



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
CITY OF CHICAGO

LORI E. LIGHTFOOT
MAYOR

May 19, 2021

Good morning,

By now, you may have heard the news that on the occasion of the two-year anniversary of my inauguration as Mayor of this great City, I will be exclusively providing one-on-one interviews with journalists of color. As a person of color, I have throughout my adult life done everything that I can to fight for diversity and inclusion in every institution that I have been a part of and being Mayor makes me uniquely situated to shine a spotlight on this most important issue. I wanted to reach out to you directly to ensure you understand my thinking behind that decision.

As the first Black woman mayor of Chicago, and the first openly gay mayor, my election in 2019 was hailed for breaking barriers to the halls of power that had existed in our city for generations. I ran to break up the status quo that has failed so many residents across our city. And that failing status quo did not apply simply to City Hall and City government. It pertains and exists in all public and private institutions.

In the time since I was elected, our country has faced an historic reckoning around systemic racism. Organizations, corporations, educational institutions and more all across our city, our state and our country have declared new efforts to address the deep-seated legacies of institutionalized racism. In looking at the absence of diversity across the City Hall press corps and other newsrooms, sadly it does not appear that many of the media institutions in Chicago have caught on and truly have not embraced this moment.

I have been struck since my first day on the campaign trail back in 2018 by the overwhelming whiteness and maleness of Chicago media outlets, editorial boards, the political press corps, and yes, the City Hall press corps specifically. In the year 2021, with a Black, lesbian Mayor, a Black woman City Treasurer, a Latinx woman City Clerk and a majority Black and Latinx City Council, the group of reporters assigned to cover City Hall is practically all white. Many of them are smart and hard-working, savvy and skilled. But mostly white, nonetheless. Indeed, there are only a handful of beat reporters of color in the City Hall press corps. While there are women of color who sometimes cover my administration, there are zero women of color assigned to the City Hall beat. Zero. I find this unacceptable and I hope you do too.

The press corps is the filter through which much of what we do in government is dissected and explained to the public. It is essential for a healthy democratic society and an accountable government. And yet, despite the many talents and skills of our reporting corps, I fear this arm of our democratic system is on life support. The Chicago media leadership must evolve with the times, in order to be a true reflection of the vibrant, vast diversity of our city. Diversity matters and without it, how can you as the media truly speak to the needs and interests of the diverse and nuanced constituency you claim to serve until you do the work necessary to reflect that constituency.

There is almost no one in the editorial board rooms or in the City Hall press corps who has themselves lived the experience of a woman of color in the City of Chicago. The Crain's Chicago Business editorial board is entirely white. There are zero women of color on the Chicago Tribune editorial board. Almost all the major television networks in Chicago covering City Hall are led by white News Directors.

It is impossible for this glaring lack of diversity not to be reflected in the daily coverage of government, politics and city life every single day.

We are working hard to do our part. We host ethnic media roundtables, and work hard to prioritize outlets led by people of color. I or others from my administration regularly appear on Black and Latinx TV and radio stations, and we've also focused paid public service media ad dollars in that direction. We have worked to build diversity into our own communications team--our Digital Director is a Latinx woman and our lead Digital Strategist is an African American woman; our Deputy Communications Director is African American; our lead speechwriter is an African American woman; and two of our Deputy Press Secretaries are African American.

We have more to do, but as I always have said, equity and inclusion are the north stars of this administration, and that includes our own communications efforts.

Still, Black or Brown community leaders often reach out to me or my team to call our attention to implicit--or explicit--bias in one piece of coverage or another from your outlets. For the past two years, more often than not, we have debated internally, then chosen to say nothing, to let it go, lest we be accused of whining about negative coverage or of "playing the race card." And the truth is, it is too heavy a burden to bear, on top of all the other massive challenges our city faces in this moment, to also have to take on the labor of educating white, mostly male members of the news media about the perils and complexities of implicit bias. This isn't my job. It shouldn't be. I don't have time for it. But as with so many festering problems, it has only gotten worse with time. So here I am, like so many other Black women before me, having to call your attention to this problem. I have no power to make you change, but I hope that you will not just cover and express your opinion about the great and historic racial awakening that is rippling across all parts of our society. I hope that you too will see it for the opportunity that it is and embrace it by reflecting the change across your organizations.

We'll start here. At the two-year anniversary of my inauguration, I am issuing a challenge to you. Hire reporters of color--and especially women of color--to cover Chicago politics, and City Hall in particular. If you only have a white reporter covering City Hall, make sure there's a person of color working with them as well.

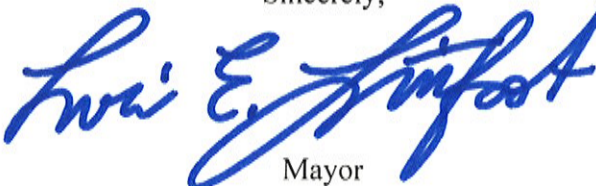
There are plenty of talented women reporters of color in Chicago for you to hire from, and that pool of talent is growing all the time.

Does your institution have an initiative set up to intentionally cultivate, recruit, support and retain young reporters of color in your ranks? Are there any people of color in your leadership teams or on your editorial boards? Are there qualified people of color on your team that could cover City Hall, but simply haven't been given the chance? Have you analyzed your own coverage to identify and root out implicit bias?

My team will always be responsive to your inquiries. We will always be transparent. But if the answer to these questions is no, be advised that I will continue to press for that to change.

I look forward to hearing your response as to what you plan to do to address this concern.

Sincerely,



Mayor