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Demand for USDA Cooperation in Discrimination Investigation

I recently joined U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, U.S. Reps. John Conyers, Bennie Thompson, Artur Davis and Bobby Scott in writing to Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer, calling on him to immediately explain why the USDA refused to comply with the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) investigation into the Department's handling of discrimination complaints.

According to news reports, GAO auditors were ordered to leave the USDA and USDA employees were instructed not to cooperate with the auditors. This latest action by the USDA appears to continue a troubling pattern of obstructing Congressional efforts to understand and remedy decades of discrimination against African-American farmers.

Last year, many Members of Congress expressed deep concerns about reports that the USDA illegally used federal resources to lobby against federal legislation that was designed to bring relief to victims of discrimination by the USDA. They also expressed concerns about the USDA's General Counsel publicly criticizing the Pigford legislation without agreeing to work with Congress on alternative ways to ensure that farmers could have their claims of discrimination adjudicated on the merits.

In our letter, we requested that the USDA commit to full transparency and cooperation with government audits and investigations, and that the USDA be an honest broker with Congress as the House and the Senate reconcile the Farm Bill and ensure an effective remedy for victims of discrimination.

Here is the text of the letter:

Dear Secretary Schafer,

In This Week's Issue:

- Demand for USDA Cooperation in Discrimination Investigation
- Landmark Bill Expands Mental Health Care
- Strengthening Volunteerism Across America

We were gravely disappointed to learn in an article yesterday by the Associated Press that "The Agriculture Department abruptly ordered congressional auditors to leave its headquarters and told its employees not to cooperate with them." There is no justification for denying Congress the ability to fulfill its oversight responsibilities. This latest action by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) appears to continue a troubling pattern of obstructing congressional efforts to understand and remedy decades of discrimination against African-American farmers.

According to the Associated Press, auditors from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) were seeking information for an ongoing audit on the USDA's Office of Civil Rights and its handling of discrimination complaints. We do not know the details of the audit nor the circumstances behind yesterday's actions. We do know, however, that for too long the USDA has failed to address complaints of discrimination seriously and protect the civil rights of America's black farmers. We also know that the only way we are going to right the wrongs of the past is to have a transparent investigation of the Department's actions. Instructing USDA employees not to cooperate with congressional auditors is counterproductive and entirely unacceptable.

It seems clear that the Department is trying to undermine Congress' efforts to repair decades of discrimination against African-American farmers. Over the summer, we complained about reports of USDA employees using federal resources to lobby against legislation in Congress that would give qualifying late claimants under the Pigford settlement the right to go to court and have their cases adjudicated on the merits. Not only is the use of federal resources for lobbying a violation of law, but the employees' efforts to undermine the legislation raised serious doubt about whether the Department is willing to reverse its record of discrimination and ensure that all farmers have fair and equal access to loans and services. We have also complained about the Department's General Counsel publicly criticizing the Pigford legislation without agreeing to work with Congress on alternative ways to bring justice to the victims of discrimination.

We request that you immediately explain the actions of the USDA in relation to the GAO's audit. We also ask that you commit to full transparency and cooperation with government audits and investigations. Finally, we request that the USDA be an honest broker with Congress as members of both the House and the Senate meet to reconcile the Farm Bill and ensure an effective remedy for victims of discrimination.

Landmark Bill Expands Mental Health Care

This week a strong bipartisan House majority supported legislation to expand health care coverage.

The Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act, which passed by a 268 to 148 vote, prohibits insurers and group health plans from imposing greater restrictions on mental health benefits than those placed on medical and surgical services.

Mental illnesses are treatable diseases that impact millions of Americans each year. Unfortunately, many group health plans currently do not provide the same coverage for mental illnesses as they do for physical ailments. This important legislation that will help end the disparity and ensure more Americans get the care they need and deserve.

The legislation applies only to insurers and group health plans that provide mental health benefits. The independent, non-partisan Congressional Budget Office has estimated that this legislation will have a miniscule impact on health insurance premiums.

Over the last eight years, the Federal Employee Health Benefits Program (FEHBP) has made "parity" coverage for mental health care available to Members of Congress and 8.5 million other federal employees. Research has shown that there has been no significant cost increase attributable to this new coverage. Now, this bill makes available to all Americans the access to affordable mental health services already available to Members of Congress.

Strengthening Volunteerism Across America

Volunteering in America is at a 30 year high. In 2006, more than 61 million Americans gave back to their communities through service. Volunteers play a critical role in building a stronger nation, from improving communities to helping our children succeed in school to rebuilding cities and towns in times of disaster.

With that in mind, the House this week approved the GIVE Act, H.R. 2857, which would strengthen and reauthorize our nation's service programs and take volunteerism into the 21st century.

The legislation increases the number of AmeriCorps Volunteers by 25 percent by setting a goal of 100,000 volunteers by 2012. It also promotes recruitment of disadvantaged youth, baby-boomers, and veterans into national and community service opportunities through the new Office of Outreach and Recruitment.

The legislation also encourages collaborative efforts at the national, state, and local level to provide service in the areas of disaster preparedness, response, and relief. It strengthens the emergency response and disaster preparedness efforts of the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) to increase the program's effectiveness during times of national need. And, it establishes a "Reserve Corps" of AmeriCorps alumni ready for deployment in times of national need.

The legislation authorizes \$1 billion for national service activities in FY 2008, including \$324 million for the AmeriCorps program – almost a 20 percent increase above what was appropriated in the 2008 omnibus bill.