

The Delray Democrat

Heroes¹

Michael K. Cantwell

One year following the passage of Amendment 4, the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (“FRRC”) statewide bus tour stopped in Palm Beach County and announced a partnership with local leaders that will permit returning citizens to register to vote even if they owe financial obligations.



No right is more precious to the citizen than the right to vote, and none is more fundamental to the state. A democracy derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed, and a government that denies citizens the right to vote has no claim to be a functioning democracy.

Few acts are more despicable in a democracy than voter suppression, and few acts more heroic than combatting such offenses to democracy. Those who have fought tirelessly to restore voting rights to some 1.4 million disenfranchised Floridians are special people and true heroes.

It all began with FRRC’s seemingly quixotic attempt to amend the Jim Crow–Era provision in the Florida Constitution that permanently disenfranchised anyone convicted of a felony by guaranteeing that voter rights would be restored upon completion of “all terms of sentence,

¹ *The Delray Democrat*, November 2019, p. 1.

including probation and parole.”

That required first collecting 766,200 signatures to place the proposed amendment on the ballot and then convincing 60% of voters to support it. That was done, and with a comfortable margin, as nearly 65% of voters (Republicans as well as Democrats) approved Amendment 4 last November!

The victory for democracy was short-lived, however, as Republicans responded by passing SB 7066 (on a straight party-line vote). Purporting to “interpret” and “implement” Amendment 4, the bill required returning citizens to collectively pay hundreds of millions of dollars in fines and fees before their voting rights would be restored, certainly not the way this voter interpreted the wording of Amendment 4.

Lawsuits, still pending, followed, but FRRC kept on trucking, and last Friday its statewide bus tour stopped in Palm Beach County.

As FRRC president Desmond Meade told an enthusiastic audience on a bright, clear morning, “where others see obstacles, we see opportunity.” Rather than an impediment, SB 7066 “provides a clear and unambiguous pathway to remove financial obligations, to remove those obstacles and allow an individual to register to vote.”

To cries of “amen,” he concluded, “If creating a more inclusive democracy is not something to be excited about, I don’t know what is. The more people that we include the more vibrant our democracy becomes.”

Mr. Meade was followed by the local leaders who had worked tirelessly to help remove the apparent barriers to restoration of voting rights. If you are reading this online, you can click [here](#) and watch this happen.

State Attorney Dave Aronberg then stressed the importance of helping returning citizens, not only for citizens themselves but for the community whose safety is the principal mission of his office.

He cited studies showing that “when citizens return to their communities and become eligible to vote they are far less likely to commit new crimes.” Registering to vote reduces recidivism because it “makes returning citizens feel more involved in their communities.” In contrast, “our community is not safer when we create a permanent underclass of the disenfranchised.”

Accordingly, his office is updating court records to provide that if returning citizens cannot afford to pay fees and fines, they will not be deprived of their right to vote, adding that this will apply to old as well as old court orders. He stressed that returning citizens would remain responsible for their fees and fines, but that would not be a stumbling block to the right to vote.

He was followed by our Public Defender, Carey Haughwout, who emphasized the importance of letting people know that there’s now a process in place to help returning citizens register to vote and urged everyone to spread the word in their communities.

People seeking help registering in Palm Beach county should call **561-355-7500**. The Public Defender's office will start the process, reviewing court records and determining what needs to be done: "we are there to support them, and help them, and get them registered to vote," she promised. "We've got the process, we've got the people, and we are ready to go."

Let's spread the word and let's get to work.