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LDF Issues Statement on DOJ Investigation Finding Constitutional Violations in Mississippi State Penitentiary

Yesterday, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) concluded its investigation of the Mississippi State Penitentiary known as Parchman, finding that there is reasonable cause to believe that the state of Mississippi routinely violated the constitutional rights of incarcerated people through the conditions and practices in Parchman. DOJ found that corrections officials in Parchman failed to protect incarcerated individuals from violence, subjected them to inhumane treatment and conditions in prolonged solitary confinement, failed to protect individuals from self-harm, and failed to provide sufficient mental health treatment for those with serious mental health needs.

Parchman has a long and sordid history, especially for Black Americans. Mississippi's oldest prison, Parchman was originally the land of Parchman Plantation, which was a forced labor camp. Upon Parchman's creation in 1901, the state exploited and forced Black Americans to labor in Parchman's cotton fields under inhumane conditions. In 1961, Freedom Riders were arrested and incarcerated at Parchman for challenging the policy of segregation on Mississippi buses, suffering shocking abuses at the hands of state officials. In 1971, individuals incarcerated at Parchman filed a federal lawsuit, and the presiding federal judge noted that Parchman was filled with violence and neglect, and was in fact "unfit for human habitation under any modern concept of decency."

"The legacy of Parchman is an inextricable part of this country's history of racism, enslavement, and mass incarceration. Parchman has long been an example of some of the worst human rights violations in this country, and we commend the Justice Department for its thorough investigation into Mississippi's failure to safeguard the rights of those who have been incarcerated in this state prison," said NAACP Legal Defense and Educational and Fund, Inc. (LDF) President and Director-Counsel Janai S. Nelson. "Parchman's cruel and unusual punishment is not merely a relic of the past, but a present and ongoing harm emblematic of the crisis of our failed prison system today."

"DOJ's investigation into Parchman and the resulting findings are a critical first step to address the deep, unconstitutional failings of the state of Mississippi by allowing the horrific conditions of this prison to persist," said Senior Deputy Director of Litigation &

Director of Strategic Initiatives Jin Hee Lee. “To be clear, the countless human rights abuses suffered by incarcerated people across the South do not stop at Parchman. The state of southern prisons is a national emergency, and there is an urgent need to enforce the human rights of all incarcerated people who have lived in the most deplorable conditions for too long.”

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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. LDF 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.

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