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JUSTICE NEWS

Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks at the National Council of La Raza Annual Conference

Las Vegas ~ Saturday, July 7, 2012

Thank you, Daniel, for those kind words – and for your extraordinary service that you provided as Chair of the Board of Directors. I'd also like to thank President Murguía for her friendship, her outstanding leadership – and her unwavering commitment – to strengthening the legacy, and the record of achievement, that has been the hallmark of the National Council of La Raza for decades.

It is a pleasure to join you in celebrating, and working to extend, this tradition. And it is an honor to be included in the litany of policymakers, elected and appointed officials, and leaders from all across the nation – and the political spectrum – who have attended this conference to speak with and learn from the largest national Latino civil rights and advocacy organization in the country. I also have to admit that it's particularly nice to be outside of Washington today – and to be among so many friends. And I want you to know that, in addition to your friendship, I am grateful for your partnership – and for the outstanding work that you are doing, in communities nationwide, to advance our nation's long and ongoing struggle to ensure equality, opportunity, and justice for all.

In a very real sense, you are now on the front lines of this fight – the same fight that, more than four decades ago, inspired Herman Gallegos, Dr. Julian Samora, and Dr. Ernesto Galarza to create the Southwest Council of La Raza. They were united by shared concerns and frustrations, but also by a common vision and a collective optimism. As I look around this room today, it's clear that their passion for righting wrongs; their dedication to assisting and empowering the Latino community; and their determination to build a more fair, more free, and more just society – remain as vibrant as ever before. And it's obvious that these qualities continue to guide this organization's efforts not only to safeguard the progress that has always defined America's history – but to build upon it.

Through programs like the Lideres Initiative – and campaigns like Home for Good, We Can Stop the Hate, and Mobilize to Vote – NCLR has established itself as an influential voice in protecting the civil rights of everyone in this nation; encouraging community engagement; inspiring future generations of leaders and activists; and ensuring equality in our law enforcement activities, immigration policies, housing and financial markets, school systems, workplaces, and voting booths.

Time and again, you have proven your ability to give voice to the challenges facing the most vulnerable among us, and to shine a light on the promises our nation must fulfill. And, especially this week, as we celebrate the birth of our nation – and the rich diversity that has always driven America's strength and success – this conference presents an important opportunity: to renew our commitment to the founding principles – and enduring ideals – of fairness, inclusion, and opportunity; and to reclaim, for ourselves and our children, the singular, animating force that – more than half a century ago – a young United States Senator named John F. Kennedy called the great "secret of America": that this country is comprised of people "with the fresh memory of old traditions who dared to explore new frontiers – people eager to build lives for themselves in a spacious society that did not restrict their freedom of choice and action."

Of course, each one of us has benefited from this remarkable – and uniquely American – spirit. Like many of you, I was raised in a family – and community – of immigrants. And like all of you, I have enjoyed the blessings of freedom, and the opportunities that – for more than two centuries – have been available to those who dared to set out for, and seek a better life upon, America's shores. But I also understand that – despite the truth and transformative power of the American Dream; and despite all the progress we've made over the last 236 years – our nation's struggle to overcome injustice and eliminate disparities remains far from over.

Many of you know this firsthand – and have felt the impact of division, and even discrimination, in your own lives. And I'm encouraged that all of you have chosen to respond by leading the way forward; by speaking out about the fact that we have further to travel on the road to

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equality; and by working to make certain that the hard-won progress of the Civil Rights era is protected. Today, unfortunately, some of these gains have come under renewed threat. And there can be no doubt that our nation now faces a moment of great consequence. But this also is a time of remarkable opportunity. And as you continue to lead national efforts to confront the obstacles that lie ahead and to uphold the values that have always defined who we are as Americans – I want to assure you that, in the fight to protect the civil rights of all – this organization will never have a more committed partner than the United States Department of Justice.

For my colleagues – and for me – our civil rights enforcement efforts are, and will remain, a top priority. And under the leadership of my good friend, and your good friend, Assistant Attorney General Tom Perez – I'm proud to report that the Department's civil rights enforcement efforts have never been stronger or more effective.

