

# METRO & STATE

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## CLEMENCY BOARD

# More ex-cons' voting rights restored

■ The number of felons who, after completing their terms, have regained their voting rights is growing fast, thanks to the state clemency board.

BY BRENDAN FARRINGTON

Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE — More than 15,500 ex-felons have had their voting rights automatically restored in the two months since the clemency board approved rules that allow the Parole Commission to give back those rights without a hearing.

That compares to fewer than 14,000 former offenders that had their rights restored without a hearing in the 12 months before the rule changes, according to Gov. Charlie Crist's office.

"They're having great success and it will only get better as we move along," Crist said Wednesday. "I'd always rather have more, but I'm

pleased with the progress and look forward to it accelerating."

Crist pushed the clemency board, which is made up of the governor and the state's three Cabinet members, to give voting rights back to felons once they've completed their sentences. Murderers and sex offenders are the exception.

The state still has to review hundreds of thousands of people who completed sentences before the rule change to make sure they're eligible.

While pleased that more people are having their rights restored, there's still a long way to go, said Muslima Lewis, an American Civil Liberties Union of Florida attorney who oversees the group's voting rights and civil justice projects.

"Fifteen-thousand-five hundred is still a drop in the bucket when you look at the

entire population of former offenders whose civil rights have not been restored," she said.

Lewis would prefer that any felon who completes a sentence have rights restored, which would eliminate the need for a review.

### 515,000 ELIGIBLE

The state estimates that about 515,000 people are potentially eligible for automatic restoration.

Since early April, the Department of Corrections has sent the Florida Parole Commission the names of 105,000 people it believes meets the criteria.

The Parole Commission has so far reviewed just over 21,000 cases and restored the rights of 15,500 people.

Reasons for not restoring rights include the person has died, moved from Florida, has been arrested again or has not paid restitution to victims.

The Department of Corrections is loaning 100 employees a week to the Parole Commission to help go through the cases in an effort to speed up restoration, said Rob Wheeler, an attorney in the governor's office.

"I'd like to see it completed as soon as possible," Crist said. "If we can get it done before the presidential primary, that would be tremendous."

Both political parties are praising the effort.

"Gov. Crist recognizes the need to govern in a tradition of Abraham Lincoln," said Republican Party of Florida Chairman Jim Greer. "He recognizes that government has a responsibility to do the right thing for its citizens."

Florida Democratic Party Chairman Karen Thurman, like the ACLU, still has questions about how far the state is going to notify former felons they can register to vote

again, but she was encouraged by the progress.

"There should be some recognition that the process that has been put in place is beginning to work and that should be hopeful to people out there who are in this situation," Thurman said.

### 'VERY MOTIVATIONAL'

It is providing hope to Lazaro Arribas, a Miami resident who was convicted of bank robbery and other charges and will complete his probation next year. His goal is to vote in a presidential election for the first time in 12 years.

He said he's been out of prison since 2003, but relives his loss of rights every time he's asked to sign a petition.

"When my time is up, when I complete my sentence, knowing that I'll be able to vote and I'll be able to sign those papers is very, very motivational to

me," said Arribas, who blamed his criminal history on drug addiction.

He said he has been drug-free since leaving prison.

The state is sending letters to the last known address of everyone whose rights are restored. It is working with community groups to help reach out to people who may be able to vote again, Wheeler said.

Bettye Marks, of Deland, received notice from the state last month that her rights were restored and she wrote Crist to thank him.

"When I received my letter in the mail, I began to cry," Marks wrote. "I cried because it's been a long hard road and thanks to you and your Cabinet, I've made it. God bless you, Governor Crist, and God bless your Cabinet. I will do everything in my power to take this opportunity and fly with it."