MEDIA RELEASE

ACLU, NAACP Urge U.S. Justice Department to Investigate Racial Disparities in Somerset County

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PRINCESS ANNE, MD – Concerned that Somerset County is not taking the steps necessary to address the community's lingering legacy of racial injustice, the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland and the Somerset County Branch of the NAACP today asked the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to open an investigation into continuing racial disparities in county government. Specifically, the groups ask that DOJ investigate whether these disparities result from illegal race discrimination infecting the County's employment practices and election system.

"The situation in Somerset County is among the worst in the nation, and just cries out for reform," said Deborah Jeon, Legal Director for the ACLU of Maryland. "Unfortunately, the County's efforts to date have been lackluster, at best. We called these racial disparities to public attention nearly a year ago, but still there is no noticeable change. We are now asking the Department of Justice to join our effort, to ensure that with respect to race relations, Somerset County does not remain 'Always the Same.'"

"We've received too many reports of prejudice and continuing discrimination in Somerset County to let this matter lie," said Kirkland Hall, Jr., President of the Somerset County Branch of the NAACP. "The time is now for a full accounting of why these disparities exist, and what can be done to overcome the racial injustices of Somerset's past."

In May 2009, the Somerset County NAACP and the ACLU of Maryland released a report, "Semper Eadem: Always the Same?", examining the demographics of Somerset County government, and revealing troubling disparities between the numbers of African Americans who live in Somerset County, and the number employed in the government and schools there, especially at the upper echelons. Somerset County is 42 percent African American in population, but *never in history* has it elected or appointed an African American to its County Commission or to any top County job. In fact, at the time

the ACLU report, not a single African American was employed by the County in a professional, official, technical or paraprofessional position. This, even though Somerset is home to a historically black college and a substantial number of African-Americans within the County are college graduates.

In response to that report, and a well-attended town hall meeting held in June 2009, a Task Force on Diversity was established. The Task Force – composed of community members, local advocates, and officials – held a series of meetings and in November 2009 offered to county leaders a comprehensive set of recommendations intended to ensure that local government values diversity and that Somerset County is an inclusive and welcoming place.

But while school system officials embraced the effort, only one County Commissioner (and no other representative of the County government) volunteered to serve as a member of the Task Force. Subsequent requests that the County Administrator, Sheriff, and Detention Center Warden also join the Task Force – so as to involve more County decision-makers – were either rebuffed or ignored.

Although the County did respond to the Task Force Recommendations in a vaguely positive way, there has been no concrete follow up or answer to specific requests for action – leading ACLU and NAACP officials to fear that the County's responses have been little more than lip service. These concerns prompted today's request that the Department of Justice join the ACLU-NAACP effort, in order to ensure that the necessary work toward reform continues.

Go online to download the letter to the Department of Justice, the recommendations of the Task Force on Diversity, and the NAACP/ACLU report, "Semper Eadem: Always the Same?":
http://www.aclu-md.org/aPress/Press2010/032410_Somerset.html

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