Over the past three years, our Civil Rights Division has filed more criminal civil rights cases than during any other period in its history – including record numbers of human trafficking, hate crimes, and police misconduct cases. Through our reinvigorated partnerships with state, local, and international authorities – particularly Mexican leaders – and thanks to a number of anti-trafficking training programs that the Department has helped to create, and to expand – we've seen a rise of more than 30 percent in the number of forced labor and adult sex trafficking prosecutions.

These actions have sent an unmistakable message to those who would deprive others of their dignity, their freedom, and their essential civil rights – that we will find you, stop you, and bring you to justice. They underscore our determination to secure severe penalties against those who violate our civil rights laws. And they prove our commitment to protecting and empowering each and every victim we can reach.

Nowhere is this commitment more clear than in our work to combat hate crimes. Since 2009, the Justice Department has prosecuted 35 percent more hate crime cases than during the preceding three-year period. Today, we're vigorously enforcing the landmark Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act – which President Obama signed into law in 2009, after NCLR, and so many other civil rights organizations, worked tirelessly to advance this critical legislation. As the Department's record clearly shows, we will not hesitate to use it – and every other available tool – to hold offenders accountable, and to protect your rights.

In fact, one of the first cases the Department brought under this law involved five Latino victims who were pursued along a highway – and brutally attacked – simply because of their ethnicity. In this and other instances, the Shepard-Byrd Act helped us to achieve convictions – and stiff penalties – befitting the horrific nature of these crimes. You saw further proof of this last year, when the Justice Department secured a conviction – and a prison sentence totaling more than four years – against an individual who sent a series of racist, threatening messages to the National Council of La Raza and four other Latino civil rights organizations. But our dedication to ensuring fair and equal treatment – and our resolve to move aggressively in enforcing civil rights protections and ending discrimination – also extends far beyond our efforts to seek justice against those who commit, or threaten to commit, violent crimes.

In recent years, it has also driven the implementation of a series of new initiatives and enforcement actions that the Department has taken in order to eliminate predatory and discriminatory practices in America's housing and lending markets – while establishing important protections for communities of color, military service members, veterans, and others who have been targeted. In 2011 alone, the Civil Rights Division – through its new Fair Lending Unit – settled or filed a record number of cases to hold financial institutions accountable for discriminatory practices directed at African Americans and Latinos. Among these was the largest residential fair lending settlement in history, totaling more than \$335 million and involving more than 200,000 victims of discrimination – roughly two thirds of whom were Latinos.

Fighting against such practices – and working to eliminate bias and combat intimidation – constitutes a key area of focus for those who are engaged in civil rights work across every sector of our society. This focus is particularly important when it comes to ensuring the integrity and professionalism of every member of our nation's law enforcement community.

As many of you know, nearly two months ago – after a lengthy investigation into the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, in Arizona – and following numerous attempts to work with the Sheriff there and his colleagues to address the concerns that our investigation raised – the Department was forced to take an unusual, and extremely rare, action. The Civil Rights Division had no choice but to file suit against Sheriff Arpaio, the Sheriff's Office, and the County for discriminatory police and incarceration practices that violate the constitutional rights of Latinos in Maricopa County. These policies simply have no place in responsible and effective law enforcement. And they must not – and simply will not – be tolerated.

In another recent case that NCLR members – and millions of others across the country – have followed with great interest, the Justice Department also challenged the constitutionality of an Arizona law that would have effectively criminalized unlawful status. And, of course, last



Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down major provisions of this law – confirming the federal government’s exclusive authority to regulate with regard to immigration issues.

The Court’s action marked an important step forward – which will help to ensure that our nation speaks with one voice on the critical, and complex, issue of immigration. Yet I remain seriously concerned – as many of you do – about the potential impact of other sections of the law,

including the requirement for law enforcement officials to verify the immigration status of anyone who is lawfully stopped or detained when there is any reason to suspect that the person is here unlawfully.

