

Testimony of
Julian Bond

June 3, 2009

STATEMENT OF MR. JULIAN BOND
CHAIRMAN
NATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS of the
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT
OF COLORED PEOPLE (NAACP)
on
FAMILY REUNIFICATION AND IMMIGRATION REFORM
BEFORE THE SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

June 3, 2009

Good morning. My name is Julian Bond and I am the Chairman of the National Board of Directors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP. We are our Nation's oldest, largest and most widely-recognized grassroots civil rights organization. As we celebrate and commemorate our 100th anniversary this year, we currently have more than 2,200 membership units actively engaged in every state across the country.

I would like to begin by thanking Chairman Leahy and the other members of this committee for holding this important hearing and for your strong and steadfast support of families of all types.

The preservation and strengthening of the family unit has long been a rallying point for the NAACP, and as such we have strongly and consistently supported policies, including immigration laws and proposals, that promote and encourage family unification and stability. The principle of family unity has long been an important moral value and part of our country's immigration tradition, and even during the most restrictive years, U.S. immigration laws have allowed immigrants to unite with their loved ones and bring their family members into our country.

For the most part, our nation's current immigration laws promote family unity by awarding the majority of U.S. immigrant visas to the husbands and wives, children and parents, and brothers and sisters of current U.S. residents so that families are not split apart; this, of course, is crucial. Today, family sponsorship accounts for more than 85 percent of legal immigration to the United States. However, our efforts to keep families together have been seriously undermined by extremely long waits for family-based visas that force families apart for years, and in some cases even jeopardize the safety and security of the family members.

A backlog of visas - experienced in many immigration categories, but especially for family members - currently separates immigrants from spouses and their young children for over five years and separates elderly parents, adult children, and siblings, in too many cases, for as many as 23 years. The current family-based immigration system has not been updated in 20 years -

keeping spouses, children and their parents separated for years and often decades, despite the fact that the family has played by the rules. As outrageous as it may seem to many of us here today, and as contrary to the spirit of family reunification that has guided our immigration laws for more than forty years, there are currently 5.8 million people in the family immigration backlog waiting unconscionable periods of time to reunite with their loved ones.

One of the goals of the 1965 Immigration Act was to expand access to our nation to immigrants of color, the NAACP is especially troubled by the long waits that are endemic among African and Caribbean immigrants.

Immigrants from Africa rely on the family-based system to sponsor the immigration of their close family members. In the past two decades, immigration from Africa has dramatically increased. As of 2007, there were 1.4 million immigrants from Africa in the United States, as compared to less than 400,000 in 1990. While Africans comprise a small portion of all family visa recipients, family sponsorship is the top source of African immigration. African-descent immigrants also come to the United States from Caribbean countries. Family sponsorship is overwhelmingly the means of immigration among this population.

The U.S. State Department issued more than 400,000 family immigration visas in 2008. Fifty-two percent of legal immigration from Africa and 99 percent from the Caribbean was family-based. Nigeria and Ethiopia together accounted for 40 percent of all family visas issued to African countries, and Nigeria received 1 percent of worldwide family visas. Clearly, along with fixing family reunification we need to ensure that all areas of the globe are treated equally when it comes to allowing immigrants into our Nation.

It is for this reason that the NAACP strongly supports legislation in the Senate that would fix our Nation's immigration laws to again make family reunification a highly functioning element of our national immigration policy. Specifically, the NAACP supports the Reuniting Families Act, S. 1085, introduced by Senator Menendez of New Jersey, and the Uniting American Families Act, S. 424, which has been introduced by the Chairman of this committee, Mr. Leahy.

In the House, of Representatives, the NAACP supports legislation to be introduced tomorrow by Congressman Mike Honda, also to be called the Reuniting Families Act, which incorporates both S. 1085 and S. 424. I would hasten to add that we support the Leahy bill / Honda provision (which has also been introduced as a stand-alone bill in the House, H.R. 1024 by Congressman Jerrold Nadler of New York) because the NAACP strongly believes that the definition of "family" is not restrictive and can and should also include non-traditional family units. The NAACP does not believe that immigration law, or any laws or policies for that matter, should discriminate against gay and lesbian families or family members.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, so much of our national debate over immigration reform, in fact too much of the debate, has focused on enforcement and undocumented workers. That is one of the main reasons I am here today: the NAACP feels strongly that genuine immigration reform will include provisions to fix an antiquated system with the result being the reinvigoration of one of the most compelling goals of the American immigration laws: the reunification of families.

