

Through red tape to the voting booth

A wall of the legal department of the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington sports a growing spiral of colored cards, each bearing the name of a person who has regained the right to vote. The wall is quickly getting crowded, thanks to the work of a dedicated group of ACLU interns.

Since the ACLU-WA Voting Rights Restoration (VRR) project began in 2004, interns have helped more than 125 people to restore their voting rights. The project has been contacted by more than 500 individuals seeking restoration of their voting rights, and the interns are actively working with scores of disenfranchised Washington citizens. Their job is to help people who have been convicted of felonies and have satisfied all the conditions of their sentences, but have not been able to negotiate the complicated process to regain their right to vote.

In order to vote, individuals must pay all court fees and penalties associated with their sentences. These "legal financial obligations" (LFOs) can add up to thousands of dollars and accrue interest at 12% each year, taking years to pay. When LFOs are paid, the person is eligible to earn a Certificate of Discharge restoring civil rights.

The process to get this certificate, however, is often delayed by technical glitches, errors and misinformation from government officials who are not familiar with the proper rules and procedures. And this is where the VRR volunteers come in, gathering information about each individual's case, talking with court officials, researching court records and, at times, educating others about the law.

"After the current voting restoration petition process was introduced, we realized that it was so complicated that 99 of 100 people would not be able to do it on their own," said Eric Nygren, ACLU-WA legal intake manager, who coordinates the VRR project. "Because of this, we decided that we needed to assist people directly in navigating through the procedural mazes necessary to restore their rights."

VRR project interns helped one person discover that he could not vote be-



ELECTORAL JUSTICE: ACLU interns Bess McKinney and Maria Elena Ramirez stand before a display representing Washington citizens who have restored their voting rights with the assistance of the ACLU

cause he owed 77 cents to the court. It is not uncommon for the interns to find that people have received their Certificates of Discharge years before, but are not being informed by court administrators. Others earn their certificates only after the ACLU requests court hearings.

Molly Peach Matter, a current VRR intern, said she was stunned when she first learned that there is no working infrastructure for the restoration of voting rights.

"The fact that so many people in our community, people whom we see and interact with daily, are left outside of democracy due to a broken system, is fundamentally wrong," Matter said. "Almost every person I talk with has overcome great obstacles in his or her life. Many are so eager to give back to

their communities and to feel that they are members of their community that they are overjoyed when they can vote again."

The ACLU supports legislation in the Washington Legislature that would automatically re-enfranchise people when they have satisfied all the conditions of their sentences, but who may still owe court fees and penalties. This would simplify the restoration process, save government resources, and ease the transition from incarceration to citizenship.

More than 167,000 Washingtonians are currently disenfranchised due to felony convictions. "We have helped a fraction of that number directly," Nygren said, "but passage of the reform bill will have a much broader impact."

The current VRR interns are Monika Goforth, Molly Peach Matter and Bess McKinney.

3 initiatives seem headed for ballot

Of the more than 50 initiatives filed with the Secretary of State this year, three seem likely to make the ballot.

Initiative 1000 would give mentally competent, terminally ill adults, diagnosed with less than six months to live, the legal choice to acquire and self-administer life-ending medication. Based on an Oregon law, the measure includes safeguards to protect patients against abuse. Known as the "Death with Dignity" act, I-1000 has been endorsed by the PSARA Executive Board.

Initiative 1029 would strengthen background checks and require the certification of long-term care workers. Supported by the Service Employees and the Senior Citizens Lobby.

Initiative 985, the latest Tim Eyman measure, would divert 15% of vehicle sales tax revenues from schools and health care to roads, deepening the state's financial difficulties.