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August 2011 | TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Florida's law-abiding citizens and taxpayers would be shocked to learn there are 102,000 inmates in state prison and thousands more in federal prisons and Florida's 67 county jails. Another 153,000 felons are on `community supervision,` commonly known as criminal probation.

Generally one-third of current state prisoners will be released within the next year, most in county jails are on pre-trial detention or will be released in 364 days, and every day felons are concluding probation.

Besides the obvious public safety concerns and taxpayer costs, we all have a vested interest in helping felons re-enter society, transition to become law-abiding citizens, and to ensure they do not re-offend. One step in this building block process is known as `executive clemency,` which is a power vested in the Governor by the Florida Constitution of 1968. Clemency is an act of mercy that absolves the individual from all or any part of the punishment that the law imposes.

Gov. Rick Scott and members of the Cabinet approved new clemency rules in March to require five- and seven-year waiting periods for restoration of civil rights, and to enforce a strict 10-year waiting period for full pardons. Clemency approval will be of valuable assistance to obtain certain jobs, business or professional opportunities, state licenses, bonds, government contracts and/or security clearances.

In addition, Attorney General Pam Bondi's support led to a new law to `de-couple` state licenses from RCRs unless the felony conviction is `directly related` to the desired license.

Gov. Scott approved CS/SB 146 by Sen. Chris Smith, D-Oakland Park, a bill that provides, in part, `a state agency may not deny an application for a license, permit, certificate, or employment based on the applicant's lack of civil rights.`

The key is how state agencies implement this new law which is appropriately named after the late Senate President Jim King of Jacksonville to help felons `get to work.`

The Clemency Board, comprised of the governor and Bondi as well as CFO Jeff Atwater and Agriculture and Consumer Affairs Commissioner Adam Putnam, meets four times a year in

Tallahassee to hear public testimony and vote on clemency applications. Approval by the governor and two members of the board is required to obtain any form of clemency.

The board will consider these six factors when determining whether to grant an applicant clemency: the nature of the offense; whether the applicant has any history of mental instability, drug or alcohol abuse; whether the applicant has any subsequent arrests, including traffic offenses; the applicant's employment history; whether the applicant is delinquent on any outstanding debts or child support payments; and support or opposition letters.

A full pardon unconditionally releases a person from punishment and forgives guilt for any Florida conviction. It restores to an applicant all of the rights of citizenship possessed by the person before his or her conviction, including the right to own, possess, or use firearms. \_

At least 10 years must have passed since the felon completed the sentence or conditions of supervision to seek a pardon. This previous option to `waive\_ this time period is no longer available.

Restoration of civil rights `restores to an applicant all of the rights of citizenship ´ voting, serving on a jury, and seeking elected office ´ in Florida enjoyed before the felony conviction, except the specific authority to own, possess or use firearms. \_

The new rules create two distinct categories of eligibility: Most applicants will have to wait five years after conclusion of prison or probation to be eligible, must affirmatively submit an application, and can be approved without a hearing.

Felons convicted of any of the 35 of the most serious crimes must wait seven years and must be approved at a hearing. As before, the applicant must complete his or her sentence and conditions of supervision, pay restitution, have no outstanding detainers, and not have any new arrests or convictions during the five-year waiting period.

The next clemency meeting is Sept. 22 at the Capitol. I encourage Tallahassee residents to attend and learn more about the process.