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NEWS

'Poll tax' for convicted felons dropped in Rutherford County, lawsuit against Tennessee continues

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Story Highlights

Advocates seek to reform law for disenfranchised citizens

Mistie Dunmire restored voting rights in 2020 27 years after facing theft convictions

State has 451,000 disenfranchised citizens after felony convictions

At least 365,356 citizens have completed sentences, yet less than 5% have restored voting rights

Mistie Dunmire paid \$50 to vote in the presidential election before Rutherford County Circuit Court Clerk Melissa Harrell reached a settlement to stop what the NAACP called a "poll tax."

Dunmire had faced paying a \$25-per-conviction fee in Rutherford after she'd long ago completed her sentences on a pair of felony theft cases.

"I wanted to get it paid off on time to vote," said Dunmire, a Lewisburg grandmother in neighboring Marshall County. "I never thought with a felony that you can restore your rights. These felonies had been like 27 years ago."

The \$25 fee led to Harrell being one of the defendants in an NAACP lawsuit filed Dec. 3. The plaintiffs sought to improve Tennessee's burdensome process to restore voting rights to citizens who completed felony sentences.

"That's a poll tax," said Blair Bowie, a Campaign Legal Center attorney representing the plaintiffs. "It violates the 24th Amendment."

The plaintiffs agreed to drop claims against Harrell as a defendant if she stopped charging the \$25 fee. The lawsuit against the state, however, will continue to pursue a more

standardized system that includes due process in Tennessee to help citizens restore voting rights after completing felony sentences, Bowie said.

U.S. District Court Judge William L. Campbell on Monday formally accepted the terms of the settlement and dismissed the claims against Harrell by consent decree.

Litigation issues: Circuit Court Clerk Melissa Harrell faces discrimination-sexual harassment lawsuit

Advocates seek to reform law for disenfranchised citizens

About 451,000 residents in Tennessee have been disenfranchised because of felony convictions. At least 365,356 have completed sentences, yet less than 5% of these tax-paying citizens have been able to obtain a certificate of restoration of voting rights needed to become registered voters, according to the lawsuit.

The state's 95 counties should be sharing information in a standardized process to help citizens restore voting rights, Bowie said.

"That information sharing is not happening now in many counties," Bowie said. "That is a statewide failure."

Advocates also want the Tennessee General Assembly to reform the law by ending requirements that citizens who completed felony sentences first pay all court costs and child support before they can restore voting rights.

"Whether or not you can restore your right to vote should not be determined by your bank account," Bowie said. "This is fundamentally about fairness."

State legislation sponsored by two Nashville Democrats, Sen. Brenda Gilmore and Rep. Vincent Dixie, would establish a new statute that "automatically restores a person's voting rights upon release from confinement, probation, or parole."

Dunmire: Being a voter is 'empowering'

Although Dunmire draws a limited disability income, she was able to raise the \$1,500-plus court costs with the help of church friends to restore her voting rights in time for the presidential election.

"It makes you feel like you're a productive member of society again," Dunmire said, adding that she seeks to be a model for friends who'd also like to restore their voting rights. "That just helps you build your self esteem. For so long, I was ashamed. It kind of sticks with you."

Dunmire's old sense of shame was long gone when she joined other voters in November.

"I was so excited just to get that sticker to say, 'I voted,'" Dunmire said. "Just something that small really meant a lot. It's really empowering."

Adam Friedman contributed to this story

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