



Report Card on Black Chiefs of Staff to Cabinet Secretaries in the Biden Administration

By Karra McCray
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Black Americans account for...



Of the 15 appointees who serve as chief of staff to a cabinet secretary in the Biden administration, only two are Black—just 13 percent of all chiefs of staff. By comparison, approximately 22 percent of President Biden’s votes during the 2020 general election were from the Black community. The two Black chiefs of staff, Jenn Jones and Tanya Bradsher—both women—are employed with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and Veterans Affairs, respectively.

Chiefs of staff are key actors in implementing the administration’s and the secretaries’ priorities, and they can play critical roles in determining the extent of Black appointments within an agency. Chiefs of staff often serve as principal advisors to department secretaries on political

appointments and act as gatekeepers to determine which candidates are considered by the secretary. A chief’s regular interactions with division and department leaders can also help create an inclusive culture that actively works to recruit, retain, develop, and promote racially diverse appointees.

**Chiefs of Staff to the Cabinet Secretaries
July 19, 2021**

Agency	Name of Chief of Staff to Secretary	Identifies as Black
Agriculture	Katharine Ferguson	No
Commerce	Mike Harney	No
Defense	Kelly E. Magsamen	No
Education	Sheila Nix	No
Energy	Tarak Shah	No
Health & Human Services	Sean McCluskie	No
Homeland Security	Karen Olick	No
Housing & Urban Development	Jenn Jones	Yes
Interior	Lawrence (Larry) Roberts	No
Justice	Matt Klapper	No
Labor	Daniel Arrigg Koh	No
State	Suzy George	No
Transportation	Laura Schiller	No
Treasury	Didem Nisanci	No
Veterans Affairs	Tanya Bradsher	Yes

Methodology

The data reflect chief of staff positions in the Biden administration as of July 19, 2021.

Like the Joint Center's earlier [studies](#), this study is limited to 15 executive branch agencies. It does not include the Small Business Administration (SBA) or the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which are independent agencies. The chief of staff at the SBA, Antwaun Griffin, identifies as Black.

For agencies such as the Department of Defense that have joint chiefs of staff for each military branch, we only included the chief of staff to the Secretary of Defense. There was a change in chief of staff in one agency before July 19, but neither the former nor current chief of staff there identifies as Black.

We used the [2020 U.S. Government Policy and Supporting Positions](#) (commonly known as the Plum book) and the database [LegiStorm](#) to identify appointees. LegiStorm contains comprehensive and accurate biographical and contact data. For chiefs of staff not in LegiStorm, we used the agency's directory.

We determined whether a chief of staff is Black by: 1) examining photos on social media accounts, news reports, and biographies from government and institutional websites; 2) looking for racially identifiable information in reports or news coverage on the nominee (e.g., the nominee is the first African American appointed to the position); and 3) reviewing whether the nominee is affiliated with an traditionally African American organization or institution, including HBCUs, fraternities or sororities, the NAACP, and so forth.

For those appointees who had publicly available contact information (e.g., email address, LinkedIn account), we contacted him or her to confirm our assumption and asked them to correct information on how they self-identify. We also invited the agency's public affairs division to correct the data. Finally, we shared the information with the White House Office of Presidential Personnel.

To provide corrections to our findings, please send an email with "CORRECTION" in the subject line to research@jointcenter.org.

In addition to chief of staff to cabinet secretary positions, there are many other high-level appointments that do not require Senate confirmation (e.g., principal deputy assistant secretaries). The Joint Center will analyze Black appointments for many of these other positions in the future.