

JOINT INFORMATIONAL HEARING
Constitutional & Budget Reform

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Senate Committee on Elections, Reapportionment & Constitutional Amendments
Senate Select Committee on Constitutional Reform
Room 3191 / 10:00 a.m.

Malaki Seku-Amen, Legislative Advocate
California State Conference of the NAACP

Good Morning Chairs & Committee Members.

I'm Malaki Seku-Amen, Legislative Advocate representing the 52 branches and 30 youth and college units within the California State Conference of the NAACP.

We'd like to thank the Committee Chairs for inviting us to weigh in on the critical issue of reforming the cherished and sacred yet mind boggling and torturous construct we call the California Constitution and State Budget Process.

At this point you've heard a lot about whether California is leading, following or failing, and ideas on how to remake governance in the state.

Although I will present the California NAACP views on which specific reforms we believe should be pursued, and how they should be achieved, these views would not deliver justice to the communities we serve, and ALL Californians, without a discussion of WHY we need a swift and major overhaul of our system of governance.

Not only do we need citizen confidence in our government, it is imperative that citizens begin to benefit more broadly from a government that is a friend and not necessarily a foe to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Founded in 1909, the NAACP - the nation's oldest, largest and most widely-recognized grassroots-based civil rights organization - is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. The NAACP was established to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons, and, to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination. Our more than half-

million members and supporters 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

As we monitor equal opportunity and the quality of life in California, we see tremendous potential, but we see tremendous disparities. The disparities have been ever more widened during our current economic downturn. The disparities are due to a lack of consistency and the dysfunction in our state constitution and budget process, and the dysfunction, inefficiencies and inconsistencies in our state constitution and budget process is a source of inequality and injustice for ALL Californians, particularly in our major urban areas.

Despite notable progress in business start-ups, homeownership and academic progress, far too many of California's urban residents and areas continue to be neglected and plagued by unemployment, poverty, crime, drugs, neighborhood blight and despair. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, unemployment in California's five major urban centers, which contain just under 18 million people (nearly 52% of the state's population), hovers around 20 percent – four times the state average – and the poverty rate remains at 40 percent.

We've been cataloguing and struggling with these findings for decades, but In an interesting pre-recession contrast, U.S. Department of Labor Statistics for June 2005 in California revealed that while unemployment decreased from January for every ethnic group, the joblessness rate for African-Americans, which was already the highest rate, actually increased.

As the State of California grapples with a staggering budget deficit, the lack of an overall job training investments strategy threatens to derail efforts to include all Californians in an economic recovery.

Numerous experts have pointed to the critical priority of training workers for "green jobs" due to the demand for America to move away from fossil-fuels, to more of a renewable energy-based economy. There is widespread agreement, including buy-in from President-Elect Barack Obama, that fostering the "green-collar" economy should link together the solutions for poverty, the energy crisis and global warming.

California's Governor and the State Legislature have made great progress in addressing the state's competitive advantage industry workforce needs such as building construction, manufacturing, entertainment, automotive repair, biotechnology and the "green sector" – all of which offer good paying jobs that don't necessarily require a 4-year degree, but rather, access to a 1-2 year Career Technical Education (CTE) course. While an economic rebound will increase demand for workers in competitive advantage industries, there is no evidence that California's progress in building a working CTE system will survive the state's constitutional and budget challenges.

These realities accompany a compelling need to steer at-risk teens, as well as youthful and adult ex-offenders, away from destructive lifestyle alternatives by helping them to be economically self-sufficient and productive members of the community. California's prison inmate recidivism rate, at 70 percent, is the nation's highest. Each year, more than 2,000 youthful offenders are released from the California Youth Authority. In the past four years in Los Angeles County, the courts have had to order the release of over 150,000 detainees from the county jail due to overcrowded facilities. The challenge now for the state is to preserve public safety and assist ex-offenders to make a positive transition to a productive life.

So when we consider a constitutional convention and budget reform, we should make sure that we do not continue to neglect an opportunity to make our state great for ALL Californians.

California's education systems, infrastructure and quality of life were once touted as magnets for economic growth, but with the staggering African American and Latino drop-out rate, water shortages and poverty rates, now we must work to remove doubts and take a dynamic new approach to restore our competitive position.

California's public policy arena, driven by a 120-member bicameral legislature comprised of 40 state Senators and 80 state Assembly representatives, has many analysts and critics contending that it is roiled by partisan gridlock, legislative term limits and ballot initiatives; rendering state government burdened by a lack of focus on achieving long-term results, poor accountability systems, numerous regulatory and bureaucratic obstacles, fragmented ED infrastructure, and ongoing budget volatility.

As we consider a constitutional convention and budget reform, we should not simply look at these issues as a way to improve government. We should craft reforms that will achieve economic development investment goals with measurable outcomes including rising per capita income, job growth, new business creation, growing private sector investment, increased minority entrepreneurship and reduced income inequality.

To conclude, the California State NAACP supports the concept of an inclusive constitutional revision process, passing a state budget with a simple majority vote. We support a sensible approach to restoring continuity of vision, institutional knowledge and leadership by extending term limits, and finally, we would support efforts to study and improve our now very volatile tax structure.

We do not have all the answers on how to accomplish all of these reforms, but we stand ready to work in full partnership with the public, private and community sector to make it happen.

Thank you.