



NATIONAL JOURNAL

For staffers of color, response to riot fits into larger pattern of racial tensions

Congressional aides want leaders to recognize the racial motivations and disparate impacts of the attack.



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🕒 Jan. 25, 2021, 8 p.m.

As thousands of troops remain at the Capitol in anticipation of threats during President Trump's impeachment trial, the attack on the building nearly three weeks ago still weighs heavily on the minds of congressional aides, especially staffers of color.

Of the dozen-plus current and former congressional staffers of color interviewed for this story, a majority told *National Journal* that they viewed the rioting of Jan. 6 as racially motivated. For many, the threat to their physical safety was a more acute manifestation of the vulnerability they have sometimes felt as people of color working in Congress. Addressing the trauma caused by the incident,

they say, won't just require beefing up security; it will require leaders to acknowledge the way that the riot was especially dangerous for minorities, the double standards held by some Capitol Police officers, and the struggle for a sense of belonging that some have faced while working on the Hill. Several staffers were granted anonymity for fear of professional repercussions from speaking candidly about race.

On Jan. 6, Daniel Chao was focused on defending his office. Alone in a room with his boss, Rep. Grace Napolitano, Chao concentrated on making sure the California Democrat didn't miss an opportunity to be evacuated, figuring out how many items of furniture to push up against the door so they could leave easily if needed, and considering what sharp object to grab if someone made it inside.

Looking back on the experience, the Chinese American chief of staff noted the demographics of the mob.

"In this specific incident, the perpetrators were—well, they were generally white," Chao said. "The individuals they were targeting were allies of progressive organizers, allies of communities of color."

A congressional staffer for more than 20 years, Chao said he has at times felt vulnerable because of his identity. That has been especially true when anti-Asian rhetoric has become part of mainstream political discourse. In Chao's view, Trump encouraged his supporters to storm the Capitol, endangering lives, in the same way he fueled [anti-Asian sentiment](https://www.nationaljournal.com/s/706960/current-and-aspiring-house-members-push-back-on-anti-asian-campaign-themes) last spring with his use of the phrase "kung flu."

"I did very much feel that, if spotted, I was more likely to be attacked by the insurrectionists due to my ethnic background," Chao added.

Marina Chafa, communications director for the Middle Eastern and North African Staff Association, said that for “MENA-identifying members, it’s often difficult for them to blend in, nor should they ever feel like they need to.”

Several Black staffers shared with *National Journal* that they were disappointed but not shocked by the attack. They are used to seeing Confederate statues displayed in the Capitol, so they weren’t that surprised when some rioters wielded the Confederate flag.

“As a Black staffer, when you see the rioters and the messages they’re unifying around, this is anti-your-being,” said Keenan Austin Reed, the cofounder of the Black Women’s Congressional Alliance, who was chief of staff to Rep. Donald McEachin until Dec. 31.

In addition to Austin Reed's group and the Middle Eastern and North African Staff Association, the staffers who spoke with *National Journal* included aides affiliated with the Congressional Asian Pacific American Staff Association, Congressional Black Associates, the Congressional Hispanic Staff Association, and the Senate Black Legislative Staff Caucus. Many described the insurrectionists as terrorists and white supremacists. Nearly all of the aides who spoke with *National Journal* said they felt that the mob came to target minorities. In the weeks that have gone by since, some staffers of color said they have felt forgotten as they notice their white colleagues and political leaders talking less about those racial motivations.

Nicole Tisdale, an advocate and staff trainer who was previously a senior congressional staffer, has spent time this month talking through the attack with Black staffers.

“One thing that I’ve said is you can push back when people say, “This wasn’t about race; this was an attack on our democracy,”” Tisdale said.

“I think a lot of the staffers are demoralized that there's no recognition ... that this was a hate crime, and that this was an attack on not only democracy and the democratic process, but also it was white supremacy and hate that was the root of all of this attack,” said one member of the Congressional Hispanic Staff Association.

A failure to acknowledge the role of race at work, including in the aftermath of the attack, is something many aides of color say they have struggled with throughout their time in Congress. They said they've watched colleagues begrudgingly sit through bias trainings while on their phones and felt frustrated when white staffers didn't notice the lack of diversity on the Hill; a majority of members and staffers alike are white, especially at upper levels. According to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, [in 2020](https://jointcenter.org/congressional-staff-diversity-fall-hiring-campaign/) (https://jointcenter.org/congressional-staff-diversity-fall-hiring-campaign/), only 11 percent of top Senate staffers in personal offices were people of color, while in 2018 only 13.7 percent of top House staffers in personal offices were people of color. For staffers of color, the weeks following the incident have reinforced their perceptions of white colleagues as being unaware of racial issues.

Other staffers, like Ecclesiaste Guerrier, an emergency coordinator for the Senate Sergeant at Arms who helped respond to the attack, said they felt that the riot largely affected white and nonwhite staffers in similar ways. But Guerrier, who is SBLSC secretary, noted that the insurrectionists were predominantly white. He, like almost every other staffer who spoke to *National Journal*, compared the police response earlier this month to the one marshaled during last summer's Black Lives Matter protests.

Guerrier was at work in the Dirksen Senate Office Building during the attack. As a former member of the National Guard, he was also charged with protecting the White House during the BLM demonstrations, and he took part in the protests

while not on duty. Having seen firsthand the difference in reaction by law enforcement to the mob at the Capitol and to the BLM marchers, he characterized the response on Jan. 6 as “sloppy and dysfunctional.”

“It was a double whammy for those of us of color,” he said, “because of the lack of response, because we saw people turn a blind eye when we know a lot of people who were faced with the exact opposite last summer.”

