

## An Open Letter from Concerned Black Workers at the Free Library of Philadelphia to the Board of Trustees of the Free Library of Philadelphia:

On June 25th, the Concerned Black workers of Philadelphia wrote an open letter to the Free Library of Philadelphia demanding the following:

1. A commitment to protecting Black lives on staff.
2. A formal and transparent investigation of Black staff's concerns regarding physically reporting to Free Library locations. Current decisions were made using a mis-leading survey.
3. A plan, developed with Black staff, to provide Library services that take into account Black people's increased Covid-19 infection and mortality rates.
4. Support and accommodations for Black staff whose Library work makes them susceptible to racial violence.
5. Provide Black staff the same opportunities to work from home that white staff have.
6. We demand that staff with librarian degrees who work in management, executive, and specialty positions are redeployed to cover the shortages in staff due to Covid -19 and the lay off of seasonal employees. Most of whom are Black.

As of today, we have only been offered a meeting, and not one with the full board. That said, we did not ask for a meeting. We asked for action taken to address the above issues.

[In a public statement](#) on June 3rd, 2020, the Free Library wrote that it must “confront structural racism, both inside our organization as well as in all of our public-facing and public-service efforts,” and that “the work to root out institutional racism must occur before we can realize the organizational changes and the necessary healing that the Free Library needs.” Since then, there have been no public steps taken to root out institutional racism or protect and value Black lives on staff. Instead there has been a lack of action on the part of Free Library leadership.

The wider world is losing patience with non-actionable steps towards anti-racism, and thus the library is losing money from donors, respect with professional networks and organizations, reputation in the press and social media, programming opportunities with authors, and the trust of patrons. All of these things compromise the services we are able to provide to our communities. How can we advance literacy, guide learning, and inspire curiosity with a leader whose actions or the lack thereof, are causing us to lose the very resources that enable us to do so? Allowing Siobhan Reardon to remain as President and Director, will betray the very mission of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

In order to move forward in becoming an anti-racist institution we must first cut ties with with leadership that has continually exhibited racism by repeatedly ignoring, minimizing, deflecting, and disrespecting the needs and concerns of Black staff; and who has met these needs with defensiveness rather than action.

We, the Concerned Black Workers of the Free Library of Philadelphia, ask that the Board of Trustees of the Free Library remove Sioban A. Reardon, the President and Director of our institution, immediately.

The Board of Trustees must choose Black lives or be complicit in upholding white supremacy.

We await your decision,

The Concerned Black Workers of the Free Library of Philadelphia

Response to the Open Letter from Concerned Black Workers at the Free Library of Philadelphia  
To the Concerned Black Workers of the Free Library of Philadelphia (FLP):

We have read your open letter closely and share deep and genuine concern for the issues raised in it. As members of the Board of Trustees and co-chairs of the board's DEI Committee, we remain absolutely committed to confronting and eradicating any form of institutionalized racism at the FLP. Moreover, we acknowledge the concerns of racial disparities in the impact of COVID-19. We also share your sense of urgency for the safety of all of our workers and patrons at this critical juncture of the reopening process.

Our committee that consists of nine members of the Board of Trustees, which also includes the Chair of the board, have been working closely with the executive team of the FLP to affect structural change in the FLP system with regard to racial equity and many of the other challenges/issues that have been highlighted in your open letter. As you may know, FLP has recently engaged a consulting firm (DiverseForce) for this expressed purpose. Their engagement started before the realization of the pandemic and only several weeks before the nation's attention turned to the brutal killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and others that ignited critical unrest and action.

In light of the new context(s), we are adjusting our engagement with the consulting firm to report directly to our committee of the Board of Trustees. The findings from their current assessment stage and following recommendation stages will support us in restructuring our strategic governance and oversight of the executive leadership at the FLP. We believe that the most prudent way to ensure executive accountability around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion will be to have direct interface with the process through all stages of the engagement.

We are also closely following the search process for the new executive level DEI Officer position for the FLP. We believe that our internal work on these issues are critical and that the tangible outcomes that will be influenced by this new position and other institutional strategies designed to directly address the culture of our organization, at every level, will be important steps in our sustained efforts to effect systemic change.

Most importantly, at this moment, we are working with the executive team to review the protocols for the phased reopening of FLP branches. With input from important stakeholders, our priority is to ensure a safe and equitable process for reopening.

Finally, we believe that now is the time to make substantive changes at the FLP. In order to discuss our commitment to the challenges that we face, we are open to engaging important stakeholders like the Concerned Black Workers and hearing from you in a manner that makes sense at this time. We believe that the pathway forward is difficult, but we also know that the work ahead will be facilitated by listening, learning and holding ourselves and FLP leadership accountable. We plan to do this with an abiding sense of equity and an unwavering commitment to realizing the full potential of the FLP.

Sincerely,

Folasade A. Olanipekun-Lewis and Christopher S. Arlene Co-Chairs of the FLP DEI Committee, Board of Trustees