



Jan. 31, 2020

WBGO Board of Trustees
54 Park Place
Newark, NJ 07102

Dear Chairman Frederic and board trustees:

I'm writing to you as a partner and longtime champion of WBGO and Newark Public Radio. I have worked alongside WBGO and its newsroom as a journalist for many years. I listen to the station every single day. As the director of Free Press' News Voices project, I collaborated with the station on the News Voices fellowship to help the station build deeper relationships with Newark residents, elevate untold and underreported stories, and produce more community-centered journalism.

The recent news about racial discrimination and hostility toward Black employees at the station is deeply disturbing and completely unacceptable. While the station is home to a great legacy, and is staffed by many dedicated people, the attacks toward and gaslighting of employees of color who raised these issues over a number of months shows a failure of leadership at WBGO, including this board.

The recent firing of Josie Gonsalves, whose calls for greater workplace equity went ignored, is only the most recent example of station leaders failing its staff, members and the city of Newark. The station has still refused to release a public response to the serious concerns a city resident raised in a November Op-Ed, and missed an important opportunity to listen to legitimate criticisms from the people it serves. The station still has not publicly responded to a community-led petition for accountability. And while the president and CEO has resigned, there has been no public communication from WBGO's leadership about its values, commitment to equity, or a plan to change its internal structure and culture.

What lies underneath all of this is a lack of respect — a lack of respect for the community to respond to residents' concerns; a lack of respect for employees to quickly root out toxic and hostile individuals; and a lack of respect for the history of a station that champions a Black art form and was founded in the wake of the Newark Rebellion.

The actions — and in some cases, lack of actions — of Newark Public Radio's leadership has compromised the success of this collaborative fellowship. Worse, the station's leaders have undermined the trust those working on the fellowship have worked to build with city residents who have been consistently let down by local media.

**Fight for
your rights
to connect
and communicate.**



I request that you take the following steps:

- Conduct a transparent and public investigation, co-led by staff of color, into the station's toxic and discriminatory workplace culture
- Develop a stationwide equity plan based on the investigation's findings that includes plans to diversify the board and leadership, hire more city residents, host equity trainings and workshops for leadership and staff, and put more Black voices on the air
- Host listening sessions with city residents, with an emphasis on underserved and marginalized communities, about their information needs and what they want out of WBGO programming

As a public-media institution, WBGO and its board are ultimately accountable to the public and the community you are charged with serving. Conducting an investigation, developing an equity plan and engaging with the public should be only be the beginning. Turning around a toxic and discriminatory workplace culture takes a lot of intentional work and the sharing of power, no matter how uncomfortable that may be. But I do believe that these would be critical first steps to repair the trust that has been broken with staff, with listeners and with the community at large.

I remain steadfast in my support for this fellowship, for News Voices Fellow Brit Harley, for News Director Doug Doyle, for the WBGO newsroom, and for many employees at Newark Public Radio. This support, however, is contingent on the station undergoing significant changes.

Free Press selected WBGO as a place to pilot this innovative fellowship so Newark residents could see themselves represented in the news and play an active role in shaping the narratives about the city where they live. Working alongside WBGO employees and Newark residents these past few months has been incredibly rewarding and the work they are doing is inspirational. It is because of their work and commitment that we continue to work with WBGO, and we hope that you are able to respond to our legitimate concerns in a swift and decisive way.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'M. Rispoli'.

Mike Rispoli
News Voices Director
Free Press