NAACP LDF Statement on Justice Department Scaling Back Key Policing Reform Initiative

Today, Attorney General Sessions announced that he is scaling back the technical assistance and support the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) Collaborative Reform Initiative provides to law enforcement agencies that request it. Most alarmingly, the COPS Office program will no longer focus on working with departments to review and reduce use of force complaints. This weakening of the program includes the elimination of comprehensive assessments of certain policies and practices. These assessments have been requested by several cities and law enforcement agencies, including North Charleston, South Carolina. Sherrilyn Ifill, President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF), offered the following statement:

“Piece by piece Attorney General Sessions is deliberately dismantling the building blocks needed for comprehensive policing reform. His actions do not help police. To the contrary, Attorney General Sessions has removed a critical tool and desperately-needed support from local police departments seeking to build and strengthen their relationship with the communities they serve. Ironically, this announcement comes as a major American city once again grapples with the acquittal of an officer in a case of a police-involved shooting.

“The COPS Office technical assistance program has provided a pathway for police departments who voluntarily seek to address allegations of excessive force and bias. The program helps law enforcement agencies identify their shortcomings and best practices to improve policing. Most importantly, this program helped local police departments demonstrate to the communities they serve their commitment to reform. The comprehensive assessments offered by the COPS Office supported law enforcement agencies’ efforts to advance constitutional policing practices, in partnership with communities, with the goal of building trust and reducing crime.

“Attorney General Sessions’ announcement fails to acknowledge the Justice Department’s obligation to ensure that recipients of federal funds, including law enforcement agencies, use that money in a nondiscriminatory manner. In cities with pending collaborative assessments, such as North Charleston, there is evidence of racial-bias in policing practices that the Justice Department must assess and address, including withholding grant funds if violations of civil rights laws are identified.”

“We call on the House and Senate Judiciary Committees to hold an oversight hearing to explore Attorney General Sessions’ priorities and his deployment of Justice Department resources in enforcing our nation’s civil rights laws.”

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation’s first civil and human rights law organization and has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF’s Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.