



**For Immediate Release**  
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### **Janai S. Nelson Begins Tenure as LDF's 8<sup>th</sup> President and Director-Counsel**

Today, Janai S. Nelson began her tenure as the eighth President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF), following Sherrilyn Ifill in the first-ever woman-to-woman leadership transition in the organization's 82-year history.

"I am deeply honored to lead LDF through the next chapter of our work advancing the rights and fighting for the full protection of the dignity and humanity of Black people in America," said Ms. Nelson. "As we have for more than 80 years, LDF will continue to defend the heart and soul of our democracy by utilizing all of the tools and tactics at our disposal, including organizing, advocacy, legislation, public education, research, and litigation.

"We are living through the most comprehensive, multi-layered, multi-directional threat to our democracy that we have seen to date. The unprecedented trifecta of attacks on our democracy includes wide-ranging voter suppression laws and racially gerrymandered district maps, restrictions on our right to assembly and protest, and the banning of truth and other attempts to erase the lived experiences of people of color. We must meet these threats head on, knowing that the promise of our democracy's future is greater than forces that seek to undo it."

Ms. Nelson began her civil rights career at LDF, first as an extern in 1995 while a student at UCLA School of Law, then as a recipient of the prestigious Fried Frank-LDF Fellowship in 1998 until she was hired as an Assistant Counsel by LDF's first female President and Director-Counsel Elaine Jones. Ms. Nelson went on to lead LDF's Political Participation Group, including the entire voting rights and redistricting docket, felony disenfranchisement, and voter suppression matters, and represented persons on death row.

After leaving LDF to do research in Ghana, West Africa, as a Fulbright awardee, she spent nearly 10 years in academia, where she became a full professor and senior administrator and dean at St. John's University School of Law. While in the academy, Ms. Nelson was honored with the Derrick A. Bell Award from the American Association of Law Schools Section on Minority Groups and was named one of Lawyers of Color's 50 Under 50 minority professors making an impact in legal education.

Ms. Nelson returned to LDF in 2014 as its Associate Director-Counsel. A member of the litigation and policy teams and an institutional thought-leader, Ms. Nelson served as lead counsel in *Veasey v. Abbott* (2018), a successful federal challenge to Texas' discriminatory voter ID law, and was the lead architect of *National Urban League, et al. v. Trump* (2020), which sought to declare President Trump's Executive Order banning diversity, equity, and inclusion training in the workplace unconstitutional before it was later rescinded by President Biden. In addition to leading several transformational operational initiatives at LDF, she has also been the lead architect of LDF's hair

discrimination advocacy and its innovative campaign to counter a virulent anti-truth movement.

Together, Ms. Ifill and Ms. Nelson launched one of the most far-reaching efforts to create the next generation of civil rights leaders: The Marshall-Motley Scholars Program (MMSP). Named in honor of the nation's first Black Supreme Court Justice and LDF founder Thurgood Marshall and iconic civil rights litigator Constance Baker Motley, the MMSP is a multiyear commitment to endow the South with committed, prepared civil rights lawyers trained to provide legal advocacy of unparalleled excellence. They also launched the Thurgood Marshall Institute, a multi-disciplinary research arm within LDF.

"I have given this work my all, and I am proud of our accomplishments, including our increased growth and strength," said **Ms. Ifill**. "But I am most proud of the leadership role LDF has played during one of the most tumultuous and volatile periods for civil rights in recent memory. And our fight is far from over. For the work ahead, I am thrilled that Janai Nelson, who has been my trusted partner, will take LDF to even greater heights. I have no doubt that she is the right leader to build upon the strong foundation we have laid over the last several years and Janai will continue to advance the organization's mission to defend and protect the rights of Americans all over the country."

LDF's Board of Directors – led for the first time in the organization's history by two women, Co-Chairs Angela Vallot, Partner at VallotKarp, and Kim Koopersmith, Partner and Chairperson at Akin Gump, Strauss Hauer & Feld – voted unanimously in favor of Ms. Nelson's ascension.

"Each era in LDF's history has called for brilliant leadership and, today, Janai Nelson, adds her name to that group," added **Ms. Koopersmith**. "She is the right person to step into this crucial role at this time of seismic upheaval, combining her rich history and devotion to LDF with clarity of purpose on meeting the new challenges we face with energy, creativity, and rigor. We, as a Board, are truly thrilled to have her as the next leader."

"Janai's leadership in close partnership with Sherrilyn over the past eight years makes her the perfect person to take the helm as LDF continues to lead the fight for racial equality during this crucial time in American history," said **Ms. Vallot**. "Janai is a brilliant lawyer and gifted leader who has the full confidence of the board. We look forward to supporting her in this new role."

"In moments of struggle and polarization, we need leaders who will stand strong in their beliefs and push forward in spite of whatever challenge lay before them. Janai S. Nelson is a fiercely talented litigator and true advocate for change that does not shy away from doing the hard work for the betterment of all people," said **Ford Foundation President Darren Walker**. "Her unwavering commitment and vision for change to break down the barriers that people of color continue to face is exactly the type of leadership needed to build upon the well-earned legacy of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund."

"Janai Nelson is an extraordinary leader, manager, and litigator who is intimately familiar with the many adverse issues impacting the African American community," said **Elaine Jones**, LDF's first woman President and Director-Counsel. "Janai has deep experience within LDF and will serve with distinction as its 8th Director-Counsel."

“As Janai Nelson takes the baton as President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund from Sherrilyn Ifill, the legal struggle for civil and constitutional rights in the United States could not be in more capable hands,” said **Ted Shaw**, former LDF President and Director-Counsel. “She is an extraordinary lawyer with a passion for justice and a powerful intellect – the right person at the right time. Godspeed, Janai.”

Said **Mrs. Cecilia Marshall, widow of the Hon. Thurgood Marshall**: “Janai Nelson is a superb choice, fully in the tradition of LDF’s commitment to equality and legal excellence.”

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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. Follow LDF on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [Facebook](#).*