Historically, immigration laws that promote family unity have benefited the United States, providing social stability and economic prosperity in numerous ways. Immigrant family members, as well as native-born families, support and sustain each other and provide security and shelter in times of need while sharing similar visions of life in a nation that guarantees life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

As was documented so well in the 2008 report by the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, "A Devastating Wait: Family Unity and the Immigration Backlogs," unified immigrant families bolster the success and integration of their U.S.-born family members, as well as the immigrant family members, by taking care of young children, buying homes together and even strengthening the economy by starting and operating small businesses together. Such support is particularly important for any individual who is learning the language, systems and processes of a new country - a period that is difficult and stressful for most immigrants.

Indeed, immigrant families have proven to be vital emotional, psychological, and cultural resources for entire communities, not only immediate family members. Public health and psychological research demonstrate that family networks help prevent a wide range of health and social problems in communities, from substance abuse and teen pregnancy to suicide and gang violence.

Economically, family-based immigration has had a real positive impact, especially for long-term economic growth. Again, research has shown that because family-based immigrants tend to invest highly in additional schooling and training, they are more adaptable to changing market and labor conditions and are less likely to compete with the native-born for jobs. In fact, family-based immigrants have a statistically positive effect on the earnings and employment of U.S.-born Caucasian- and African-Americans.

Family unity is economically sound policy for the U.S. because it keeps important dollars in the country. With family unity, immigrants - many of whom are the bread winners of their families - no longer need to send money home to support their spouse, children, siblings, and parents. Each year billions of dollars are sent overseas in remittances to family members in an immigrant's home country. Family unity keeps those dollars in the U.S. where U.S. residents and immigrants use them to purchase homes and consumer goods which helps to grow and strengthen our economy.

Given all the benefits, socially, economically, and morally, of ensuring that effective family reunification is an integral part of our nation's immigration policy there can be no question that the NAACP supports an overhaul of current law to ensure that the family preferences policies are functioning well and without discrimination. As I said earlier, the NAACP would also like to stress that the definition of "family" should not be interpreted so stringently as to omit people who are in a loving, committed relationship but happen to be of the same gender.

Our nation's current immigration laws were established in the mid-1960's, at the height of the modern-day civil rights movement. It was, in fact, the Immigration Act of 1965 that put family unification at the core of our nation's immigration policy, replacing the old "Quota Acts" of the 1920's. The Immigration Act of 1965 made huge strides in eradicating the old, racist policies that

put a premium on people from Northern and Western Europe and made it next to impossible for people of color to immigrate to the United States.

As I have said throughout this testimony, we need to update our immigration policies to more efficiently promote family unification, and in the spirit of promoting civil rights that was the guiding force behind the 1965 law, we should include families of all different races and ethnicities, including families with gay and lesbian members. It is because the NAACP supports the civil rights protections of all people, and is opposed to discrimination based on any criteria, that we support inclusion of the principles inherent in Uniting American Families Act in any comprehensive immigration reform. This important legislation will ensure that gay and lesbian couples and families are treated just like other families who are bi-national. The inclusion of the Uniting American Families Act in comprehensive immigration reform would ensure the continuation of an expansion of civil rights to people who have historically been left out and mistreated by American immigration policies.

Under this proposal, a "permanent partnership" is defined as a "committed, intimate relationship" with another adult "in which both parties intend a lifelong commitment." The couple must be financially interdependent and not married to or in a permanent partnership with anyone else. And the partners can't be related. The benefit comes with the same immigration restrictions and enforcement standards that apply to heterosexual couples and families. Fraudulent permanent partnerships face the same penalties as fake marriages: up to five years in prison and up to a \$250,000 fine.

In closing, let me reiterate the NAACP's strongly belief in the benefits of strong, unified families. As such, we support the inclusion of modifications to the existing family reunification policies in our nation's immigration laws to facilitate more families being brought together faster and with less hassle. We also support family reunification policies that place a premium on the family, regardless of its shape or form.

I would again like to thank the Chairman for holding this important hearing, for your support of all types of families, and I would welcome any questions you may have.