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Philadelphia Inquirer

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Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director
The Lenfest Institute for Journalism

To Lisa Hughes and Jim Friedlich:

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* finds itself in an unprecedented position amid a global pandemic. While protesting systemic injustices and racist institutions that support and condone police violence, the city's majority Black community is yearning for accurate and reliable information from trusted sources to keep it informed and engaged around these issues.

We, the undersigned, believe that the recent resignation of top editor Stan Wischnowski has placed the city's paper of record at a critical juncture. The *Inquirer* has long had a tumultuous relationship with the city's diverse communities. To help remedy this, we encourage leadership to select a new editor who can transform how the newsroom engages and collaborates with these communities, and create an equitable internal culture that supports journalists of color.

We believe that local journalism is critical to civic engagement and the overall health of our communities. We are rooting for the *Inquirer* to succeed, but the grave mistake of running the "Buildings Matter, Too" headline was only the latest instance of larger harm that the paper has inflicted on Black Philadelphians.

We urge the *Inquirer* to work with local residents to implement a community-first approach that would enable the newsroom to actively engage with the public and build genuine relationships that center community perspectives. This would ensure that the *Inquirer's* impactful journalism is accessible to diverse populations and would improve the quality of coverage and foster trust. All of this is imperative given how the *Inquirer's* reporting and actions have historically marred the way Black and Brown communities have viewed and interacted with this institution and its journalists.

The *Inquirer* is a public-benefit corporation. To have a sustainable future, it must nurture deep relationships with the community and develop a community-first, anti-racist newsroom philosophy. A clearly articulated set of values for what those relationships look like, and action steps to implement this approach, are needed now more than ever to keep public trust in the *Inquirer* from collapsing at a time when it needs them most.

With this framework, local Black and Brown communities can begin to heal and trust that the information they're receiving from the *Inquirer* is reliable and addresses their needs.

In the spirit of service, accountability and community engagement, we ask *Inquirer* leadership and the incoming top editor to:

1. Audit and publicly publish the demographics of its newsroom, its newsroom sources, its advertisers and its readership.

By understanding the shortfalls in the *Inquirer's* current diversity efforts, we can lay out tangible solutions and measurable outcomes that show how the *Inquirer* can build toward a more equitable newsroom that produces journalism that meets the needs of Black and Brown communities. Publishing these demographic data annually would further establish the *Inquirer's* commitment to transparency as a public-benefit corporation.

2. Consciously shift narratives away from officials, police and people in power. Center impacted communities and humanize impacted people.

For far too long, journalists have cozied up to politicians, public officials and police, giving these institutions and authorities more power in setting the narrative behind the news. The result skews public perception of issues affecting Black and Brown communities while minimizing or otherwise erasing the voices of these communities, which bear the brunt of unchecked power and injustice. The *Inquirer* must commit to reimagining and implementing new approaches for how its journalists cover police, public safety and criminal-legal systems, recognizing that the public outcry in this moment echoes what community members have been saying to the *Inquirer* for generations. This includes providing dedicated and unobstructed time for journalists to diversify their sources and deepen their relationships with community members impacted by these unjust systems.

3. Institute new guidelines on stories around crime, public safety and the criminal-legal system.

Current media coverage of crime and violence disproportionately depicts and harms Black and Brown communities. In response, many newsrooms around the country have begun to rethink all aspects of how their newsrooms cover the criminal-legal system. This includes ceasing the use of mugshots, withholding names of individuals accused of minor crimes, creating an appeal process for people named in crime stories to have the stories removed from the website, defining rules of engagement when working with law enforcement, and refusing to run stories where police are the sole source of information. We believe the *Inquirer* should engage with a community-advisory board (discussed below) and leaders in the criminal-justice space to develop similar guidelines.

