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Former Felons Responding to ACLU Brochure on Voting Rights

by R. Ben Stone, Executive Director

10/28/2008

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – October 28, 2008

In this pivotal election year, the non-partisan ACLU of Iowa has made a priority of informing felons and their families about the right to vote by distributing ***Voting With a Criminal Conviction in Iowa***, brochures it has produced in both English and Spanish. In the past six weeks, nearly 20,000 brochures have been distributed all around the state. There is also a link on the nonprofit's website <http://www.aclu-ia.org/>

And the potential voting felons are responding. "Activists who work with in urban areas and with low income workers have told us how popular these brochures are," said Ben Stone, ACLU of Iowa Executive Director. "Activists and advocates all over the state are asking for more of both language versions because they are in such high demand. A lot of former felons really do want to vote, and they are glad to learn they can!" he added.

The brochure highlights that Iowans with felony convictions are allowed to vote once they have completed their sentences, including parole, and had their paperwork processed by the Governor's Office. Felons wanting to learn if their voting rights have been automatically restored should call the Governor's Office at 515/281-5211.

The following comments are from Sharon Zanders-Ackiss, Director of *Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement (ICCI* - 515/282-0484) in Des Moines:

Thanks for the wonderful brochures on "Voting with a Criminal Conviction," that you provided Iowa Citizens For Community Improvement. This brochure was well done and very informative. We have passed this information on to many people who have criminal backgrounds. Most were surprised that they could even vote. They were unaware that a bill had been passed to restore their voting rights. One of our members, a student at DMACC, has picked up brochures on several occasions to take to the campus.

Our hats are off to the ACLU for taking the time and energy in providing this much-needed resource to the community. It feels good to know that we can continue to keep

this community aware and continue our efforts to educate them on topics like this. I was meeting with a young man and asked him if he was registered to vote. His eyes turned downward and with his head hung, he seemed almost embarrassed as he slowly and softly told me that he could not vote. When I asked him why, again with his head hung, he replied “because I am an ex-offender.” I was thrilled to be able to share the brochure with him and my excitement grew even more, when he realized he could indeed vote. As his head raised and a smile came across his face, I saw a complete transformation in his demeanor.

In addition to the felon voting information, the ACLU of Iowa has also been distributing thousands of **2008 Iowa Voter Empowerment Cards** in English and Spanish as well. Nearly 5,000 of the 7,500 of these brochures have already been distributed. These “cards” – which are more like a pamphlet – contain virtually anything an Iowan would want to know about voting in 2008.

Stone emphasized that it is not too late to register to vote, because, for the first time, any citizen -- including former felons -- can register to vote on Election Day at the polling place for the precinct in which they reside. “But they must bring both a photo ID with their current address,” Stone said.

Any group interested in obtaining copies of either brochure should call 515/243-3988 or email the ACLU at: info@aclu-ia.org

PDFs of both versions of both publications may be downloaded from the ACLU of Iowa’s website at

<http://www.aclu-ia.org/Documents/VoterInformation.aspx>