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## **PRESS RELEASE**

**For Immediate Release**

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### **LOUISIANA STATE LEGISLATURE PASSES PUBLIC DEFENDER ACT OF 2007**

*“Act Passage Sets Stage for Overhaul of State’s Justice System”*

WASHINGTON, DC, June 24, 2007 — In a monumental win for equal justice for the people of Louisiana, the state legislature, in a sweeping bipartisan vote, today passed the Louisiana Public Defender Act of 2007. The bill establishing a statewide system that provides poor people charged with crimes meaningful representation passed the Senate with a 26-7 vote and the House on May 16 with a 100-1 vote. The bill will undergo a procedural concurrence vote in the House then be sent to Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who is expected to sign it into law. The National Legal Aid & Defender Association (NLADA) applauds this noble and principled move by Louisiana’s legislative body.

“This new system is the result of deep soul-searching within the state to develop a process that will treat everyone equally in the state’s criminal justice system, regardless of ability to pay,” said David Carroll, director of research for NLADA. “The legislature, under the leadership of Representative Danny Martiny and Senator Lydia Jackson, is to be commended for performing the painstaking task of recognizing that the justice system was broken, designing an appropriate approach to fixing the problem, and solving it in a way that benefits all residents of Louisiana.”

The Louisiana Legislature also deserves congratulations for the consensus approach it used in creating this bill. Republicans and Democrats, victims of crime and exonerees, prosecutors, judges and defense attorneys all came together to shape Louisiana’s new public defense system. “This cooperation demonstrates that justice is not political – it is a priority for every state resident who cares about safety, fairness and accountability,” said Carroll. “Louisiana’s example today stands as a beacon to other states struggling to overcome difficult

public safety issues,” Carroll continued. “Sound justice policy decisions are best served by leaving the adversarial process in the court room and for all stakeholders to collaborate in an honest, deliberate and open dialogue to reach consensus on the most efficient and effective approach to administering justice. My hope is that Louisiana institutionalizes this collaborative process to create a sound course of action for all future criminal justice measures taken up by either chamber.”

NLADA President and CEO Jo-Ann Wallace applauded the steps Louisiana has taken to ensure that its criminal justice system is fair, stating that such a consensus approach could extend to the civil side and address the underlying societal issues that increase the need for indigent defense services in the first place. “Investing in civil legal aid helps to reduce crime through providing hope to people by assisting them with housing, immigration, domestic violence, employment, discrimination and countless other legal issues that may otherwise leave them in a state of despair,” Wallace said. “Unfortunately civil legal aid in Louisiana has been woefully under funded, leaving tens of thousands of residents without anywhere to turn when they are being illegally evicted or facing discriminatory employment practices. Today, NLADA heartily praises the work of the Louisiana Legislature and pledges to continue to work with the Legislature in making equally exceptional strides in the civil legal aid arena.”

The Louisiana criminal justice system had long-standing, pre-existing systemic deficiencies that were unmasked and accentuated by the catalyst Katrina. The natural disaster prompted NLADA to author a comprehensive proposal, “*A Strategic Plan to Ensure Accountability & Protect Fairness in Louisiana’s Criminal Courts.*” Commissioned by the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) and the Louisiana Bar Foundation (LBF), the report proved an invaluable resource to the legislature for crafting the Louisiana Public Defender Act of 2007.

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The National Legal Aid & Defender Association (NLADA), founded in 1911, is the oldest and largest national, nonprofit membership organization devoting all of its resources to advocating equal access to justice for all Americans. NLADA champions effective legal assistance for people who cannot afford counsel, serves as a collective voice for both civil legal services and public defense services throughout the nation and provides a wide range of services and benefits to its individual and organizational members.