Statement by Hilary Shelton, Director of the NAACP Washington Bureau and Senior Vice President for Policy and Advocacy

December 10, 2015

The NAACP shares the concerns of the groups represented here, as well as those of many Americans, regarding the unacceptable reaction by too many to the recent acts of terrorism which have rocked our world. The challenges we are currently encountering as we strive to help those who have been forced to flee their homes and who hope to resettle in our country are contrary to our basic, fundamental values of civil rights, civil liberties, and basic human dignity.

We are a nation of immigrants, which is founded on the premise that all humans are created equal. As such, we have reinforced in every aspect of our shared laws and doctrine that regardless of your race, gender, ethnicity, your point of national origin, or your religious beliefs you are indeed as American. If you believe in the promise of our nation and our shared values of equality, you are welcome. The tenet is further ascribed in our Constitution under these few words, “we hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

It is bewildering to me that with the robust history in a struggle for human dignity of a nation that is founded on the belief in the equality of all, and in the power of diversity, that the reaction of some to acts terrorism would be so diametrically opposed to all that we believe in. Fear, unfortunately, sometimes drives lesser people away from the noble tenets of human dignity and equal opportunity. But we know the strength of our nation lies in the awesome promise of America; a promise so well entrenched in the Constitution, and one that has been strengthened and improved throughout our Nation’s growth. A promise of equality and fair treatment.

It is therefore counter-intuitive, and indeed counter-productive to indiscriminately restrict the rights of any group of people who wish to enjoy the freedoms promised them by our great nation. Our country is not yet perfect; we remain a work in progress. Yet progress is not – cannot – be achieved by retreating on our basic promise, which is so eloquently stated on the Statue of Liberty. ‘Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Huddled Masses Yearning To Breathe
Free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Like too many experiences in our past, due to the extremism of the misguided and violent, we stand at the crossroads of embracing our American values of compassion, equality, justice and hope or giving into discrimination, despair, isolationism, and fear. Certainly in the more recent history of our country there are many reasons to fear, whether it was the bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, the four commercial jets hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the Backpack bomb at the Spokane, Washington, Martin Luther King Day Parade, the Boston Marathon bombing, the Colorado Planned Parenthood mass-shooting, or the San Bernadino shooting. There is no doubt that there is reason to fear, as there are those who have worked to destroy what is precious about the American way of life. From these tragic experiences to today, we have held fast to our history-enhanced commitment to freedom and hope.

I believe President Obama said it best in his remarks at the commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution,

“To rise above the cynicism and rise above the fear, to hold fast to our values, to see ourselves in each other, to cherish dignity and opportunity not just for our own children but for somebody else’s child. To remember that our freedom is bound up with the freedom of others — regardless of what they look like or where they come from or what their last name is or what faith they practice. To be honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. To nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of Earth. To nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of Earth. That is our choice. Today, we affirm hope.”

As we move into this holy season of joy and celebration, we must be reminded to hold fast to the values that make us the great nation and people that we are.