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**TESTIMONY OF HILARY O. SHELTON
DIRECTOR, NAACP WASHINGTON**

BUREAU &

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT

FOR ADVOCACY AND POLICY

before the

ALASKA SENATE STATE AFFAIRS

COMMITTEE

on

**SB7 – FELONS' RIGHT TO VOTE OR BE
JURORS**

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Good morning Chairman Wielechowski, Vice Chair Paskvan, and other members of this committee. I appreciate your holding this hearing and inviting me to share with you the opinion of the NAACP. The NAACP strongly supports SB7 – Felons' Right to Vote or Be Jurors as it is consistent with our national policy which supports the re-enfranchisement of ex-felony offenders once they have been released from prison or jail. We urge its immediate enactment and offer special thanks to Senator Davis for being our champion on this issue.

My name is Hilary Shelton and I am the Director of the NAACP's Washington Bureau and the Senior Vice President for Advocacy and Policy. The NAACP is our Nation's oldest, largest and most widely-recognized grassroots civil rights organization and we currently have more than 2,200 units in every state in the Nation.

At the heart of this debate, Mr. Chairman, is a question of rehabilitation, democracy and fairness. Currently, an estimated 5.3 million Americans across our nation are denied the right to vote because of laws that prohibit or restrict voting by people with felony convictions. Three fourths of these Americans are no longer in jail.

In Alaska, more than 11,000 people are currently disenfranchised. Of these men and women, over 77%, or almost 9,000 are no longer incarcerated.

The NAACP supports federal legislation, the *Democracy Restoration Act*, which would permit men and women to register and vote in federal elections once they have been released from prison, even if they are on probation or parole. SB7 is Alaska's equivalent to the *Democracy Restoration Act* on the state level.

By allowing men and women who are no longer incarcerated to register and vote, we are encouraging them to take another positive step towards creating a commitment to, a bond with, and a stake in their community. This will, in turn, can only help with the reentry process.

Furthermore, by allowing ex-felons to register once they are released from prison we are avoiding potential problems at the polls. After the 2000 election the NAACP received sworn testimony from a number of people, including a Catholic priest, who said their right to vote was questioned on election day by poll workers who accused them of being on probation or parole and thus ineligible to vote. By allowing people to register and vote as soon as they leave prison, we are eliminating this potential misunderstanding.

Ex-felon re-enfranchisement is of special concern to the NAACP due to disparate number of African Americans who come in contact with the criminal justice system and, as a result, find themselves either temporarily or permanently disenfranchised.

As a result of the racial disparities that continue to plague our criminal justice system, a vastly disparate number of the people who are incarcerated and subsequently disenfranchised are racial or ethnic minorities. Nation-wide, an estimated 13%, or one out of every 8 African American men cannot vote because of the law in the state where he resides and a prior felony conviction. This is seven times the national average.

In Alaska, 2.4% of the overall population is disenfranchised as a result of a felony conviction. However almost 8% of the state's African Americans cannot vote. Furthermore, although African Americans make up just over 4% of Alaska's population, we represent more than 13% of those Alaskans who cannot vote.

Because the right to vote is such an important element of the democratic process, it is simply wrong to predicate it upon a system rife with racial disparities. And with voting such an integral part of becoming a productive member of American society, the way forward for our Nation should be a new paradigm in which we encourage ex-felons to vote, not prohibiting them.

Thank you again Chairman Wielechowski, Vice Chair Paskvan, and other members of this committee for holding this important hearing and for inviting me here today. As I indicated earlier, the NAACP strongly supports SB7 and urges its immediate enactment.