

**Congressional Black
Associates
&
Senate Black Legislative Staff
Caucus**

Joint Congressional Staff Task Force on Racial Justice and Reform

Congressional Black Associates & Senate Black Legislative Staff Caucus
Joint Congressional Staff Task Force on Racial Justice and Reform Policy Report

Congressional Black Associates

Created in 1980, the Congressional Black Associates (CBA) is an officially House-recognized, bi-partisan Congressional staff organization. For 40 years, CBA has been a leader in enhancing the political, social, and economic well-being of black staffers through professional development programs, networking events, and other opportunities that strategically position staffers to become leaders on and off the Hill. CBA is a registered Staff Organization with the Committee on House Administration and abides by the rules set by the Committee. While the majority of its members are employees of the U.S. House of Representatives, CBA members also work in the Senate and outside of Capitol Hill.

CBA's mission is to enhance the political, social and economic capabilities of Black people on Capitol Hill, in the Greater Washington Metropolitan area, the nation, and other countries throughout the world.

Senate Black Legislative Staff Caucus

In search of fellowship and equal opportunity in the workplace, a group of Black Senate staffers founded a non-partisan affinity staff organization—the Senate Black Legislative Staff Caucus (SBLSC) in 1977. Since its inception, SBLSC has been making strides to accomplish its founder's dreams; for nearly 43 years, SBLSC has been empowering Senate staffers by providing them resources to grow professionally and attain job opportunities on the Hill; connecting with external stakeholders to enhance networks in Black communities, and advocating to Senate leadership for inclusion and diversity amongst Senate offices and policy initiatives. In most recent years, SBLSC has taken its torch of action to collaborate across staff organizations, re-establish a mentorship program, create women and men symposiums, in addition to events that encourage staffers to confidently address workplace issues, salary negotiations, and so much more.

SBLSC's mission is to build a sense of community and support among African-American Senate staffers. Membership is open to all who are interested regardless of race, creed, ethnicity, sex, religion, sexual orientation or national origin.

The Joint Congressional Staff Task Force on Racial Justice and Reform

For decades, the members of CBA and SBLSC have worked together in Congress to eradicate codified barriers to equality and represent the interests of the Black community. While some progress has been made, parallels between the 1960's Civil Rights Movement and now reveal the systemic inequities and racial injustices afflicting the Black community. The photos of police clashing with protesters and the calls for equality and equal rights are nearly identical. Even more surreal is the fact that both movements were galvanized by, and coalesced around, the murder of Black unarmed civilians.

It was the brutal lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 that moved a generation of young Black Americans to organize during the Civil Rights Movement and call on America to complete its unfinished work to create a “more perfect union.”¹ The fight for equality during the Civil Rights Movement resulted in meaningful change that provided voting rights and public office opportunities, gave Black Americans the right to service in public establishments, and indirectly led to the inception and creation of CBA and SBLSC. Unfortunately, the racist, inhumane legacy of slavery continues to pervade every facet of American life—through systemic anti-Black oppression and discrimination in housing, health care, education, policing, and other public policy areas.

Black congressional staffers are not immune to the growing unrest and anxiety that is sweeping the nation. For many, this anxiety stems from being members of a community disproportionately impacted by the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, having to repeatedly process the trauma of witnessing Black lives cut short by state-sanctioned violence, and mourning the loss of titans from the Civil Rights Movement, including Reverend Joseph E. Lowery, Congressman John Lewis, and Reverend C.T. Vivian. For others, stress comes from the cognitive dissonance of working in office buildings named after self-avowed racists, walking through the U.S. Capitol engineered by enslaved Black laborers, living in a society that treats them and their families as second class citizens, and dealing with daily mental and emotional afflictions that Black people endure as an underrepresented, often-maligned, disenfranchised, and infrequently understood community.

To find some semblance of peace during this time, Black staffers are seeking solace amongst each other and leaning on Congressman John Lewis’s words “to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe.”² Congressman Lewis’ unwavering commitment for a just and equal America has inspired Black staffers to turn pain into purpose and challenge America to live up to its ideals. In order to carry on the torch of those who have fought and sometimes died for justice and equity, CBA and SBLSC convened the Joint Congressional Staff Task Force on Racial Justice and Reform to identify policies that would uplift the Black community, highlight and address long standing systemic racial inequalities in America, and create meaningful dialogue with congressional and community leaders.