4. Create specific beats dedicated to abolitionism, police injustice and violence, and the LGBTQIA+ community

The *Inquirer* has never had beats focused on abolitionism, police injustice and violence, or the LGBTQIA+ community. There's always been public interest in such beats, and they should be led by Black journalists or other journalists of color. A beat focused on abolitionism couldn't be more relevant given

the growing interest in dismantling the prison-industrial complex, defunding the police, and developing new programs to ensure community health and safety. Given that these topics directly impact Black communities and other communities of color, yet are currently underreported, Black journalists and other journalists of color should be given priority to take on these beats. Reporting on these topics should intentionally focus on systemic issues that continue to afflict communities of color within the Philadelphia region and should lift up solutions.

5. Diversify management in all facets of the company and hire more Philadelphians

That means hiring more Black and Brown community leaders, experts and local journalists to shift the entire company's demographics. It's well known that the *Inquirer* has a diversity issue within its board, its executive team, its masthead and its editor base, all of which has influenced its editorial decision-making in ways that undermine public trust. More people of color from Philadelphia must be hired to shift the culture and redirect how the company prioritizes news coverage.

6. Create a community-advisory board to improve direct engagement with community members

This external board would serve as the direct bridge between the newsroom and the public it intends to serve, allowing reporters and editors to engage with community leaders with deep networks. This would enable journalists to center diverse community voices within their newsgathering processes while allowing the board to recommend and support specific stories and initiatives that the public demands. The board would act as a public watchdog, holding the newsroom accountable for coverage and providing ideas for future stories. This would be a call to invite Black and Brown neighborhood leaders — not white corporate leaders, politicians, people with financial privilege or people who run majority-white organizations — to the table. This board would begin to help change the way the newsroom listens to the public and centers people's information needs. Luckily, this model has already been implemented in newsrooms in other parts of the country. The *Inquirer* can look to these examples for inspiration and adapt to best meet the needs of its newsroom and Philadelphia's communities.

7. Establish a rotating public editor of color who is from a non-journalism background and represents Philly's Black or Brown communities.

Ombudspersons have served as the public's eye and critic for newsroom coverage, following complaints, deconstructing lapses in coverage, educating the public on the newsgathering process and raising the community's collective media literacy on how a newsroom operates and evolves its news judgment to fit the public's information needs. This critical eye is needed, and it must be from the communities the *Inquirer* has harmed. This public editor must be given open and unobstructed access to interviewing and questioning newsroom employees and managers on processes and decision-making; the public editor must be able to field questions and requests directly from the public to help the newsroom address the community's information needs. To ensure they represent the people of Philadelphia, this public editor should be selected by the community-advisory board and given all the necessary tools and resources to investigate and report back to the public what's happening on the inside in the spirit of public transparency and accountability.

We stand ready to work with you and the *Inquirer* to implement these equitable and community-first practices. We also are willing to meet in person to have an open dialogue about these ideas, now and during the process of selecting a new editor.

Sincerely,

Organizations:

Movement Alliance Project

Free Press

Amber Art

Amistad Law Project

Asian American Journalists Association Philadelphia

Ethnologica

Germantown Hub for Justice

Germantown Info Hub

Juntos

Kensington Voice

LatinX Media Association

MIC Center

National Association of Hispanic Journalists, Philadelphia chapter

National Domestic Workers Alliance, Pennsylvania chapter

Open News

People's Paper Co-op

The Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists

Philadelphia Ethical Society

Philadelphia Neighborhood Networks

Philadelphia Reentry Think Tank

PhillyCAM

Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign

POWER

iPresente! Media

Reclaim Philadelphia

Schmerling Photography

The Shalom Center

Slought Foundation

Individuals:

Enni Aigbomian

Nancy Anderson

Rev. Thomas A. Beers, pastor, Central Baptist Church

Rabbi Phyllis Berman, spiritual director, ALEPH Ordination Program

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Studies
Gayle Lacks
Dr. Herbert Levine
Rabbi Mordechai Liebling
Amy E. Mann
Ellen Massey
Mary Hale Meyer
Maya Nojehowicz
Hannah Prativa Spielberg
Genie Ravital
Carole Ribner
Susan Richards
Stan Shapiro
Moon Smith, Be the Change
Robert M. Smith, staff coordinator, Brandywine Peace Community
Stephen Strahs
Kelsey Woida