

An Open Letter to the Mississippi Legislature

Dear MS Legislators:

We are extremely disappointed that our state legislature has once again failed to ensure Mississippi supports equal access to the voting box by ending the state's discriminatory felony disenfranchisement laws. A failure to end these laws reveals that some of our elected officials are complicit in silencing the voices and devaluing the worth of formerly incarcerated individuals of this state. We were hopeful that our leaders would choose to grant all citizens of Mississippi, regardless of their past actions, the equal ability to shape their future and the future of their community by exercising their fundamental democratic rights.

After this year's legislative session, we see that Mississippi is content on being stuck in the past where the formerly incarcerated are not valued as citizens— even after serving their sentences. In Mississippi, one out of every thirteen people is disenfranchised. For African Americans, the number is even worse: one out of every seven African Americans in Mississippi are disenfranchised because of a felony conviction. When we incarcerate and take the vote from disproportionately Black Mississippians, we continue deferring a fundamental promise of freedom in this country and the notion that one can pay their debts for violating the values of their community and move forward as a productive member of society.

People with disenfranchising felony convictions cannot choose the elected representatives that will advocate on issues that matter to them, vote on policies that may affect their community, or support reforms that could transform the criminal legal system. Continuing this archaic and discriminatory practice shields elected officials from being held accountable by those who are impacted most by their decisions. Individuals who have been most impacted by the criminal justice system and understand the hardships of reentry must be able to participate in elections so we can elect leaders who will create policies that ensure all citizens enjoy equal access to our democracy.

Formerly incarcerated Mississippi residents are striving every day to rebuild lives that better themselves and their communities. We must continue to fight for them and their ability to help shape their future and the future of the communities in which they live. While we did not get the results we wanted this year, we will continue fighting to end Mississippi's discriminatory disenfranchisement laws and help those formerly incarcerated fully participate in a democracy that impacts their everyday lives and the lives of those in their surrounding communities.



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