



Iowa governor has yet to deliver on promise to restore voting rights for thousands

Gov. Kim Reynolds made the announcement four weeks ago.

By [Dan Desai Martin](#) July 15, 2020

Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds made [headlines](#) on June 16 when she announced a forthcoming executive order to restore voting rights to those with previous felony convictions who had been released from prison.

A month later, Reynolds has not released any such order, and voting rights advocates are growing concerned.

"We're 118 days away from the election," state Rep. Ras Smith, a Democrat, said during a phone interview on Thursday. Smith worried further delay could overburden the judicial system as people try to register to vote before November's election.

Iowa is the [only state](#) in the nation with a lifetime ban on voting for anyone convicted of a felony. Some 2% of Iowans, more than 52,000 people, faced this lifetime disenfranchisement in 2016, according to the [Sentencing Project](#). The number included 9.8% of Black Iowans.

Des Moines Black Lives Matter, along with representatives from the NAACP and ACLU, was involved in conversations with Reynolds about a potential executive order on Friday, June 12, according to the [Des Moines Register](#).

The group said it had audio from that meeting of the governor promising to provide language for the executive order the following Monday.

Monday came and went, and no language was provided to Des Moines BLM.

"It just seems like she's trying to stall for time," Ellie, an activist working with Des Moines BLM who asked that her last name not be used for privacy reasons, said about the continued delay.

Both Smith and Ellie worried Reynolds would add caveats to voter reenfranchisement, something they opposed.

"If you served your time, even if you have restitution that you still have to pay, you should be able to vote," Ellie said. Forcing those with felony convictions to pay all their fines before they can register is "pretty akin to a poll tax," she added.

"You're making them pay for their right to vote when they should really already have it."

On Saturday, Des Moines BLM [released](#) proposed language for the executive order.

The group called for voting rights to be restored "immediately upon release from imprisonment" and that they not be contingent on "payment of restitution, fines, fees, or other financial obligations resulting from conviction."

If the restoration process is overburdened with caveats and Reynolds continues to delay signing an order, it could "disenfranchise those who probably could participate in one of the most influential and impactful elections in our country's history," Smith said.

He worried that even those who may qualify to have their rights restored would be disenfranchised "because the governor is going to sit on [the executive order] too long."

Reynolds' office did not respond to numerous requests for comment.

Other states have recently tried to restore voting rights to ex-offenders, with mixed success.

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, a Democrat, vowed to restore voting rights to ex-offenders during his inaugural address in December 2019. A week later, he [issued](#) an executive order doing so.

In Florida, voters [approved](#) a measure in 2018 to restore voting rights to those convicted of a felony. In response to the vote, the GOP-controlled legislature in the state put up roadblocks, passing legislation requiring people to pay all legal fees and fines associated with their conviction before being allowed to register to vote.

A federal judge [overturned](#) the law in May, ruling that the Republican effort amounted to a "pay-to-vote system."

Florida Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis appealed the decision, and the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals [ruled](#) on July 1 that the law can be left in place as the court hears the case, a setback for voting rights advocates.

Experts expect both Florida and Iowa will be hotly contested states in the 2020 presidential election. Cook Political Report [rated](#) Florida as a toss-up and Iowa as Lean Republican.

Iowa also has one of the most closely watched Senate races, with freshman Republican Joni Ernst facing off against Democratic challenger Theresa Greenfield. Three polls [released](#) since June show Greenfield with a small lead over Ernst.

Voting "is one of our most cherished responsibilities as Americans," Smith said this week, adding that disenfranchisement of those with prior felony convictions is "baffling."

"I want our state to start leading for the right reasons," he said.