



# A Push To Register New Voters Reaches Behind Bars

by [Pam Fessler](#)

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Tens of millions of Americans who are eligible to vote are not registered. So before every big election there's a flurry of activity to sign them up.

One South Carolina woman is passionate about registering those who others might ignore. Dr. Brenda Williams, a physician in Sumter, S.C., regularly visits the county jail to sign up inmates.

Williams says it's important for them to become part of the community after they're released. She thinks this will make them less likely to end up back behind bars.

Williams recently made a trip to the Sumter-Lee Regional Detention Center to hand out voter registration cards. She enters what's called the Delta pod, a large gym-like room with metal bunk beds, tables, toilets. About fifty male inmates live there. Many are tattooed and grim-looking. A few shoot hoops on an outside court.

When Williams enters, a female guard tells the men to get behind a red line that borders the room. The doctor is only 4 feet, 11 inches tall, but knows how to take charge. Standing in her white doctor's jacket, she starts to belt out a gospel hymn, "I Know it Was the Blood." She quickly gets the attention of the inmates, who now stand by their bunks.

"Good afternoon, fellas," she calls out.

"Good afternoon," they reply in unison.

"You know, I came last weekend and registered many of you, many of whom decided that you're going to do right," she says, adding that she has something to give them.

## Can Ex-Cons Vote?

According to [The Sentencing Project](#), 5.3 million Americans (1 in 40 adults) were unable to vote due to a felony conviction in the 2008 elections.

State approaches to felon disenfranchisement vary tremendously. In Maine and Vermont, felons never lose their right to vote — even while serving a prison sentence. In Kentucky and Virginia, felons and ex-felons

permanently lose their right to vote absent a pardon from the governor. The remaining 46 states have 46 different approaches to the issue. Some highlights:

- In 13 states and the District of Columbia, felons are ineligible to vote only while serving a prison sentence. Ex-offenders and people on probation and parole can vote.
- In 25 states, prisoners and people under community supervision (probation and/or parole) are ineligible to vote, but ex-offenders are eligible.
- In eight states, all felons in prison and under community supervision, as well as certain ex-offenders, are ineligible to vote.

Source: [National Conference of State Legislatures](#)

"When you hear your name, please come forth and get your voter registration card," says Williams.

One by one, she calls the men forward to receive their cards and a big hug. When each man is called, the other inmates applaud. It's a little like a graduation, except that the graduates wear blue jail outfits and orange rubber shoes.

"Congratulations, sir. You are a registered voter in the United States of America," Williams tells each recipient. Some smile sheepishly.

Williams says for some of these men, registering to vote is one of the few positive things they've done in their lives. It's behavior she wants to encourage.

But South Carolina doesn't allow inmates to vote, unless they're awaiting trial. Once out of jail, felons can vote if they're not on probation and parole. Some states don't allow felons to vote at all. People think they've lost that right. But Williams thinks that just getting them registered gives the inmates something to strive for.

Williams has run a medical clinic in Sumter for 30 years, with her husband, Joe Williams, who is also a physician. The Williamses remember all too well the civil rights battles of the 1960s. They always ask their patients — who are often poor and black — if they're registered to vote.

They believe in treating the whole patient. Brenda Williams says voting increases an individual's feeling of self worth, which is also good for one's physical health.

Among the clinic's workers is 26-year-old Amanda Wolf, who until recently was homeless. She says she's trying to pull her life together. Wolf spent six months in the Sumter-Lee Regional Detention Center for failure to provide child support. She says one bright spot was when Brenda Williams came to register her to vote.

"It was a privilege you know to be able to have the entire pod clap for you as you go up and get your voter registration card," says Wolf. "A little bit of excitement when you feel like all hope is lost."