

## National NAACP Applauds Historic Expansion of Voting Rights

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“This is a great step for Virginia and we look forward to working with the Commonwealth ...on expanding the vote,”stated Benjamin Todd Jealous, national president and CEO of the NAACP. “Anyone who has made a mistake, done their time and paid their debt to society should be able to join their neighbors at the voting booth.”

The head of the nation’s oldest and largest civil rights organization issued the statement in response to Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell’s historic and unprecedented plan to streamline the voter rights restoration process for people with nonviolent felony convictions. In a news conference at Cedar Street Baptist Church of God in Richmond’s mostly black Church Hill community, the governor said nonviolent felons who finish serving their sentences and maintain, after that, a clean record will regain their right to vote and other civil rights on an individual basis without having to apply.

The governor also is eliminating a two-year waiting period for former felons convicted of nonviolent crimes to have their civil rights restored. Previously, they also had to apply. Cases will now be automatically considered without an application.

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“It really is a personal thing,” Gov. McDonnell said. “I believe in an America of second chances.”

The governor was joined on stage at the news conference by civil rights advocates and legislators from both parties, including members of the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus, who have pressed for years to reform the state’s strict process for restoring ex-felons’ rights.

In Virginia, only the governor can restore these rights. Gov. McDonnell already has streamlined the process and has restored the rights of more than 4,800 former felons — more than any previous administration. But the Sentencing Project says about 350,000 Virginians who have completed their sentences remained disenfranchised in 2010. Thousands of those residents could become registered voters in time for the November election as a result of Gov. McDonnell’s new policy. Violent felons will still have to wait five years and apply to regain their rights to vote, hold public office, serve on a jury or become a notary public.

The announcement came a day after Republican Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli released a report by an advisory committee he appointed in March to study restoration of rights. The panel concluded that the process could be improved by designating an executive branch agency to do all the legwork, working with religious and community groups to solicit and process applications for the governor’s consideration.

The attorney general said he liked the idea of outside help but preferred to keep the program in

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the Secretary of the Commonwealth's office. The Cuccinelli task force said the Virginia Constitution does not allow the governor to issue an executive order restoring all felons' rights, and Gov. McDonnell's new policy stops short of that by continuing to handle each case individually.

"I wanted to use the maximum authority I had," Gov. McDonnell told reporters. "An executive order is probably beyond the scope of my authority."

He said the new process will eliminate subjectivity.

"Your civil rights in this country should not be dependent on the whims of one person," he said.

The change was welcome news for Darrell Gooden of Richmond, who was convicted of marijuana and cocaine possession in 2002. He said he applied to regain his rights in 2008, when Democrat Tim Kaine was governor, but was turned down because of a speeding ticket. He hasn't reapplied, and now he won't have to. "I want my children to see that the American dream is not just a dream," the 40-year-old father of three said.

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Attempts to amend the constitution to allow the blanket automatic restoration of nonviolent felons' rights have failed repeatedly, most recently in the 2013 General Assembly.

The constitutional amendment, historically championed by Democrats, was backed by the Republican governor and attorney general this year but was rejected by the heavily GOP House of Delegates. The ACLU of Virginia praised Gov. McDonnell for further expediting the rights restoration process.

"The governor will be giving voice to thousands of Virginians who have been denied participation in elections due to an antiquated and regressive voting law in the commonwealth," ACLU of Virginia board president Jayne Barnard said in a news release.

Virginia New Majority, an advocacy group, said it would follow up Gov. McDonnell's policy change — which is effective July 15 — with a voter registration drive.

"We're going to celebrate today, but we have to get right back to work tomorrow," said Jon Liss,

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the group's executive director. "We're making plans to ensure that people with nonviolent felony convictions will be registered in time for the November elections."

Attorney General Cuccinelli, the Republican candidate for governor, lauded Gov. McDonnell "for pushing his own reforms even further."

"We needed to simplify the process for those who want to regain their civil rights so they can return to full participation in society," he said.

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Terry McAuliffe called the change "an important step forward on an issue of justice for Virginians who have paid their debt to society."

Gov. McDonnell said he expects the next governor to keep his new policy.

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The Associated Press contributed to this story.