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The Illinois Legislative Black Caucus at 40: Moving Forward

Middle-age hasn't brought a mid-life crisis for the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus (ILBC). To the contrary, it's growing and becoming more active with the addition of its first headquarters, staff, plans for a statewide communication network, and plenty of goals, in addition to those it's already accomplished.

Today the Caucus has 28 members: 19 from the Illinois House of Representatives and nine from the Senate, but it started with far fewer.

The ILBC's History

The Caucus began in 1966 as a study group for four African-American lawmakers, according to Dr. Emma Brooks Williams, Senior Executive Director for Board and Government Affairs at Chicago State University and author of "Political Empowerment of Illinois' African-American State Lawmakers from 1877 to 2005," which will be published this summer.

Former Representatives Harold Washington, Lewis A.H. Caldwell, Otis Collins and Calvin Smith gathered together to "examine issues affecting African-Americans in Illinois and to explore ways to address social issues that the community was facing at that time, such as anti-discrimination, housing, education, criminal justice, employment, voting, and the like," she says. "They realized by capitalizing on the strengths of individual group members, much could be accomplished."

Senators Richard Newhouse, Charles Chew, Jr.,

Cecil Partee, and Kenneth Hall, along with Representative Raymond Ewell, later joined the group.

In 1968 the group officially became the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus with a mission of assuring that "the interest of African-American citizens are given equitable representation in the General Assembly and that legislative action is directed to address those interests."

Its members passed legislation to create the state lottery, ensured that African-Americans get some of the state's construction contracts for the Dan Ryan Expressway, and created the Illinois Judicial Sub-district law, "which has increased the number of African-American judges by 200 percent," according to Dr. Williams. "Not only have African-Americans benefited from this law, women, gays, and other groups are benefiting from the passage of this Act."

Some of its members have become prominent in their own right, such as Harold Washington -- Chicago's first African-American mayor, Carol Moseley Braun -- Illinois' first black woman in the U.S. Senate, Jesse White -- Illinois' first black Secretary of State, and Barack Obama -- current presidential candidate and U.S. Senator.

In the 1990s, the Caucus developed a Foundation. "The Foundation has always been

the alter ego of the Caucus, in the sense that we work hand in hand with the members at all times," says ILBC Foundation Chair (and former Caucus member) Paul Williams. "We try to help them analyze issues

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A group photo of the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus taken by Illinois House Photographer Jeff Lyons.

The Illinois Legislative Black Caucus ...

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Rep. Marlow H. Colvin is Chairman of the Illinois House Legislative Black Caucus. Photo courtesy of the Illinois House of Representatives, Office of the Speaker.

that they're dealing with, like education or gaming.”

The Foundation also helps fund and implement Caucus programs, including a yearly conference and a scholarship program that began two years ago. “Last year we gave over \$50,000 in college scholarships to students around the state,” says Williams. The ILBC’s annual conference provides “a forum to address and analyze legislation and civic solutions for issues that impact upon Caucus members’ communities,” he adds.

The ILBC’s Future

The Black Caucus is larger than it’s ever been before. “We are the largest Caucus of any delegation in the General Assembly,” says ILBC member Rep. Art Turner. It’s developing an infrastructure to support its numerous members and their initiatives. A couple years ago, the ILBC bought its first headquarters -- a house at 615 South College in Springfield. “We needed a place to have meetings in Springfield, because we were meeting in members’ offices,” says Williams. “We needed a place to keep records, and for our staff to work.”

The ILBC is also hiring an executive director and hopes to have one by the end of this legislative session, according to Rep. Turner. After that, it hopes to add staff. These changes, including becoming a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, are taking the Caucus “to another level,” he adds. “We’re trying to develop policy and be more pro-active. I think initially the Caucus was reactive, so we’ve taken a different perspective.”

Having a director and staff will enable the Black Caucus to pursue initiatives it hasn’t been able to, such as developing a statewide communication network. “The Foundation and Caucus have to address a wide range of issues, and we have a wide range of

communities throughout the state that resemble or have pockets of people and interests similar to communities we represent,” says Mr. Williams. “To be able to contact and communicate with those communities so that we can understand and unify to address our common challenges, is something I’d like us to do...”

“Right now there’s just a complete (communications) void,” says Rep. Turner. “If you want to reach the Caucus, you either reach the Caucus chair or you reach a Caucus member.” A communications network will solve that, allow the ILBC to send out e-mail alerts about legislative issues, and improve their lobbying ability overall.

“I think the challenge with our Caucus is we’ve not been able to plug into the mayors and township committee guys and supervisors to fully talk about the impact of some of the legislation that we can pass,” Rep. Turner says. “We know this is a step in the right direction.”

