



**For Immediate Release**  
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## **LDF Welcomes Karla McKanders as New Director of LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute**

Today, the Legal Defense Fund (LDF) announced that Karla McKanders has been appointed as the new director of the [Thurgood Marshall Institute](#), the multidisciplinary research and advocacy center within LDF that was launched in 2015.

Professor McKanders comes to LDF from Vanderbilt University Law School, where she has taught Critical Race Theory and Immigration Law for the past six years. She was also the Associate Director of Vanderbilt's Clinical Program and served as the founding director of the school's Immigration Practice Clinic. That work included the supervision of students who provide vital representation to asylum seekers and unaccompanied minor children in humanitarian immigration cases.

"We're thrilled to welcome Karla McKanders to lead LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute," said Janai Nelson, LDF President and Director-Counsel. "Professor McKanders' highly respected scholarship regarding how cultural norms perpetuate racial division, along with her many years working on immigration matters and her broad experience with civil rights issues, will significantly benefit the Thurgood Marshall Institute and LDF as a whole."

"I'm excited to start this new chapter in my professional life and honored that it is with LDF, an organization that I have long admired for its steadfast commitment to civil rights," Professor McKanders said. "I am especially enthused at the prospect of leading the Thurgood Marshall Institute at a critical time in this nation's history, where the issues highlighted and researched by the Institute are more urgent than ever."

Earlier this month, Professor McKanders accepted the prestigious [American Immigration Lawyers Association \(AILA\) 2023 Elmer Fried Excellence in Teaching Award](#). In presenting the award, the AILA described her as a "brilliant leader" who has been leading a community of advocates and scholars "at a time of tremendous pressures on the humanitarian and due process aspects of immigration and asylum law."

Professor McKanders, who is chair of the American Bar Association's Commission on Immigration, was also a visiting associate professor of law at Howard University School of Law during the 2016-17 academic year. There, she directed the Civil Rights Clinic and facilitated collaboration between LDF and the Advancement Project that resulted in the submission of amicus briefs in civil rights and social justice litigation before the Supreme Court.

Before her time at Vanderbilt, Professor McKanders held a tenured associate professorship at the University of Tennessee College of Law. Prior to her academic career, she clerked for the Honorable Damon J. Keith on the U.S. Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit, in Detroit. She obtained her law degree from Duke University and completed her undergraduate studies at Spelman College.

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*Founded in 1940, the [Legal Defense Fund](#) (LDF) is the nation's first civil rights law organization. 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 Legal Defense Fund or LDF. Please note that 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.*