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A Petition Drive Organized by a Coalition of Voting Rights Advocates and Community Members Stops Move of a Polling Location in a Majority African American Precinct to the Macon-Bibb County Sheriff's Office

Groups Noted Likely Chilling Effect on Minority Voter Turnout if the Polling Location Was Moved to a Law Enforcement Agency Office

WASHINGTON, D.C., May 17, 2016 – Yesterday, the Macon-Bibb County, Georgia Board of Elections voted unanimously to reverse its decision to temporarily relocate the Godfrey 2 precinct's polling location to the Macon-Bibb Sheriff's Office when a petition drive organized by community members and a coalition of voting rights advocates, including the Macon-Bibb Chapter of the NAACP, Georgia State Conference of the NAACP, Georgia Coalition for the Peoples' Agenda, New Georgia Project and the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, successfully blocked the Board of Elections from going forward with the move to the Sheriff's Office.

The polling location will now be temporarily moved to the Macedonia Church's Milton Bivens, Jr. Challenge Center, which is located at 2584 Houston Avenue in Macon, Georgia, for the May 24, 2016 state primary and July 26, 2016 runoff election.

Citing fears that the relocation of the polling place to the Sheriff's Office would depress turn-out in this majority African American precinct, the groups initially attempted to persuade the Board of Elections informally to reconsider its decision. When those efforts failed, the local and national groups resorted to a seldom used provision under Georgia law that gives voters the opportunity to stop a polling place change by collecting signatures of at least 20 percent of the voters in the affected precinct on a petition objecting to the change.

"The petition drive became necessary as a result of the Board of Elections' complete lack of concern for the chilling effect the move of this polling location to the Sheriff's Office would likely have on African-American voters in this precinct," said Francys Johnson, president of the Georgia State Conference of the NAACP. "Voting is a sacred right and the Macon-Bibb Board of Elections should have elevated the concerns of its constituents over expediency in making this decision, particularly given the long history of friction between law enforcement in the county with the minority community and the role law enforcement played in discriminating against African-Americans and other racial minorities in the voting rights movement."

"Unfortunately, this is just one example of the kinds of discriminatory voting changes that we are seeing across the country in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision in the *Shelby County v. Holder*, which gutted Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act," said Kristen Clarke, president and executive director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. "Under Section 5, the Macon-Bibb County Board of Elections would have been required to submit this change for federal review and approval. Instead, in the aftermath of the *Shelby County* decision, the burden is now falling on voters and organization to stop these kinds of voting changes that negatively impact minority communities."

"The petition drive demonstrated that when government is not responsive to the community it represents, citizens and advocates can come together and work to effect change," said Nse Ufot, executive director of the New Georgia Project. "The fact that over 400 people in this precinct signed a petition objecting to the move shows that this was an issue that concerned many voters and not just an isolated few."

"The Board of Elections attempted to justify its decision by citing low turn-out in this precinct," said Helen Butler, executive director of the Georgia Coalition for the Peoples' Agenda.

"However, given the large number of voters in the precinct who signed the petition, it is clear they perceived that the move to the Sheriff's office could suppress the turnout even more. Hopefully in the future, the Board will pay closer attention to the concerns of the community before making changes such as this one."

About the Lawyers' Committee

The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law (Lawyers' Committee), a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, was formed in 1963 at the request of President John F. Kennedy to involve the private bar in providing legal services to address racial discrimination. Formed over 50 years ago, we continue our quest of "Moving America Toward Justice." The principal mission of the Lawyers' Committee is to secure, through the rule of law, equal justice under law, particularly in the areas of fair housing and community development; employment; voting; education; environmental justice; and criminal justice. For more information about the Lawyers' Committee, visit www.lawyerscommittee.org.

About the Georgia State Conference of the NAACP

Founded in 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. The Georgia NAACP has had an unbroken presence in Georgia since 1917. The Georgia NAACP maintains a network of branches throughout Georgia, from cities to small rural counties. The Georgia NAACP has been the most effective and consistent advocates for civil and human rights in Georgia. The NAACP's half-million adult and youth members throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities, conducting voter mobilization and monitoring equal opportunity in the public and private sectors. <http://www.naacpga.org/>.

About the New Georgia Project

Register. Engage. Advocate. www.newgeorgiaproject.org.

About the Georgia Coalition for the Peoples' Agenda

Voting is a sacred right and a moral obligation.

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