Moving Forward

In the coming weeks, the Joint Congressional Staff Task Force on Racial Justice and Reform will release a report on codified, systemic racial injustice. In many instances, Members of Congress have already proposed one or more legislative solutions to the issues that we will be outlining.

¹ 1 U.S. Constitution, pmb1.

² Lewis, J. (2020, July 30). Together, you can redeem the soul of our nation. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html>

While it is not CBA or SBLSC's role to advocate for any particular piece of legislation, the task force will provide examples of legislative solutions that have been introduced during the 116th Congress. In some cases, these proposals have been debated and called for a vote by the House or Senate. We look forward to working with leaders of the House and Senate to continue confronting racism and anti-Blackness, specifically, in our nation's laws and policies.

To be clear, we do not view passing these bills as the sole solution to 400 years of slavery and systemic racism, but rather we see this as the next logical step the legislative branch should take to fight the historic and on-going harms the federal government has propagated against Black Americans. The report will focus on five areas:

1. ***Creating Economic Opportunities for All:*** In the months prior to his death Dr. King launched the Poor People's Campaign, which he called "the beginning of a new cooperation, understanding, and a determination by poor people of all colors and backgrounds to assert and win their right to a decent life and respect for their culture and dignity."³ In 1968, the year Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, the average middle class Black family possessed one-tenth as much wealth as the average middle class white family. The gap is just as wide today. According to the Brookings Institute, the net worth of a Black family is \$17,150, compared to a typical White family whose net worth is \$171,000.⁴ If we are to realize Dr. King's dream, Congress must act to close the wealth gap.
2. ***Fulfilling America's Promise of Equality:*** Ahead of the 2018 midterm elections, the Brennan Center for Justice warned that American voters would be subjected to "the worst voter suppression" in the modern era.⁵ Leaders in several states across the nation undertook spurious actions to subvert the sanctity of the ballot box. When millions of Americans took to the streets to call for an end to the state-sanctioned death of Black Americans, and all other forms of oppression, they did so with the uneasy feeling we all share: the progress that past generations fought for is under attack. Congress must protect the right to vote and begin to reverse the decades-long policy of mass incarceration.
3. ***Delivering Quality Healthcare to Everyone:*** Black communities are fighting two public health crises: systemic racism and COVID-19. Long before COVID-19, Black communities experienced some of the worst health outcomes in the nation, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. It is clear that there must be a targeted effort to help Black, Latinx, and other minority communities combat COVID-19. Congress must act to protect

³ King, M. L. (1968, March 15). Black and white together. Southern Christian Leadership Conference Press Release.

⁴ McIntosh, K., Moss, E., Nunn, R., and Shambaugh, J. (2020, February 27). Examining the black-white wealth gap. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/>

⁵ Johnson, T.R., and Feldman, M. (2020, January 16). The new voter suppression. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/new-voter-suppression>

vulnerable communities from the COVID-19 pandemic, and it must act to eliminate long-term health disparities.

4. ***Ensuring the Future by Improving Education:*** According to famed Black educator Mary McLeod Bethune, “education is the great American adventure, the world's most colossal democratic experiment.”⁶ Indeed, education has long been a “great equalizer” and has helped lay the tracks towards progress for Black Americans. However, perennial federal under-investments, combined with the implementation of policies that do not center the experiences and needs of Black students—and often criminalize them—have created barriers to closing the achievement gap and ensuring Black students have an equal opportunity to thrive in school and life. Congress must prioritize advancing educational equity, as well as strengthening education quality and increasing education affordability for Black students.
5. ***Building Equitable Infrastructure:*** Generations of federal policy in transportation and infrastructure, environment, and technology have perpetuated and reinforced systemic racism in America. Issues that have plagued Black communities such as the lack of investments in transportation and infrastructure priorities, poor air quality and lack of access to clean water, and lack of access to internet and broadband—to this day—continue to limit mobility, civic and social access, and opportunity for Black Americans. Congress must examine and reverse federal laws and policies that help facilitate these unequal outcomes.

CBA and SBLSC have represented the interests of Black congressional staff for decades, and the Joint Congressional Staff Task Force on Racial Justice and Reform will call on its network of Black Capitol Hill alumni, and engage with scholars, activists, and stakeholders in our communities to develop the report. Now is the time to uphold the values that this country was founded upon for every American, especially those that have been integral to the foundation and sustaining of America.

⁶ Bethune, M.M. (1934). The educational values of the college-bred. Essay.