

NAACP-LDF Leader Calls For Civil Rights Focus On ‘New Economy’

By Hazel Trice Edney
(TriceEdney Wire) – America’s continuous struggle with economic woes that have disparately impacted African-Americans and other people of color must signal to the civil rights community a need to not only expand its focus – but change its strategy.

This according to Sherrilyn Ifill, the new director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, who received rousing applause during a welcoming reception late last month.

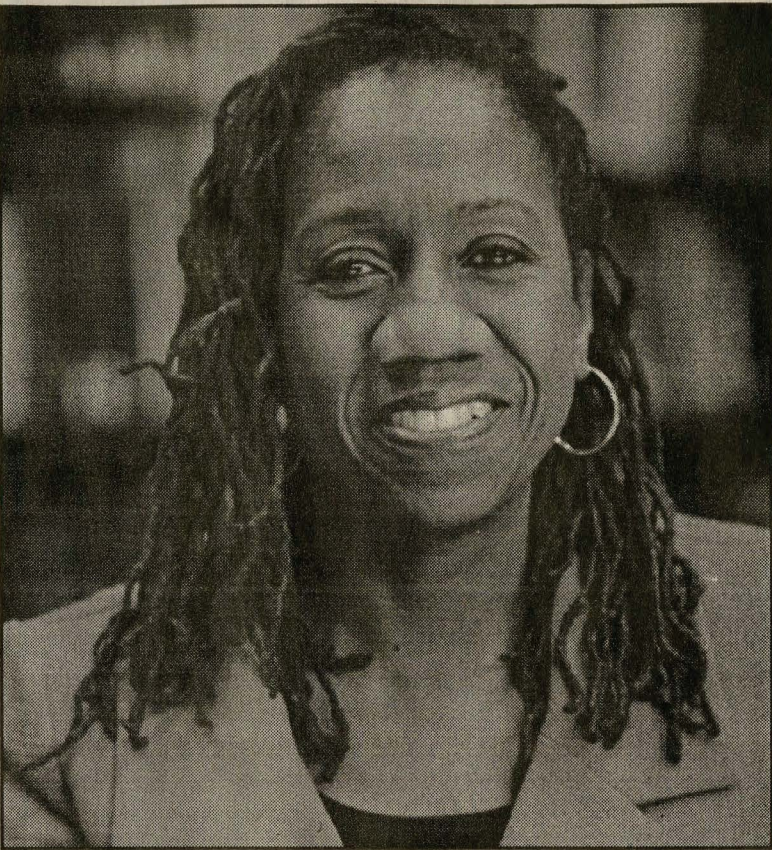
“And so we have to figure out how we’re going to deal with this issue of the new economy. Where do we fall in that? Where do the people that we represent fall in the new credit realm, in the new mortgage lending realm? How are we going to deal with the loss of African-American wealth by the foreclosure crisis that has really decimated the Black middle class?” Ifill grilled an audience of hundreds of lawyers, civil rights activists and leaders of non-profits. “So, we’ve got to step out and begin to take on those issues for our future and that’s my desire as I take up this position at the Legal Defense Fund.”

Ifill started at the New York office of the LDF in 1988 as a voting rights lawyer before

leaving to teach at the University of Maryland School of Law five years later. After more than 20 years of teaching, legal consulting and continuing to litigate, the veteran lawyer has returned to her first love.

As her civil rights colleagues listened intently during the Downtown D.C. reception, she reminded them of the “Educational Fund” part of the LDF, which too often gets lost in the name. That is one part that strategically must now become a priority, she said.

“Part of our charge is to engage in a conversation with the American public about what’s really happening to African-Americans. We love that they’re able to see a president and his wife get off Marine One with their kids. Without question, that’s a tremendous success, due in some part to LDF. But there is another America – another African-America,” she stressed. “And our job is to make sure that the picture of that African-America stays at the forefront of the vision of people in this country. And we only do that by committing to show them that African-America and that Latino America and that Asian America and that elderly America and that poor America and all of the people who are living under the margin and behind the veil of American success and



Sherrilyn Ifill

prosperity.”

Reaction to her 20-minute talk ranged from energetic applause to hearty chuckles. Perhaps the most humorous line was her use of the Super Bowl to make her point about the need for a greater offense.

“I’m from Baltimore, home of the Super Bowl champions and we’re known for our defense ... I had to get that in,” she said to laughter from the audience. “But the lessons of the Ravens is

that although we’re known for a great defense we did recognize that we had to lift our offense... We recognized that we had to have a quarter back who could throw, that we had to have people who could block, that we needed a runner that we needed what we call depth on our offense... And I’ve come back to the Legal Defense Fund in pursuit of depth on our offense.”

Though she encouraged her colleagues to “defend the wins”

that have been made, such as the then pending arguments in the Shelby vs. Holder voting rights case, she stressed that there must now come a shift in the strategy.

“I’m not interested in just defending what we have already been able to establish. I’m really interested in our pushing ourselves forward to try and realize an America that does not yet exist,” she said, continuing the football analogy. “It’s the perfect time for me because I feel so powerfully and so passionately about the issue of voting rights; because I believe that we really have to be on the offense on this issue... We have to continue to advance the ball.”

The wins have been many, she pointed out. As the seventh in a line of NAACP-LDF director-counsels, she praised the work of her predecessors. In the audience were former director-counsels Ted Shaw and Elaine Jones. Ifill succeeds John Payton who died suddenly last year. Preceding them were founder Thurgood Marshall in 1940, Jack Greenberg and Julius Chambers consecutively.

