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Contact: Carol McGruder

1.510.701.5561

cmcgruder@usa.net

AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERS CALL ON TOBACCO INDUSTRY TO STOP TARGETING THEIR COMMUNITY

NBCI President Rev. Anthony speaks out

Los Angeles – Today African American leaders in California called on the tobacco industry to stop targeting their community with the promotion of menthol cigarettes and deceptive advertising. Menthol cigarettes are not more toxic than regular cigarettes, but the minty flavor and cooling sensation makes them more enticing and easier to smoke, paving the road to nicotine addiction. Seventy percent of African American smokers prefer to smoke menthol cigarettes, compared to thirty percent of White smokers.

“We’re here today to say enough is enough,” said Sharon Eubanks, the former government prosecutor who led the landmark 2005 lawsuit against tobacco companies. “The tobacco industry has been targeting the African American community for decades with deceptive ads and pushing menthol cigarettes that have an anesthetic quality. These cigarettes are harder to quit and make it easier for youth to take up smoking.”

Convening in Leimert Park, a historic gathering place for Los Angeles’ African American community, tobacco control activists showcased a selection of historical ads created by the tobacco industry to entice African Americans to smoke and highlighted data about the disastrous health effects in the Black community that are attributable to tobacco use.

Leading the effort were Eubanks as well as Rev. Anthony Evans, President of the Washington, D.C.-based National Black Church Initiative ---www.naltblackchurch.com

The call to stop the tobacco industry’s targeting of African Americans comes at a time when the United States Congress is considering legislation to give the FDA authority to regulate cigarettes. This legislation would prohibit tobacco companies from adding flavorings like cherry and peach to cigarettes, but contains a specific exemption for menthol.

“The U.S. Congress wants to ban adding candy and fruit flavors to cigarettes because it makes them more attractive to kids,” said Eubanks. “It is unacceptable that menthol is not included.”

According to the most recent California Tobacco Survey in 2005, African Americans in California have the highest overall smoking rate of any other group at 19.3 percent, compared to that of the general population at 13.9 percent. African American men and women both smoke at higher rates than other groups at 21.3 percent and 17.4 percent respectively, yet they attempt to quit more often and successfully quit at lower rates than any other group.

Advertising and promotion of tobacco products is prevalent in African American communities in California. Throughout the years, African Americans have been exposed to hundreds of tobacco ads, most of which are for menthol cigarettes. Historically, the tobacco industry places proportionately more menthol cigarette ads in African American magazines than general population magazines.

“Smoking is not glamorous or sexy as these ads, so prevalent in our community, make it appear,” said Rev. Evans. “It’s lethal. And this targeting by the tobacco industry must stop.”

Tobacco use is the key contributor in the three major causes of death among African Americans: heart disease, cancer and stroke. Lung cancer rates are especially high in the African American community, with African American men 24 percent more likely than White men to have the disease.

Tobacco control activists and community members are in town to attend the tobacco control conference, “*A Community Under Siege: The State of Black California and Tobacco Use*.” The conference will be held at the Los Angeles Airport Hilton on Friday, September 26. Participants of the all-day conference, sponsored by the California Department of Public Health, will discuss and develop recommendations to deal with the immense toll tobacco use is having on California’s African American population.

About NBCI

The National Black Church Initiative (NBCI), a coalition of 16,000 African-American and Latino member churches works to eradicate racial disparities in healthcare. In addition to our member churches, we have 18,000 sister churches. NBCI is a faith-based health organization dedicated to providing critical wellness information and preventive health screening to all of its members. The African-American community ranks first in eleven different health risk categories. NBCI’s purpose is to partner with national health officials to provide health education, reduce racial health disparities, and increase access to quality healthcare.

The URSA Institute is a non-profit, full service, social interest consulting firm providing training and technical assistance, community-based program planning, implementation, and evaluation, and social marketing services. URSA works to emphasize community-level interventions, community driven research and evaluation and culturally competent training and technical assistance.