He hopes the Caucus’s improved infrastructure will enable it to tackle issues that have laid by the wayside, such as education, criminal justice, and the environment. Regarding the latter, Rep. Turner says poor communities have to balance the benefits of economic development and job creation with potential negative effects on its environment. “I think about the issue of the waste incinerator in Robbins, Illinois.” (Robbins is a poor, mostly African-American town in southern Chicago that welcomed a waste incinerator in the late 1990s for the jobs it would create, only to see the incinerator close after being cited -- more than 750 times -- for federal clean air violations. The incinerator has been revamped to burn wood instead of waste and may reopen soon.) “Oftentimes poor communities are dumping grounds for junk and waste,” Rep. Turner adds. “We need to weigh in on those issues to make certain we’re not selling our communities short under the guise of economic development or job creation.”



Rep. Arthur L. Turner. Photo courtesy of the Illinois House of Representatives, Office of the Speaker.



Senator and Reverend James T. Meeks is Joint Chair of the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus. Photo Courtesy of Brandy Rees, Senate Democrat Photographer.

As stated on its Web site, the ILBC's current legislative priorities are:

- Reform the current education funding inequalities in Illinois schools.
- Develop a comprehensive job training program, which will focus on the top ten zip code areas with the highest unemployment statistics.
- Make Illinois a SAC (State Apprenticeship Council) state.
- Restore education classes to all prisons.
- Develop comprehensive expungement legislation.

In the future, Mr. Williams would like the Caucus to expand its scholarship program, "to make sure it becomes institutionalized and is supported at a level that's meaningful." But his "real dream" is for the ILBC to develop "a think tank-type of research and development arm that can analyze issues and spit back meaningful solutions."

For more information about the ILBC, visit its Web site: <http://illinoisblackcaucus.org>.



Sen. Kwame Raoul is the Chair of the Illinois Senate Legislative Black Caucus. Photo courtesy of Brandy Rees, Senate Democrat Photographer.

Illinois Legislative Black Caucus Members:

Senator James Clayborne
 Senator Jacqueline Collins
 Senator Rickey Hendon
 Senator Mattie Hunter
 Senator Emil Jones
 Senator Kimberly Lightford
 Senator James T. Meeks (Joint Caucus Chair)
 Senator Kwame Raoul (Illinois Senate Legislative Black Caucus Chair)
 Senator Donne Trotter
 Representative Annazette Collins
 Representative Marlow Colvin (Illinois House Legislative Black Caucus Chair)
 Representative Monique Davis
 Representative William Davis
 Representative Kenneth Dunkin
 Representative Mary Flowers
 Representative LaShawn Ford
 Representative Esther Golar
 Representative Deborah Graham
 Representative Constance Howard
 Representative Charles Jefferson
 Representative Elga Jefferies
 Representative David Miller
 Representative Milton Patterson
 Representative Al Riley
 Representative Arthur Turner
 Representative Eddie Washington
 Representative Karen Yarbrough
 Representative Wyvetter Younge



Illinois' First African-American Legislators

In 1876 -- just 11 years after the Civil War ended, Chicago voters elected an African-American man to serve in the Illinois legislature, according to the February 2006 "First Reading" newsletter, published by the Illinois Legislative Reference Unit. (Interestingly, Chicago voters didn't elect an African-American to their City Council until 1915.) As the first black Illinois lawmaker, John W. E. Thomas also drafted our state's first civil rights legislation. Four years after he joined the General Assembly, he was admitted to the Illinois Bar.

The Illinois Senate didn't see an African-American member until nearly 50 years later, in 1924 when Adelbert H. Roberts was elected to its chamber. Three years later he made another first by becoming the first

African-American to chair a legislative committee, according to "First Reading."

For more information about African-Americans in Illinois, visit the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Web site: www.illinoishistory.gov/lib/GenPrideAfAm2.htm.

For more information about African-American legislators in Illinois, see the online February 2006 "First Reading" newsletter from the Illinois Legislative Reference Unit at: www.ilga.gov/commission/lru/Feb2006FirstRdg.pdf.



Transitions

On February 29, Chuck Hartke resigned as Director of the Illinois Department of Agriculture. Hartke previously served in the Illinois House of Representatives. Tom Jennings, formerly the Assistant Department Director, is now Acting Director.

On February 10, Heather Steans was sworn in to replace former Senator Carol Ronen, who resigned. Senator Steans is a Democrat representing the 7th District.

On February 10, 2008, former Republican Senator Adeline Jay Geo-Karis of Zion, known as "Geo" in the General Assembly, passed away. Geo-Karis was elected to both the House of Representatives and the Senate, where she was the first female dean of the Illinois Senate and the first female Assistant Majority Leader. She served in the Illinois General Assembly 34 years.

On February 5, former Representative Andrew J. McGann died in California. A life-long Democrat, McGann represented the Chicago area's 29th District for ten years, beginning in 1982. He was also a funeral home director and veteran of World War II and the Korean Wars.

Last December, Paul Williams, a lobbyist from Chicago and Chairman of the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus Foundation, was elected Speaker of the Third House by his peers. Williams is a former member of the Illinois House of Representatives and was a legislative aide to former Chicago Mayor Harold Washington.

