

Testimony of Joe Leonard, Jr.  
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry  
April 1, 2009

Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Chambliss, and Members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry. It is an honor to appear before you today. I would like to thank Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Chambliss for their longstanding commitment and dedication to the principles of civil rights while serving on this Committee. I would also like to thank Representative Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick for her warm introduction and to indicate what an honor and privilege it has been to work for her as her Executive Director when she was Chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus and to serve as a senior advisor on her staff.

Behind me, I'm proud to be joined by my wife Dr. Natasha Cole-Leonard and our son Cole. I thank my wife for her patience, support and understanding with a husband who swims far from the shore. I also thank my parents Joe and Shirley Leonard for their support, sacrifice, and teaching of what we refer to in our family as "stickability." It is also important for me at this time to invoke the names of Leonard men--Jose, Levy, Charles, Dave and Joe Sr. - all of whom endured slavery or segregation so that I might have better opportunities.

It is a sincere honor and privilege to be selected by President Obama to serve as Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at the United States Department of Agriculture during this critical period in American history. As a historian, I am mindful of the challenges that have been associated with this office. USDA has recorded a turbulent history in Civil Rights since the establishment of the Office of Equal Opportunity in 1971. Initially, the total civil rights program experienced an almost revolving door situation with its leadership and for several years, it averaged one director a year. Furthermore, unfortunately, the allocation of resources – both human and monetary – did not match its needs.

The suspension of investigations and compliance reviews in the early 1980s and the concomitant reduction in the budget left a crippling legacy. The establishment of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in 2003, through language included in the 2002 Farm Bill by this Committee, was a step in the right direction but the challenges of addressing a ballooning

inventory of complaints and complex class action complaints has not allowed it to fully address the many functions under its jurisdiction.

The Department has also been confronted with complex legal issues related to its program discrimination complaints. USDA must acknowledge its past mistakes and discrimination, correct its errors, and move forward into a new era of transparency and accountability that provides equal employment, equal access, and equal treatment to all of our employees and constituents.

I am confident that, if confirmed, I, along with the staff that Secretary Vilsack is putting together at the Department, will be able to tackle these longstanding challenges and implement the requirements of the 2008 Farm Bill as you intended.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Chambliss, and Members of the Committee, if confirmed, I will work to the best of my abilities to reinvigorate the Office of Civil Rights. Specifically, I will:

- Initiate preparations for the construction of a single accurate database for customer complaints and a separate database for employee complaints;
- Take immediate steps to analyze this information to ensure that provisions of the Farm Bill on suspension of foreclosures is being properly implemented;
- Work to streamline the process for filing complaints for USDA customers;
- Work within USDA to employ full time investigators, encourage on-site investigations, and hire staff qualified to support and assist the investigators and adjudicators in processing USDA claims;
- Conduct analysis at the points of service delivery to pinpoint barriers to providing equitable access and treatment, and develop solutions to overcome these barriers, including providing tools to our employees to achieve intensive grassroots effects;

- Increase Alternative Dispute Resolution and mediation efforts to resolve complaints at the local and /or state level;
- Implement Farm Bill provisions for recording of application and participation rate data of applicants so that complete and accurate information can be used in accountability assessments and in evaluating special outreach needs;
- Review the overall organization of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights to ensure optimal information flow and cooperation and coordination;
- Initiate a systemic department-by-department review to determine staffing requirements in order to better facilitate timely responses to customer claims.; and
- Reinvigorate the commitment to Civil Rights for all USDA employees.

When Secretary Vilsack was before you, he reaffirmed his commitment to resolving outstanding civil rights claims at USDA. I am equally committed to that end and hope that my career is a testament to this principle.

This Committee plays a vital role in overseeing the operations of USDA and the Office of Civil Rights, and, if confirmed, I look forward to working with you to ensure that you and your staff are kept fully informed of the work of my office.

Lastly, I conclude by expressing my gratitude to President Obama for the confidence he has placed in me to take on this honorable responsibility and to you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Chambliss, and the Members of the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you this afternoon.