

## Maria Meier Leads Drive for Staff Diversity

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Scott J. Ferrell/CQ Roll Call

Maria Meier was recently hired by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to lead Senate Democrats' diversity hiring initiative.

The new head of the Senate Democratic diversity hiring initiative faces a daunting task in making a dent in the overwhelmingly monolithic staff demographics of Capitol Hill.

In her first interview since taking the job two weeks ago, Maria Meier said she wants to strengthen the pipeline of minority hiring created by Majority Leader Harry Reid more than three years ago and do more to retain the staffers who move through it.

"I think every Democratic office understands that their leader is committed to this," she said of the Nevada Democrat. "It's one thing to say, 'We're going to do this.' It's another thing to commit the resources to institutionalize an office and put a senior level person in charge of it."

Martina Bradford, the former head of the program, said she helped staff more than 200 minority employees in Senate offices since she was hired in 2007.

“These numbers are not big. These numbers are not strong. But they are improving,” said Bradford, now the deputy Senate Sergeant-at-Arms. “Not nearly quick enough, but important strides are being made.”

Neither the House nor the Senate releases a tally of how many minority employees work among the ranks of about 7,000 Congressional staffers on the Hill. But House Assistant Leader James Clyburn, the highest-ranking black legislator in Congress, said a formal report would hardly confirm their absence.

“It doesn’t take much more than eyeballing to see that diversity is very lacking here on this Hill,” the South Carolina Democrat said. “It’s been that way for a long time.”

Nevertheless, Meier uses the same metrics to gauge the Senate diversity initiative’s success: “You simply have to look around and you see there are more people, more diverse staff on the Hill,” she said.

Working out of Reid’s office, Meier maintains a database of résumés from thousands of minority candidates. She interviews them to make sure they are qualified, and when offices come to her, she connects them to applicants.

The country is seeing steady growth in Hispanic and Asian American populations, and minority staffers can help tap into those communities, said Brown University professor John Logan, who has been studying the 2010 census.

“Everyone’s constituency is becoming more diverse,” Logan said. “An African-American or an Asian staff person will find out different things and be aware of different things than a non-Hispanic, white staff person.”

Meier said she especially wants to reach out to communities that haven’t historically been engaged in politics and government, such as first-generation Americans who don’t innately see government work as an option. With community organizations, internship programs and the Tri-Caucus, she said, she will try to bring new faces to the Hill.

“Their commitment is there, the desire is there, they just don’t have the existing networks to even know where to start,” she said.

The initiative’s next step, she said, is strengthening minority retention with brown-bag lunches and career development seminars for existing minority staffers.

“They need some career advice and the networking opportunities so that they get the right sort of skills and understand what it takes to eventually move up and be placed in senior level positions,” Meier said.

The end result, she said, should be more minority staffers in high-ranking positions, where they can make decisions to hire minority employees themselves.

“Who knows?” Meier said. “One of these staff assistants we have walking in the door may be a Senator one day.”

But if there is a pipeline to the top, it’s not evident in the current demographics of the Senate.

The chamber lost its only African-American Member last year with the departure of Sen. Roland Burris (D-Ill.). In an interview, Burris said the lack of African-Americans in the Senate and among the staff makes it all the more difficult to address the black community’s needs.

“Black Americans are not represented in the most deliberative and the most important body in the country,” Burris said. “And when I left, most of my black staff people, a lot of them have not been able to get jobs with any other Senators.”

The Senate has two Asian Americans, both Hawaii Democrats, and two Hispanic Americans, one of whom is a Republican. There is no comparable diversity program on the GOP side of the aisle, but that Republican, Cuban-born Sen. Marco Rubio (Fla.), just hired a Hispanic chief of staff. Still, Rubio said he does not specifically seek diversity in the hiring process.

“I think you always hire the best people and you cast as wide a net as possible, and you stay open-minded about who the best candidates are,” he said. “I’ve always felt that’s the best policy that will ultimately lead you to diversity.”

The House has 79 Members that identify as part of minority groups.

House Democrats unveiled a minority résumé bank last year but did so two weeks before ceding the majority to Republicans. Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) hasn’t addressed the issue as his predecessor did; the website for the résumé bank still has a quote from former Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) across the top.

But a spokeswoman for House Administration Chairman Dan Lungren said the Californian Republican’s staff will meet with Democratic staff in the coming weeks to assess the status of the program.

“Unfortunately, we’ve been slightly delayed due to our increasing focus on enhancing security measures and awareness since the tragic shooting in Tucson,” Salley Wood said.

Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.), ranking member on the Appropriations Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch, attempted, so far unsuccessfully, to insert language into the subcommittee’s funding bill expressing support for the diversity initiative.

Still, failing to entrench the program before giving up power, Democratic staffers said they are cautiously skeptical that Republicans will take up the mantle.

“I’m not entirely convinced that it’s dead. I just don’t know to what degree it’s going to be embraced by Republican leadership,” an African-American House staffer said.