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**Sherrilyn Ifill to Step Down After Nearly a Decade of LDF Leadership;  
Longtime Deputy Janai Nelson to Lead LDF**

The [NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.](#) (LDF) today announced that President and Director-Counsel Sherrilyn Ifill will step down from her role in the spring of 2022 after nearly a decade leading the organization through its greatest period of growth and transformation. Janai Nelson, LDF's current Associate Director-Counsel who has worked alongside Ms. Ifill for nearly eight years, will become the next President and Director-Counsel of the storied organization founded in 1940 by Thurgood Marshall. LDF has been a separate organization from the NAACP since 1957.

Since its founding, LDF has distinguished itself through groundbreaking achievements in every facet of racial and social justice. Under Ms. Ifill's leadership, LDF has advanced its legacy as the country's most high-profile racial justice legal organization. LDF has led the fight against voter suppression, inequity in education, economic disparities, and racial discrimination in the criminal legal system. LDF has also been at the forefront of protecting the integrity of the electoral process against a scourge of anti-democratic incursions and providing powerful and relentless advocacy against police violence.

Ms. Ifill and Ms. Nelson have both dedicated their lives to the pursuit of racial justice and consider leading LDF as the pinnacle of that work. Their transition marks the first woman-to-woman succession in LDF's history, and they will continue to work closely together during the transition period to ensure LDF's vital role in advancing racial and social justice throughout the country.

"It has been the privilege of a lifetime to lead LDF for nearly 10 years. I began my career as a civil rights lawyer at LDF more than 30 years ago and every day leading this extraordinary, dedicated staff has felt like a dream come true," said Ms. Ifill. "I have given this work my all, and I am proud of our accomplishments, including our increased growth and strength. 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."

During Ms. Ifill's tenure, at critical moments during political and civil rights crises, her singular voice and vision have powerfully influenced our national dialogue. She has elevated and strengthened LDF's prominence as the country's leading civil rights law organization and achieved unprecedented growth in the organization's history. LDF's staff, annual budget, and endowment have increased five-fold under Ms. Ifill's leadership. In addition, the organization launched several lawsuits to protect the integrity of the 2020 election, while partnering with LeBron James' More

Than A Vote to recruit over 40,000 people to apply to be poll workers across the country. LDF has also provided powerful and relentless advocacy against police brutality, housing discrimination, and education inequity – all while working to protect the lives, homes, and educational opportunities of Black communities disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ms. Ifill first joined LDF in 1988 as Assistant Counsel, litigating voting rights cases for five years before joining the faculty of the University of Maryland School of Law. Ms. Ifill’s scholarly work on the history and ongoing resonance of 20<sup>th</sup> century lynchings, including her widely acclaimed book “On The Courthouse Lawn,” is credited with reigniting the contemporary focus on lynching and the movement to create lynching memorials. She returned to LDF as its seventh President and Director-Counsel in 2013.

Among many honors, Ms. Ifill is the recipient of numerous honorary degrees, and was named one of Time Magazine’s 100 Most Influential People in the world in 2021, honored with a 2021 Spirit of Excellence Award by the American Bar Association, and named Attorney of the Year by The American Lawyer in 2020. In 2022, Ms. Ifill will receive the prestigious Brandeis Medal, named for Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis, and the American Bar Association’s Thurgood Marshall Award.

“From the moment I learned about LDF’s storied legacy in securing and advancing the civil rights of Black people in America and pressing this country to live up to its constitutional ideals, I knew that contributing to that effort would be the highest and most fulfilling pursuit,” said Ms. Nelson. “LDF is unparalleled in its contributions to the cause of racial justice over the past 81 years and in the evolution and protection of civil rights for Black people. It is the utmost honor to continue the work of those who came before me alongside the exceedingly talented team of lawyers, advocates, organizers, researchers, communications professionals, and administrative personnel that comprise LDF today.”

“It has been an extreme privilege to work alongside Sherrilyn Ifill since 2014 and to have worked with three of LDF’s seven President and Director-Counsels, including Elaine Jones and Ted Shaw,” Ms. Nelson continued. “As LDF emerges from the profound metamorphosis of the past nine years under Sherrilyn’s leadership, I am honored to steward LDF’s next chapter with the skill, vision, care, and courage that it demands.”

Ms. Nelson also 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. 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 high-level 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 at Ms. Ifill’s invitation. A member of the litigation and policy teams, 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. Working closely with Ms. Ifill, Ms. Nelson has also helped to develop and execute LDF’s strategic vision and oversee the operation of its programs.

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). The 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, 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.

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.

Ms. Vallot commented, “Sherrilyn has been a transformative leader who has done a remarkable job of leading LDF over the last 10 years. When it came time to name her successor, we knew exactly who it should be. Janai’s leadership in close partnership with Sherrilyn over the past several 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.”

Ms. Koopersmith said, “Sherrilyn Ifill is a true visionary and her contributions to LDF, and our country are extraordinary. She has risen to every challenge we have faced as a nation, and we are a better country for her leadership and tenacity. Equally importantly, she has given the greatest gift to LDF – a seamless transition to a truly exceptional new leader. As recent years have shown, the work of LDF remains as vital as ever and we are exceptionally fortunate to have Janai Nelson step into this crucial role as LDF’s 8<sup>th</sup> President and Director-Counsel.”

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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](#).*