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**LDF Mourns the Loss of Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr.,
Civil Rights Champion and Arbiter of Justice**

The [Legal Defense Fund](#) (LDF) mourns the loss of the Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr., the legendary civil rights leader, politician, advocate, and ordained minister whose powerful voice galvanized generations in the fight for civil rights, human rights, and racial justice. A towering figure whose moral clarity and political acumen helped to incite change over the course of nearly seven decades, Rev. Jackson stood at the center of America's struggle to expand civil rights, challenge injustice, and build an inclusive multiracial democracy. He passed away on Feb. 17, 2026, at 84 years old.

"It is with the heaviest of hearts we mourn the loss of Reverend Jesse Jackson Sr., a singular force in the fight for racial justice," said LDF President and Director-Counsel Janai Nelson. "Rev. Jackson was a dynamic and ceaseless civil rights champion whose booming voice, strategic brilliance, and unwavering moral conviction shifted the trajectory of our nation. LDF had the honor and privilege of working alongside the Reverend across decades of initiatives and engagements. As LDF noted when we honored Rev. Jackson with the 'Spirit of Selma' award at last year's National Equal Justice Awards Dinner, Rev. Jackson challenged the previous constraints of American democracy, melding community and conviction to achieve the previously unthinkable. We are deeply grateful for his courage, his leadership, and his boundless commitment to the dignity and rights of Black people."

"While we are utterly saddened by this profound loss, Rev. Jackson's impact and legacy cannot be overstated," Nelson continued. "His life's work opened doors to political participation, expanded the bounds of what justice could look like, and inspired millions across the globe. His legacy will endure in the institutions he built, the movements he empowered, and the generations he emboldened to continue the fight for freedom."

Born in Greenville, South Carolina, Jackson rose from humble beginnings to become one of the most influential civil rights organizers of his generation. After attending North Carolina A&T College as a talented football player and becoming active in the local CORE chapter, he joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), where he quickly emerged as a trusted organizer under Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As director of Operation Breadbasket, he led pioneering economic justice campaigns that expanded job opportunities and corporate accountability. His organizing prowess later propelled him to found Operation PUSH and the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, institutions

that mobilized Black political power, confronted discrimination, and advanced economic equity nationwide. His two groundbreaking presidential campaigns helped register millions of voters and forged a new model for multiracial democracy.

LDF honored Rev. Jackson at its annual National Equal Justice Awards Dinner (NEJAD) last year with the 'Tribute to the Spirit of Selma' Award, which recognizes the monumental contributions of everyday civil rights activists who pioneered voting rights in Selma, Alabama and across the nation.

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Founded in 1940, the [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) is the nation's first civil rights legal organization. LDF has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957, though it was founded under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall while he was at the NAACP. LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute (TMI) is a division of LDF that undertakes innovative research and houses LDF's archive. In all media attributions, please refer to us as the Legal Defense Fund or LDF (do not include NAACP) and refer to the Institute as LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute or TMI.