

Confusion over how to implement restoration of Florida felons' voting rights

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SOUTHWEST FLORIDA - Now that convicted felons have been given the right to vote in Florida, one lawmaker said some criminals would undoubtedly have that right revoked.

Legislators are struggling to implement Amendment IV which was approved overwhelmingly by voters last November.

The new law states that all felons except murderers and sex offenders can vote. Some lawmakers want to define that specifically.

Then there's the task of finding out who has paid their debt and who hasn't. Without a central database, it's nearly impossible.

"No one is trying to slow roll or slow-walk this process," said Spencer Roach, District 79.

The state representative said he no longer believes Amendment IV is self-implementing.

"Right now we're trying to determine what murder is. Is it murder one, two, three or vehicular homicide? Does it or does it not include murders committed outside the state of Florida?" Roach asked.

Roach predicts some who have already registered will not qualify after lawmakers implement it.

Fort Myers Attorney Elizete Velado said she doesn't believe the legislature had plenty of notice of the changes occurring. She predicted if legislators don't act swiftly the courts will likely get involved.

Lawmakers also worry that it's impossible to determine who has repaid their debt to society and who hasn't.

"You don't get anything that tells you that you completed that sentence, or [that] you're now done," Roach said.

Lee County Clerk of Courts Linda Doggett called the issue problematic. She said a central database is needed statewide, but notes that could be challenging.

"If somebody had a felony 50 years ago and maybe they're 80 now, and they want to vote, you need to go back 50 years," Doggett explained.

Doggett pointed out the documents may not be at anyone's fingertips.

"Those records could be on microfilm. They could be on [a] paper form depending on that county," Doggett said.

Then there is the matter of restitution and whether former felons have achieved that.

In Lee County, that's something the clerk's office doesn't track, yet another concern for getting former felons their rights back.

They have until May 3 to get it all figured out.