“I’ve lost trust in [the Capitol Hill police] 100 percent,” wrote Mecos Shoulders, a legislative assistant to Rep. Bennie Thompson, in a statement to *National Journal*. “Both our members’ and staffers’ lives were at risk.”

While staffers praised the heroism of many officers who responded to the attack that day, they said they felt that Capitol Police leadership underestimated the threat from the rioters. They said they were disappointed that the force had not accepted [preemptive offers of federal help](https://apnews.com/article/capitol-police-reject-federal-help-9c39a4ddef0ab60a48828a07e4d03380) (https://apnews.com/article/capitol-police-reject-federal-help-9c39a4ddef0ab60a48828a07e4d03380). Some put it down to police leadership failing to take seriously the dangers of white supremacy and hate groups.

“For us as staffers of color, it was very impactful to know that perhaps the color of our skin influences how much law enforcement is going to take care of us outside and inside of the Capitol,” said the congressional aide in CHSA.

For many minority aides, that isn’t new. Although some said they have had good experiences with Capitol police officers, like those who have walked them to the train or to their cars when they’ve worked late, they said they have also felt that some white officers treat them differently because of who they are.

“While I have become fond of some officers that I interact with on a daily basis, I am far too often struck by fear due to their mere presence,” wrote one Black House staffer in a statement to *National Journal*. “Even after passing through

metal detectors hundreds of times over the years, it still makes me uneasy knowing that a small mistake could be fatal for me. I am also certain that if I were to bypass the detectors to enter a building, I would be shot on sight.”

Another aide described having once been yelled at by a Capitol police officer in a way that implied the staffer didn't speak English. Another time, the same staffer recalled being part of a small group of minority aides told to leave a congressional gallery as white staffers stood around without receiving any reproach.

Several aides spoke about a pattern of white Capitol police officers asking staffers of color to show their badges while allowing white staffers without visible badges to pass through doors and hallways unimpeded. Multiple staffers also described how uncomfortable they sometimes felt taking photos on the Capitol steps, a favorite spot for staff organizations.

Even after asking permission, even in their business clothes, they said they felt Capitol Police were especially stern with them and the colleagues of color they were with. It was a gut punch, then, to see a mob rush up those same steps.

“We recognize this insurrection as only part of a battle that we've been fighting, which encompasses holding our government officials accountable in confronting racial inequality and calling out the double standards of law enforcement,” wrote CBA President Herline Mathieu.

Staffers of color would like to see regular bias trainings and a more organized system to report incidents of racism. Some simply want officers to acknowledge when they make mistakes and apologize.

“Given that too many of our members have also witnessed and experienced the inequities in how select USCP officers police individuals of color, we are concerned that racial bias contributed to the security lapse on January 6th and

continues to endanger the lives of all people of color throughout the Capitol complex,” wrote the Congressional Hispanic Staff Association in a Jan. 19 letter to congressional leadership. The group has yet to receive a reply.

The Capitol Police did not respond to *National Journal's* request for comment.

Even as staffers of color discussed negative interactions with some white officers, they also talked about feeling solidarity with Black and brown Capitol Police and service workers who keep the complex running smoothly.

“There’s definitely a sense of, ‘I see you; you see me,’” said Francesca McCrary, who worked for the late Rep. Elijah Cummings and served as CBA president until November 2018. “There’s definitely a level of camaraderie: ‘If something were to happen, I have your back and you have mine.’”

“The ones that have stuck out to me who remember it’s your birthday, or remember your boss was on the news—those are mostly the officers of color,” McCrary said.

Following the attack, congressional diversity and inclusion organizations have held calls and worked to support their members. Doing so has at times been a challenge due to remote work during the pandemic. In a recent community check-in call, members of the CBA and the SBLSC stated their desire to understand the positions of Black Capitol Police officers. During the call, staffers also discussed how to make sure their bosses don’t gloss over the way the incident at the Capitol affected Black people, and Black staffers in particular. Members of the organizations hope to institute informal meetings between Capitol Police and staff, and possibly revive a task force to deliver policy proposals on racial justice, including ones addressing Black staffers’ concerns

after the attack. Similarly, the CHSA has formed a Crisis Committee on the Aftermath of the Insurrection to determine the best way for the organization to move forward.

In recent weeks, such calls have provided staffers of color forums to discuss how they are feeling as they work through what happened. Many said they feel traumatized, on edge at work, and worried that a similar attack could happen again. Some talked about how it's made it harder to do their jobs.

Staffers point out that unlike some members of Congress, they do not have security details. They know their safety won't be a top priority in the event of another breach. Some feel uneasy working in the same buildings as members who they feel incited the insurrectionists, and concerned about the guests such members might invite to walk by them and their offices.

Committee staffers are also worried "they're going to get some of these members who may have helped the attackers on their committee," Tisdale said.

At the same time, staffers of color said they are committed to working through their fear, starting new initiatives and proposing a variety of solutions to prevent another attack from happening and to begin to change the larger culture on Capitol Hill.

Some minority staffers have been talking about having members read staffers' stories about the incident into the record, a plan that could go forward despite individuals' worry for their safety.

For staffers of color, the weeks after the attack on the Capitol have seen a continuation of the struggles they faced in 2020.

"We are traumatized. We were traumatized in 2020. The terrorist attack, the racist attack at the Capitol this month really reopened those wounds," said SBLSC President Kameelah Pointer, speaking about the police killings of Black

people that dominated the news last year. “The insurrection does not stop us from doing what we need to do. Staffers of color are resilient people.”