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Florida felons may get voting rights restored

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FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Most felons released from prison could soon have their voting and other civil rights restored under a rule approved Thursday by Republican Gov. Charlie Crist and the state's clemency board.

All but the most violent felons would avoid a hearing before the board, which sometimes takes years.

To qualify, ex-offenders must have completed their sentences and probation and paid all restitution.

"If we believe people have paid their debt to society, then that debt should be paid in full, and their civil rights should in fact be restored," Crist said.

"By granting ex-offenders the opportunity to participate in the democratic process, we restore their ability to be gainfully employed as well as their dignity."

Under the new process, most convicted felons — as many as eight out of 10, according to Crist's office — will automatically have their rights restored.

People convicted of more violent crimes, such as murder, kidnapping and assault, will still have to go through a hearing, but they will no longer have to wait as many years to obtain one since the backlog of those waiting will be reduced.

State officials vowed to immediately begin combing through the ranks of convicted felons already released from prison to identify those now eligible to regain their civil rights.

Estimates of how many felons have left prison but have not regained their rights vary. The state estimates 628,000, while restoration advocates say the number is nearly a million.

The board voted 3-1 for the change. Attorney General Bill McCollum, also a Republican, strongly objected, calling the plan "reckless," "irresponsible" and "a grave mistake."

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