

## Legislation

### **The Importance of Committee Hearings** **Benjamin Zelenko, Counsel, House Judiciary Committee**

Benjamin Zelenko explains the rationale behind holding committee hearings.

*Interview recorded May 29, 2014.*

This bill had seven to 10 titles at one point. I think as it came up from the President it had seven titles. By the time it passed it had 10 titles. To the extent that the testimony was factual, to the extent the testimony had legal analysis in it, it was a very important reference point for Members of the subcommittee when they were discussing a particular issue. What in fact was the situation for blacks as they traveled from North to South, for example, from New York to Florida? Where could they stop to eat? Where could they stop to sleep? What were the facts? How far off the road did they have to go? Where did they have to go? And the Freedom Riders showed the difficulties of going to the bathroom in a bus terminal. But there's much more to it than that. And what were the statistics on voting? There was a Civil Rights Commission and it issued a report that was used as a source material.

These hearings provided various things. It provided a way of getting interest groups heard on the record and their commitment as to what they would support. It was also a way of collating factual information about what needed to be corrected and what the bill would do to that factual situation. And it was a source of legal analysis. How would the voting rights section operate? That was Bobby Kennedy's testimony, among others. But there was ACLU testimony. So the hearings served as both a public forum to hopefully marshal support for the bill and also to develop a factual and legal record that Members could look to in support, or if there was criticism, against provisions of the bill when we went through it line by line. And that's why it was important to have that hearing available when the subcommittee sat down.