

# Feds launch effort to help ex-felons register to vote in Minnesota

U.S. Probation Services alerts those who have finished their sentence of their rights.

By Zoë Jackson (<https://www.startribune.com/zo-jackson/6370408/>) Star Tribune

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Derek Carlson, a former felon, received a letter from the government recently informing him of his right to vote. Had it not arrived, he says, he might not have registered to vote for the 2020 election.

“I had no idea that my voting rights were restored as soon as I finished probation,” said Carlson, who lives in Duluth.

Carlson, 40, has never voted before. He was motivated to register after hearing about a federally sponsored event where he could get help.

Amid a national debate about voting rights for felons, the Minnesota district of U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services is seeking to better inform former felons of their right to vote this election, taking advantage of a state law that [allows ex-convicts to register and vote](https://www.startribune.com/why-are-felons-stripped-of-voting-rights-and-what-other-rights-do-they-lose/565227122/?refresh=true) (<https://www.startribune.com/why-are-felons-stripped-of-voting-rights-and-what-other-rights-do-they-lose/565227122/?refresh=true>) after completing their probation.

Minnesota is one of just 19 states that extends that right. But it’s not common knowledge, even among many ex-offenders.

Felons lose several rights, including the right to own firearms, serve on juries and vote. To restore some of these rights, they often have to go before a judge. But many, like Carlson, don’t realize that once they finish probation, they regain the right to vote in Minnesota.

As part of National Voter Registration Day, the U.S. Probation Services office in Minnesota held events online and in-person across the state last week to help register ex-felons who qualify to vote. Kito Bess, chief U.S. probation officer for the district of Minnesota, said he recognizes that many ex-offenders need help transitioning “off paper,” or off community supervision, and getting their voting rights restored.



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League of Women Voters volunteers Ann Napp and Katie Anthony awaited registrants at the federal courthouse in Minneapolis on Sept. 22.

“If it’s important to tell them what they lose, I also think it’s important to remind them what they can get back after they have completed their sentence,” Bess said.

His office has no current tally of the number of ex-federal offenders like Carlson it has helped register, but the efforts come amid battles to restore the vote to all felons who have completed their sentence, both in Minnesota and across the country.

In the Minnesota Legislature, the DFL-led House sought to restore voting rights for felons more quickly as part of a sweeping police reform proposal this summer following the police killing of George Floyd. The effort was rejected by Republicans who control the Senate.

If voting rights were restored immediately upon release from jail or prison, it would affect more than 53,000 Minnesotans who are on state- and federal-level felony community supervision (<https://www.aclu-mn.org/en/campaigns/voting-rights-restoration>) and unable to vote, according to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Minnesota.

Black and Indigenous Minnesotans are disenfranchised at rates several times higher than white Minnesotans, said ACLU of Minnesota staff attorney David McKinney.

“From a constitutional, legal perspective, we’re challenging that type of scheme which effectively disenfranchises people for no rational, legitimate reason,” McKinney said.

The ACLU of Minnesota sued the state in 2019 to restore these rights for all felons (<https://www.startribune.com/aclu-of-minnesota-sues-state-to-restore-voter-rights-for-people-with-felonies/563561532/>). But the case was dismissed last month.

“If the goal is to have these folks who have committed crimes, and wanting to get them back into the community, back on the straight and narrow continuing to do good, then allowing them to vote serves that purpose,” said McKinney, who plans to appeal the ACLU case to the Minnesota Court of Appeals.

Bess moved to Minneapolis in 2018, and spoke with Chief U.S. District Judge John Tunheim about voter registration in early 2019. One of their first changes was to include voting information in discharge packets.

“When we have someone transitioning off supervision, we would put in their discharge letters a copy of the voter registration application,” Bess said.

Bess and other probation officers expanded their efforts this year to in-person events in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Bemidji and Duluth. The probation office also offered an office hour-style Zoom meeting for people to ask questions about voting with a felony record.

Carlson registered at the Damiano Center in Duluth, just as the probation officers and volunteers from the League of Women Voters were packing up.

“I got a little red sticker saying that ‘I will vote,’” he said.

Carlson served eight years in federal prison for a nonviolent offense. He was released in 2017 and works full-time while studying for his engineering degree in the evenings.

Carlson is a bit nervous about voting for the first time. He plans to spend time reading up on the candidates so that he can make an informed decision in November. He plans to vote in-person to get the full voting experience.

“I mean, out of all elections I can finally vote in, it’s got to be this one,” Carlson said. “2020, can you believe it?”

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