“They created this world in which we have statutes that theoretically protect us from employment discrimination and protect us in the voting realm and protect us from educational segregation and so forth. And we have to defend those winds and

the Supreme Court now has put us in the position where we are pretty regularly defending them. Even after they’ve been upheld, we’re back defending them again. But we cannot allow ourselves to only play a defense game,” she said.

She named a string of economics-related issues plaguing Black America that must be studied and must be documented in order to educate America. Those issues include the school to prison pipeline, the impact of the “new economy” on people of color, the housing crisis and safe quality education.

Though she described herself as energetic, she stressed the need for the civil rights community to pull together as a united front because no one person can do it alone.

“The job is enormous, the work is huge and I am mortal,” she said. “It only happens when we are linked together and when we’re working in partnership. All of the gains of the civil rights legal community have been rendered by us standing close together, communicating with each other, determining what we want and going for it with tenacity. And that’s why I’m happy to see so many of you here tonight because it’s an expression of your commitment to continue doing that.”

Forced Budget Cuts Will Be Extra Harmful To Blacks

By Freddie Allen
NNPA Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – The good news about the sequestration debate is that it reminds people about the vital role government plays in our lives. The bad news is that it will hurt Blacks more than other groups.

“Part of what has been interesting about the conversation about sequestration is the extent to which we’re all remembering all the things that the government actually does, all the public services we all rely on every day,” said Sharon Parrott, vice president for Budget Policy and Economic Opportunity for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

One of the things that government does is take care of the roads, bridges and highways, but 21st century transportation needs continue to outpace the nation’s 20th century infrastructure. Projects that sought to repair and improve those roadways languished in Washington gridlock on Capitol Hill.

According to a report by Building America’s Future Education Fund, a bipartisan group, that advocates for investments in U.S. infrastructure, in 2010, “Americans wasted 4.8 billion hours sitting in traffic, at a cost of \$101 billion and 1.9 billion wasted gallons of fuel.”

The recent sequestration budget axe just added to that congestion.

In a recent brief, the Center for American Progress, a Washington D.C. based-independent think tank, detailed how the forced budget cuts will have severe consequences in the Black community. According to report, sequestration threatens Build America Bonds, programs designed to encourage infrastructure investments.

The bond program could lose 7.6 percent of its budget this

year, costing thousands of jobs at the state and local level in industries such as construction and public transportation that employ Blacks at higher rates than other groups.

African Americans held 20 percent of the jobs in the public sector in 2011, an area which shed roughly 10,000 jobs in February, according to the latest jobs report from the Labor Department. Sequester cuts would not only affect workers but also companies that stand to lose government contracts, forcing everyone to make tough decisions.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that more than 700,000 jobs would evaporate because of sequestration, forcing many thousands to lean on unemployment insurance benefits.

Even as more Americans lean on unemployment insurance benefits to scrape by, those benefits will also fall under the clumsy sequester axe some experts say by nearly 10 percent.

The unemployment rate for Blacks was 13.8 percent in February and 38 percent have

been out of work for more than a year.

“If you’ve been out of work for six or seven months and you’re trying to keep your family together, you’re trying not to lose your home and you’re trying to put food on the table and you’re getting like \$1,200 a month, losing a \$100 in unemployment benefits is something that you’re going to feel,” said Parrott during a recent panel discussion on effects of sequestration at the Center for American Progress Washington office.

Young Blacks looking for work have it even worst, as many of the programs that they depend on will lose funding and therefore limiting their options. The forced cuts will also make it harder for young Blacks that use job training programs such as YouthBuild and JobCorps to climb out of poverty.

Black aged 16-19 already suffer with unemployment rates that topped 40 percent over the past three months compared to 21.5 percent average jobless rate for White teens over the same period. YouthBuild, a job

training program for poor youth, stands to lose one-third of its total budget in 2013 because of sequestration cuts and previous budget cuts. More than half of the young people that turn to YouthBuild are Black. JobCorps could lose \$83 million in funding as a result of sequestration.

Life under sequestration won’t get much easier for young Blacks who choose college over job training.

According to the Center for American Progress, “Nearly \$3 billion would be cut in education alone, including cuts to financial aid for college students and to programs for our most vulnerable youth—English language learners and those attending high-poverty, struggling schools—impacting 9.3 million students.”

More than 80 percent of Blacks who graduated during the 2007-2008 academic year, earned degrees and mountains of debt. Sixty-four percent of White students graduated with college debt during the same year.

Even as President Obama touts universal pre-kindergarten programs for improving

educational outcomes, the sequestration that he and Congress agreed to undermines the survival of current programs such as Head Start, federal school readiness program for children and pregnant woman. Head Start, created in 1965 to assist poor families with children 5 years old and younger and pregnant women, may lose nearly \$1 billion from their budgets.

Almeta Keys, executive director of the Edward C. Mazique Parent Child Center, a Head Start program in Washington, D.C. said that cutting Head Start at the grassroots level would be a catastrophic event for families living in poverty.

“We really can’t afford to cut a dollar from Head Start because we are serving the poorest of the poor,” said Keys. “You are cutting the people that need the most help. Head Start already knows how to stretch dollars.”

Keys said that even with private partnerships, Head Start is still short on funds.

“This is not a luxury,” said Keys. “We know that our families need these services so we will try to be as creative as we can to provide the services, but we are telling them to prepare.”

Alicia Tolliver, a parent who participated in Head Start feels that pain. Tolliver, who lost her job last year used Head Start’s before school and after school programs for her 2-year-old so that she could look for work. Last year, Tolliver said, her Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners came from Head Starts supplemental programs. This year, without their help, she doesn’t know what she will do.

“They are already at maximum capacity, if you cut the hours, you have to cut the children – it’s a package deal,” said Tolliver. “Once those things happen, what am I going to do?”

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