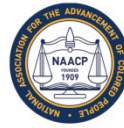




National
Urban League



NAACP



AFRICAN-AMERICAN LEADERS CONVENING: A MESSAGE TO THE NATION

We African-American civil rights and social justice leaders come together on the heels of another historic election—one in which African-Americans played a crucial and decisive role in securing a second term for the Obama Administration, and in the outcomes of numerous U.S. Senate, U.S. House, gubernatorial, state legislative, mayoral and other races across the nation.

We come together as a growing coalition representing the changing face of America; to urge our elected leaders at the national, state and local levels to give our unique challenges utmost consideration as they grapple with the daunting fiscal and social challenges facing our country.

The current plight of the African-American community underscores the urgency of our demand. The African-American community was disproportionately battered by the Great Recession, and has benefited the least from the fragile economic recovery. Unemployment remains unacceptably high; income inequality and the ever-widening wealth gap threaten to relegate the black community to perpetual underclass status. And those who wish to curtail investment education and career preparation further dim the prospects for upward mobility for our young people.

We come together at this historic juncture to articulate our vision for those priorities that can—and must—drive economic recovery and rebirth not just for the African-American community, but also for urban communities and all low-income and working-class Americans.

Accordingly, we the undersigned organizations adopt the following priorities to move these communities forward toward economic empowerment, equality and prosperity.

1. Achieve Economic Parity for African-Americans

Economic parity begins with fiscal fairness. We urge our leaders to adopt a balanced approach to address the Fiscal Cliff, sequestration and deficit reduction that balances responsible spending reforms with protections for the necessary programs that provide a safety net to the most vulnerable among us; and invests in education, innovation, jobs and infrastructure to help spur economic growth and plot a proactive agenda for the future of America.

Economic parity means tax reform that levels the playing field by bringing clarity to the tax code. So we support closing special interest loopholes and adjusting marginal tax rates so that everyone pays their fair share – no matter how their income is earned.

Economic parity also means support for those measures that clarify and streamline the process of asset building—especially home ownership and small business growth and development—and for those programs that promote financial literacy and help struggling borrowers retain what for most African-Americans is their most important asset, their home.

As the nation moves forward with a much-needed infrastructure construction initiative, African-American businesses must be included in development and implementation. Economic parity also respects the rights of workers and recognizes the dynamism of both private and public sector employment as a pathway to the middle class.

2. Promote Equity in Educational Opportunity

Education has become the latest front in the battle for civil rights in the U.S. A quality, world-class educational experience provides the on-ramp to success and, without it, our ability to compete as a community and as a country in a global economy is diminished.

The disparity in educational investment in our minority communities and the resulting achievement gap among African-American youth is the biggest threat to equality and upward mobility.

Therefore, we support progressive funding mechanisms that promote quality and direct more resources to those areas where the need is greatest—more often in high poverty and minority communities.

We also support a universal early childhood curriculum that prepares our youngsters to learn and achieve at a competitive level. That preparation is useless, however, without also providing youngsters with the schools and tools they deserve including qualified and engaged teachers, and comprehensive in-school and community-based programs that provide academic support and motivation to reverse the drop-out trend and encourage children to perform at their full potential.

We also urge leaders to increase investment for curricula and programs that prepare youth for careers of the future, including science, technology engineering and math. Finally, we believe college should be an attainable—and affordable—goal and that federal resources should be geared toward ensuring that financial aid does not become a barrier to the development of the next generation of leaders in business and government.

Federal and state resources should be invested in those institutions that graduate disproportionate percentages of African-Americans, such as HCBUs, MSIs and community colleges.

The federal government should also use its leverage to get states to invest public dollars in HCBUs such that they are comparable to and competitive with historically white colleges.

3. Protect and Defend Voting Rights

The past election saw the rise of an ugly and unprecedented campaign to roll back the right to vote. Cutbacks in early voting, restrictive identification requirements, onerous registration procedures, purges of voting rolls and efforts to intimidate minorities fly in the face of constitutional amendments that have expanded the voting franchise.

It is clear that some in power view the vote as a tool that can be manipulated to achieve a desired political end, so we call on Congress to extend and strengthen federal protections for voters and reaffirm voting as a constitutional right for all, not a privilege for some.

We pledge to vigorously oppose any effort by federal, state or local government to roll back the right to vote. We support federal election reform, including the Voter Empowerment Act so that long lines at the polls will not be the rule instead of the exception. We also call upon the Justice Department to mount an aggressive defense of the Voting Rights Act when it comes before the Supreme Court. We pledge to educate the public about this keystone of civil rights.

4. Promote a Healthier Nation by Eliminating Healthcare Disparities

Disparities in healthcare cost our nation more than \$82B dollars in lost economic activity. This cost is borne overwhelmingly by African-Americans in higher health care spending, and, tragically, significantly higher levels of illness, disability, and death.

We support full and timely implementation of the historic Affordable Care Act and believe that by providing access to quality and affordable health care for all, promoting community-based prevention efforts, and expanding Medicaid to our most vulnerable citizens, the ACA will play a pivotal role in reducing the human cost of these disparities.

We also urge the federal government to work to incentivize Medicaid expansion to every state and we stand ready to educate voters and advocate in the states to ensure that the Affordable Care Act is implemented with Medicaid expansion intact.

We also support strong enforcement of environmental protection laws, recognizing that low-income communities disproportionately suffer the consequences of air, water and soil contamination

5. Achieve Comprehensive Reform of the Criminal Justice System

We support the elimination of the cradle-to-prison pipeline, spurred in large part by the War on Drugs, that exacts a heavy cost not only on the African-American community but on taxpayers and to the economy. We call for greater federal oversight of federal and local police to end the practice of racial profiling.

The school-to-prison pipeline starts in America's schools where black students are routinely subjected to far more severe punishment than their white peers for the same infractions. These students subsequently are more likely to be incarcerated in juvenile detention facilities, and beyond, to adult prisons. The pipeline is further fueled by the disproportionate sentencing guidelines that call for longer jail time for some "urban" crimes, while similar crimes in a white collar setting receive far more lenient treatment. The severity of crimes should not be dictated by zip code or race and we therefore call for uniformity in sentencing. The criminalization of African Americans exacerbates barriers to economic opportunity, including unemployment.

The pipeline is also primed by an insidious and obscene private prison industrial complex that lobbies for harsher sentencing--not for any societal benefit; but to increase the prison headcount for financial gain. The past 15 years have seen the private prison population jump by more than 300 percent, compared with just 46 percent in federal prisons—a cost borne squarely by the American taxpayer.

Racial discrimination permeates every aspect of the criminal justice system, from profiling to arrest to trial and to sentencing. The system needs a major overhaul.

CONCLUSION

While this convening of African-American leaders occurs in Washington, DC, our efforts must extend beyond the elected officials in this city, where filibuster and obstruction have prevented the enactment of a host of progressive measures. State legislators and governors play an increasingly important role in setting policies that determine how our community will survive and thrive, including the implementation of Medicaid and education reform. Accordingly, we commit to redouble our efforts to educate and advocate in the states for measures that support our opportunity agenda for African-Americans.

We, the undersigned organizations, are bound by our common goal to protect, promote and defend the rights, well-being and opportunity of 42 million African-Americans. As we approach the 50th anniversary of the Great March on Washington and the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, we must have a seat at the table to fully leverage the talents, intellectual capital and contributions of our leaders to craft a domestic agenda that brings African-Americans closer to parity and equality, and fulfills the promise of these milestones.

This communiqué represents a first step in developing a public policy agenda, and we pledge to continue to collaborate on specific recommendations with clearly defined objectives as we move forward as a united community.

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