

BRENNAN
CENTER
FOR JUSTICE

For Immediate Release: May 4, 2009
Contact: Jeanine Plant-Chirlin, 212-998-6289
Susan Lehman, 212-998-6318

Washington Governor Signs Voting Rights Restoration Act
Right to Vote Will No Longer Hinge on Economic Status

Seattle – Today, Washington Governor Chris Gregoire will sign a bill restoring the right to vote to tens of thousands of people with criminal histories who are living in the community. [The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law](#) is a national leader of state-based voting reform and has been working with local Washington groups on the passage of the Voting Rights Restoration Act for many months.

The Voting Rights Restoration Act eliminates the requirement that people pay all fees, fines and restitution, plus hefty surcharges and accrued interest, before becoming eligible to vote. The new law reverses restrictive and discriminatory voting laws which disproportionately impacted low-income and minority people. Passage of the Voting Rights Restoration Act ensures that all people leaving the criminal justice system will have the right to vote, regardless of their wealth or economic status.

“Whatever form they take, wealth qualifications are simply incompatible with democracy,” says Erika Wood, Director of the Brennan Center’s Right to Vote Project. “Simply put, the right to vote should never hinge on one’s wealth or economic status. The Voting Rights Restoration Act now eliminates this modern-day poll tax in Washington.”

Previously, Washington was one of only eight states that required people to pay court-imposed financial obligations before being allowed to vote. It now joins nineteen other states that restore voting rights automatically upon completion of prison, probation and parole, as described in the Brennan Center’s [Restoring the Right to Vote](#). With this new law, Washington becomes the twentieth state in the last ten years to ease voting restrictions on people with criminal histories; the Voting Rights Restoration Act is the latest step in a nationwide movement to end this last blanket barrier to the franchise.

The new law also encourages voter participation by streamlining voter registration rules and eliminating a complicated and bureaucratic restoration process. With this bill, voting rights are restored as soon as individuals complete their probation and parole. As shown in the Brennan Center’s [De Facto Disenfranchisement](#), simplifying the law eases election officials’ administrative burden and decreases the likelihood of confusion about voter restoration.

The Brennan Center for Justice recently filed *amicus curiae* briefs in the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in [*Johnson v. Bredesen*](#) and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in [*Coronado v. Napolitano*](#), both of which challenge existing laws in Tennessee and Arizona, respectively, that also condition the right to vote on the payment of court-imposed financial obligations.

For more information or to arrange an interview with Erika Wood, please contact Jeanine Plant-Chirlin at 212-998-6289 or at jeanine.plant-chirlin@nyu.edu or Susan Lehman at 212-998-6318 or at susan.lehman@nyu.com.

####