

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Senators Respond to Report on Diversity in the Halls of Power

Report says 7 percent of the top staffers in the U.S. Senate are people of color, far below minorities' representation in the population of the United States – and only 3 Senators' staffers are Black



SENATOR HARRY REID/COURTESY PHOTO

Senator Harry Reid (D-Nev.) has put together a diversity initiative that he hopes will increase the number of minorities in senate leadership positions.

By Stacy M. Brown
NNPA Contributing
Writer

Long before last month's damning report from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies that revealed a stunning lack of diversity among top staff in the U.S. Senate, Nevada Democratic Senator Harry Reid had formed a means to assist offices with identifying and hiring a more diverse workforce.

of staff diversity and stand behind the work of the Senate Democratic Diversity Initiative and its efforts to help ensure that our offices are more reflective of the constituents we serve," Reid said. Luke Bolar, a spokesman for Louisiana Republican Sen. David Vitter, said the senator's staff includes three minorities among its senior members.

James R. Jones, who conducted the Joint Center study, told the

“You need to have people from all walks of life in the room making decisions

Reid started the Democratic Diversity Initiative that, in addition to assisting with a more diverse workforce, would help those who want to work on Capitol Hill with understanding and navigating the job search process.

On Dec. 8, the D.C.-based Joint Center – an African American think tank – revealed that just 7 percent of the top staffers in the U.S. Senate are people of color, far below minorities' representation in the population of the United States.

The report found only 24 staffers of color out of the 336 top Senate staffers working in Washington. Further, minorities make up over 36 percent of the U.S. population, and over 28 percent of the citizen voting-age population, according to the study.

There are two African American senators, three Hispanics, and one Asian-American.

“The recent study by the Joint Center illustrating the lack of staff diversity at the most senior levels of Senate offices serves as an important reminder of how much work we still need to do, but, I remain as committed as ever to the concept

Associated Press that researchers looked at top positions in senators' Washington offices, including chiefs of staff, legislative directors, and communications directors in personnel offices, as well as staff directors assigned to committees.

They were only able to find 12 Asian-American, seven Latino, three African American and two Native American staffers.

The top Senate staffers wield important influence with their bosses, and help shape legislation and policies that affect everyone, Jones said.

“You need to have people from all walks of life in the room making decisions,” said Jones, a Ph.D. candidate in the sociology department at Columbia University.

Working for the Senate also opens doors to other jobs in government, and by not getting those first congressional jobs, minorities find it more difficult to move up a government ladder that looks favorably upon Capitol Hill experience, he said.

Minorities make up larger numbers in the Democratic Party than they do in the GOP, but the study noted that the number of minority

staffers was not that different between the two parties.

It found that 8.1 percent of the Democrats' top Senate staffers were minorities and 6.7 percent of the top Republican staffers were minorities.

The report noted that people of color make up about 37 percent of those

who identify as Democrats, and 9 percent of those who identify as Republicans.

“Increasing the presence of people of color in senior staff positions in the Senate will amplify the voices and perspectives of communities of color,” said Spencer Overton, president of the

Joint Center.

The think tank is calling on senators to increase diversity by interviewing more minorities for top positions, hiring more minority interns and starting fellowships for minority staffers.

It also called on the Senate to be more transparent in its staffing

because – unlike many government agencies – Congress is not required to monitor the race and ethnicity of its workforce.

Researchers said they combed online profiles, consulted with Senate organizations and called Senate offices to come up with their numbers.



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