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October 20, 2015

The Honorable John Boehner, Speaker  
United States House of Representatives  
H-232, The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Boehner:

As you end your term as Speaker of the House of Representatives, the 46 Members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) urge you to fully prioritize and address not only key issues whose deadlines are quickly approaching but issues that also affect the African American community. We urge you to seize this opportunity to effect positive change for not only our Congress but for our nation.

The median income of African American households is \$35,400—nearly \$25,000 less than the median income of white households (\$60,300). More than one in four African Americans live in poverty (26.2 percent)—almost triple the rate for whites (10.1 percent). The median net worth of white households is 13 times greater than black households at \$142,000 and \$11,000, respectively. This is an opportunity to expand economic opportunities for African Americans to ensure our nation is living up to the notion of Liberty and Justice for All.

With your help, we believe there is an opportunity to gain significant ground on several legislative areas which are not only CBC priorities but are also in the strategic interest of our nation. Criminal Justice reform is one such area. As you are aware, there is movement on bipartisan criminal justice reform legislation in both the House and the Senate. Both parties acknowledge inadequacies in our criminal justice system and see reform as a key priority. The political will for criminal justice reform is present on both sides of the aisle, and we believe with your leadership significant legislative accomplishments can be achieved this session.

This year we celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Voting Rights Act (VRA). Sadly, celebrations for this historic legislative achievement have been undercut by the proliferation of regressive state laws restricting access to the ballot for low-income, elderly, and African American voters across the country. These laws were enacted following the Supreme Court's decision to strike down a critical provision of the VRA that protected against these types of electoral changes. In their decision, the Supreme Court asked Congress to update the VRA to properly reflect the electoral landscape of America today.



To date, Congress has failed to enact a legislative solution to fix this problem and has allowed the resurgence of voter disenfranchising laws not seen since the Jim Crow era. Like you, protecting voting rights and ensuring equal access to the ballot box is a critical priority of the Congressional Black Caucus. The CBC is more engaged than ever in our efforts to ensure voting rights are protected for all eligible Americans, and we believe it is imperative that Congress pass comprehensive legislation to restore the full protections of the Voting Rights Act. As you have demonstrated over the course of your legislative career, we ask that you support the VRA by restoring its ability to guarantee access to the ballot box and the protection of the fundamental right to vote for every American.

The economic climate will be grim with the continued threat of a government shutdown, especially for African American families who face a racial wealth gap that has persisted for decades. Another government shutdown would severely hamper the ability of all Americans to provide for their families and that is why on September 29<sup>th</sup>, Congresswoman Judy Chu, Chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus and Congresswoman Linda Sanchez of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus joined with the Congressional Black Caucus to issue a Tri-Caucus statement calling for a bipartisan budget agreement in order to avert another government shutdown in December. We strongly urge you to continue discussions with President Obama, Majority Leader McConnell, Democratic Leader Reid, and Democratic Leader Pelosi in order to find a long-term budget solution that will keep our government open.

The fiscal challenges facing our country are significant, and it is critical that we enact policies with an eye on the future and not just the short term. Therefore, we must reach a bipartisan agreement on the budget and end the sequester. Relying on Continuing Resolutions and kicking budget negotiations down the road is not in the best interest of the American people. The impact of budget uncertainty, budget cuts, and sequestration is felt in every community we represent and felt disproportionately by African Americans. From cuts to our military to reductions for programs like Head Start, Pell Grants, and the Child Care & Development Block Grant program, the sequester has hurt the middle class across our country and must be repealed.

The debt limit must be raised before measures to prevent a default are exhausted on November 5<sup>th</sup>. It would be totally irresponsible to allow the United States to go into an unnecessary and completely avoidable default. Creating yet another manufactured crisis threatens the economic security of hardworking Americans for the purpose of political grandstanding. We must address this critical deadline and restore global confidence in the American economy.

We must also work in a bipartisan manner to invest in our infrastructure and transportation systems. According to the Department of Transportation, one out of every three major roads is rated poor or mediocre and one-third of all bridges in the United States are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. The recent flooding in South Carolina, coupled with failed infrastructure, cost at least 14 people their lives and more than \$1 billion in damages and demonstrates that we must address infrastructure deficiencies immediately before more lives are lost.

Surface transportation authorization and the highway trust fund are due to expire later this year; we must provide greater certainty and more reliable funding by passing a long-term transportation bill. Investments in infrastructure not only sustain good paying jobs, but will generate new employment opportunities that will help put unemployed people back to work. With the current unemployment rate for African Americans at 9.2



percent, we must do all we can to protect jobs and job creation. Therefore, we must act and pass a long-term transportation bill to modernize our nation's roads, bridges, highways, public transportation, highway safety programs, to stimulate our economy, and spur job creation.

It is time to make necessary investments in our country so future generations can experience greater prosperity than those that have come before them. That can only be done by rolling back sequestration cuts to our nation's education system and by reinvesting in our young people by passing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and Higher Education Act (HEA). On September 29<sup>th</sup>, Tri-Caucus education leaders sent a letter to ESEA Conferees to highlight policy principles critical to communities of color. African Americans currently lag behind whites in educational attainment, and funding must continue to be provided to student populations most in need. We must also ensure that there is sufficient accountability to keep students on track. The CBC believes every child has the right to an equal opportunity for a quality education and Congress must do its part to ensure that is indeed the reality. In today's competitive economy higher education is becoming increasingly necessary. For that reason, we must support institutions of higher learning including Historically Black Colleges and Universities and community colleges. All students – regardless of income – should have an opportunity to pursue higher education. It is incumbent upon Congress to find a way to reduce the student debt burden which has eclipsed \$1.3 trillion and give all students an opportunity to learn.

Investment in education and training is at the heart of addressing an African American unemployment rate which is the same as the highest unemployment rate experienced by white Americans during the recent recession. Congress can also help to spur our nation's economy by leveraging taxpayer resources on programs proven to have positive benefits. One way to do this is to reauthorize the Export-Import Bank which has created over 1.5 million private-sector jobs since 2007. We should not continue to allow American companies to face the negative impacts of Congress' inaction as it hampers their ability to compete in the global marketplace. Furthermore, bipartisan legislation including the bipartisan 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cures Act has the potential to spur innovation and investment from the private sector while benefitting public health and vulnerable populations including African Americans. Urging the Senate to move this important legislation and expediting conference proceedings is in the best interest of our country.

Our nation looks to us, as Members of Congress, to legislate and to act in a manner befitting a leader. We urge you to have these critical conversations now and lead by example so that Congress governs responsibly and addresses these urgent priorities before it is too late. Seize this opportunity and stand on the right side of history. You have an opportunity now to do what is in the best interest of our nation.

Thank you very much.

Very truly yours,  


G. K. Butterfield  
Chairman  
The Congressional Black Caucus