Let me assure you: the Justice Department will monitor the impact of this and other measures to make certain that they do not conflict with federal civil rights or immigration laws. We’ll work to ensure – as the Court affirmed – that such laws cannot be seen as a license to engage in racial profiling. And we’ll continue to enforce federal prohibitions against racial and ethnic discrimination, in order – as President Obama has promised – to “uphold our tradition as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants.”

In line with this promise, just last month, the Department of Homeland Security announced a new policy that will help to focus limited law enforcement resources, protect public safety, and make our immigration enforcement efforts not only more efficient and cost-effective – but also more just. Soon, certain young people – who may have been brought to this country illegally by their parents, but who pose no risk to national security or public safety – may receive temporary relief from removal and the chance to apply for work authorization.

There’s no question that this action represents a significant – and long-overdue – improvement to our nation’s immigration policy. And we all can be encouraged that President Obama and other members of his Administration, including me, will keep working with Congressional leaders – from both parties – to advance the passage of critical legislation like the DREAM Act, and comprehensive immigration reform, in order to bring about fair and lasting updates to our immigration system so that it meets our 21st century economic and national security needs while continuing to honor our rich traditions and diversity.

In this work – as in the Justice Department’s civil rights enforcement efforts – my colleagues and I will continue to be guided by the legacy that organizations like NCLR have helped to shape. We’ll draw inspiration from – and remain dedicated to – the sacred values that have always set this country apart, and made America an example of strength – and a beacon of hope – for all the world. And we’ll do everything in our power to stand vigilant against any and all measures that threaten to undermine the effectiveness and integrity of our elections systems – and to infringe on the single most important right of American citizenship: the right to vote.

As part of this commitment, over the last 18 months – in response to a number of proposed changes that could make it more difficult for many eligible voters to cast their ballots – the Justice Department has initiated careful, thorough, and independent reviews of redistricting plans, photo identification requirements, and changes affecting third party registration organizations. In each of the jurisdictions where proposed changes can be shown to have no discriminatory purpose or effect, we’ll follow the law and approve the change. Where jurisdictions cannot meet this threshold, we will object – under the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and other laws – in order to guarantee that all eligible citizens have unrestricted access to the ballot box.

We also will move aggressively to protect the voting rights of citizens with disabilities, Americans living and serving abroad – particularly service members and their families – and the 19 million voting-age citizens who are covered by protections for language minorities. Over the last year and a half, I’m proud to report that we’ve resolved eight different cases to protect the rights of Spanish-speaking, Chinese-speaking, and Native American voters in communities all around the country. Today, we’re taking additional steps to review nationwide compliance.

And as my colleagues and I keep working to build on this progress – and strive to take all of our efforts to a new level – know that we’ll continue to rely on organizations like this one to help lead the way forward. And know also that we’re depending on you to help us ensure that – in our workplaces and military bases; in our housing and lending markets; in our schools and places of worship; at the ballot box and in our immigrant communities – the rights of everyone in this country are protected.

As the advocates and activists in this room know all too well, this never has been, and never will be, easy work. And although we can be proud of the great strides our nation has made in the decades since NCLR was founded – and since the day John F. Kennedy laid out his vision for an inclusive, “spacious society” – the harsh reality is that much remains to be done, and the road ahead remains far from certain.

So as we gather this afternoon – to look toward the brighter future we seek, and that, together, we must build – I urge you to keep rallying new partners to this work. Seek new ways to expand – and extend – the promise that has always given shape to our highest aspirations. Demand that policymakers move beyond partisan gridlock and political gamesmanship. And call upon leaders in Washington – and in communities across the country – to reach for practical

leaders in Washington – and in communities across the country – to reach for practical solutions to the difficult problems facing the American people.

As a result of your committed leadership, we've already come a long way. Pero solamente juntos podemos lograr un futuro mejor. But only together can we achieve a better future. Thanks to your continued engagement, as I look around this crowd, I can't help but feel optimistic about where our joint efforts can – and will – lead us from here.

Once again, thank you for all that you do – and keep up the great work. Si se puede.

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