



Audience members raise their hands to support a statement from Supervisor Sandra Lee Fewer during a hearing on The City's discriminatory hiring practices at a meeting of the Board of Supervisors Government Audit and Oversight Committee at City Hall on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2018. (Kevin N. Hume/S.F. Examiner)

African American workers blast city for racism, discrimination in hiring

LAURA WAXMANN / Sep. 20, 2018 12:00 a.m. / NEWS / THE CITY

African Americans make up just 15 percent of the workforce employed by the City and County of San Francisco yet comprise 36 percent of its terminations, and a quarter of all employees released before they complete probation.

Those statistics, and allegations of racism and discriminatory hiring practices by city departments, were the subject of heated testimony during a three-hour hearing Wednesday before the Board of Supervisors' Government Audit and Oversight Committee.

"We will be here until this problem is resolved," said Joseph Bryant, executive director of SEIU 1021. "There is no space for racism or discrimination in this city."

Supervisor Jane Kim called for the hearing in response to a request from the union earlier this summer. It also came on the heels of an executive directive issued Tuesday by Mayor London Breed calling on department heads to ramp up efforts around recruitment and retention of a more diverse, fair and inclusive workforce.

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The directive urges the City's Human Resources Department to hire two full-time staff members to focus on diversity recruitment and requires city departments to begin reporting instances of disciplinary action to human resources, among other changes.

On Wednesday, dozens of current and former city workers poured into City Hall to share personal experiences of discrimination in the hiring process as well as retaliation by superiors, filling the meeting chamber to capacity.

Social worker Malorie Branch told the committee that she experienced "racism and targeted bullying" from a former supervisor before being released from probation.

"I had an accident where I was rear-ended in a county vehicle. I was injured and I left for medical leave. I had two weeks before my probation was up," said Branch. "They didn't call me, they didn't check on me. They fired me. How many social workers do we have that are black working for San Francisco County?"

Employed as a secretary with the San Francisco Police Department for 25 years, Madeline McMillan, who is black, said that an accident temporarily forced her off the job. When she returned, a "young white police officer" had taken over McMillan's desk and duties. After failing to gain support from her supervisors, McMillan said that she proceeded to file a discrimination complaint.

"Once the complaint went through, I was removed from my desk, I was moved down the hall to an isolated area where no one was," she said. "I got a reply back form [Human Resources Director] Micki Callahan saying there was no merit to my discrimination or retaliation complaint."

The city workers and their allies criticized a presentation given by the Human Resources Department that highlighted San Francisco's diversity initiatives and some successes in hiring black employees.

"Current demographics show that The City is actually a diverse employer," said Human Resources Director Micki Callahan, adding that the current "success" can be attributed to diversity initiatives such as "merit-based hiring, anti-discrimination policies" and pipeline programs meant to remove barriers for minority applicants.

Callahan pointed out that despite the steady dwindling of San Francisco's African American Population — which a 2017 census placed at roughly 5.5 percent — black people make up 15 percent of city hires, "well above labor market availability."

"New hires [are] 19 percent. So it shows that our workforce programs and some of these initiatives are yielding good results," said Callahan, who faced periodic interruptions from a jeering crowd. "Promotions of African Americans are at 14 percent, roughly equivalent. I would characterize that as acceptable or good news."

But Bryant said those statistics do not reflect the reality of many San Francisco's City workers of color.

"The people here today are all making sacrifices. They are either taking vacation off work, their lunch breaks, or time away from their family to express their frustration," he said.

Supervisor Vallie Brown, who sits on the committee, agreed and described the current statistics as "a siren that is going off."

Supervisor Sandra Lee Fewer, who is not a member of the committee but attended the hearing, called the testimony from city workers across nearly all of its departments “extremely disturbing.”

“When I hear of an isolated incident, I see it as that and I get it,” she said. “But when I hear repeatedly about the lack of investigation, that people are being harassed to the point of physical deterioration, and when I hear it’s impossible for them to go back into the workplace because of the hostility — these are issues that people marched and lost their lives over in the 1960s and we are still here.”

The committee voted to continue the hearing and Fewer asked Human Resources to provide more data in areas such as pay discrepancies, the rates at which black City workers transition from temporary to permanent positions, and retention rates.

“San Francisco claims to be the most progressive city but the racism here is very systemic and sophisticated,” said Fewer. “It takes a lot of looking at the root causes but also dismantling some of the policies that we have that are racist and inequitable. How do we know that? Because the outcomes are racist and inequitable.”

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