

Joint Center Statement Commending Speaker Ryan and Senators Cortez Masto, Feinstein, Harris, Heinrich, and Tillis on Top Staff Diversity

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Republican and Democratic leaders in Congress hired six top staff of color recently:

- House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) hired Jonathan Burks as chief of staff
- Senator Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV) hired Rey Benitez as communications director
- Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) hired Steve Haro as chief of staff
- Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA) hired Clint Odom as legislative director
- Senator Martin Heinrich (D-NM) hired Virgillio Barerra as legislative director
- Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC) hired Courtney Temple as legislative director

The following is a statement by Spencer Overton, the President of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies:

The Joint Center commends Speaker Ryan, Senator Cortez Masto, Senator Feinstein, Senator Harris, Senator Heinrich, and Senator Tillis for their leadership in hiring diverse talent to senior staff positions. Diversity among top congressional staff enhances representation of citizens, and enriches deliberation and innovation in the legislative process.

In selecting the first African-American chief of staff to a Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Speaker Ryan has helped shatter a centuries-old color barrier.

Senator Cortez Masto displayed immediate leadership in the U.S. Senate by hiring Benitez as her communications director.

We commend Senator Feinstein for hiring Steve Haro as her chief of staff. He brings a wealth of experience.

Senator Harris brought immediate leadership to the U.S. Senate by hiring Odom as her legislative director. So far, Odom is the only African-American Democratic staffer in this Congress in one of the four top spots--chief of staff, legislative director, communications director, and staff committee director.

Senator Heinrich has a track record for valuing diversity among top staff, and we commend him for continuing to build on that history by hiring Virgillio Barrera as legislative director.

Senator Thom Tillis has demonstrated important leadership in hiring Courtney Temple as his legislative director. Temple is one of four African-American staffers so far in the entire Senate who currently hold one of the top four spots--chief of staff, legislative director, communications director, and staff committee director.

Senators from western states—California, Nevada, and New Mexico—account for four of these six diverse hires.

The Joint Center also commends Senate Democratic Leader Charles Schumer for adopting the Rooney Rule, and for urging his colleagues to do the same.

While we applaud these recent announcements, a major disparity persists when it comes to interviewing and hiring people of color in top positions--especially in the U.S. Senate. For example, although Latinos and African Americans collectively comprise over 30 percent of the U.S. population, it appears that not one of the U.S. Senate's 39 committee staff directors is Latino or African American. We urge all Members to work on addressing the challenge of lack of diversity among top staff.

Racial diversity among top congressional staff remains a challenge, and thus these hires are particularly welcome. For example, a 2015 [Joint Center report](#) found that although people of color make up over 36 percent of the U.S. population, they account for only 7.1 percent of top Senate staff (personal office chiefs of staff, legislative directors, and communications directors, and committee staff directors).

	Black	Latino	AAPI	Native Am.	POC
U.S. Population	13.3%	17.6%	5.8%	1.2%	37.9%
Top Senate Staff	0.9%	2.1%	3.6%	0.6%	7.1%

The Joint Center will release a report on diversity among top House staff in 2017.

Next Steps

1. **Personal Office Top Staff:** Encourage Members of Congress who have openings in the chief of staff, legislative director, or communications director positions to interview and hire strong candidates of color.
2. **Legislative Assistants:** Encourage Members of Congress who have legislative assistant position openings to interview and hire strong candidates of color. Legislative assistants

are often feeder positions to legislative director positions, and legislative director positions are often feeder positions for chief of staff positions.

3. **Committee Staff Directors:** Diversity among committee staff directors also remains a significant concern. As of January 2017, it appears that while Latinos and African Americans collectively account for over 30 percent of the U.S. population, Latinos and African Americans will account for 0 percent (none) of the 39 committee staff director positions in the new Senate. Constituents should encourage Senators who have new leadership positions as Chairs or Ranking Members to interview and hire strong candidates of color for committee staff director positions.

Key Resources

Click [here](#) for a link to the full fact sheet on diversity among top U.S. Senate staff.

[“Thom Tillis Appoints New Legislative Director,”](#) *Roll Call* (January 9, 2017) (Senator Thom Tillis has appointed Courtney Temple as his new Legislative Director – making her the second African-American Legislative Director in the Senate).

["Under pressure, Schumer wants Democrats to focus on minority hiring - by using an NFL tool,"](#) *Washington Post* (January 6, 2017) (Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer urges Democrats to adopt the Rooney Rule when hiring new staff).

[“Sen.-Elect Harris Hiring Black Legislative Director,”](#) *Roll Call* (December 27, 2016) (Senator-Elect Kamala Harris named Clint Odom as her Legislative Director--making him the first African-American Legislative Director in the Senate).

[“Ryan names new top aide as he gears up for Trump,”](#) *The Hill* (December 14, 2016) (reporting that Speaker Paul Ryan named Jonathan Burks as his new Chief of Staff).

["Senator-Elect Cortez Masto's 7 Senior Staff Picks,"](#) *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (November 28, 2016) (reporting that Senator Cortez Masto hired a Latino Communications Director—Senator Reid's Senior Adviser for Hispanic Media).

Media Contact

MORGAN BUTLER

Digital Media Associate

MORGAN@JOINTCENTER.ORG | 202.789.3500 EXT 105

The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies is a non-partisan, non-profit public policy organization that supports elected officials and policy experts who serve communities of color across the United States.