

**INTERVIEWS & PROFILES**

## The power players

How Black women in government and politics are getting it done.

By *SHERYL HUGGINS SALOMON* | NOVEMBER 30, 2020

As the nation its attention to the penultimate power move for a Black American woman – becoming vice president of the United States – let’s note that this triumph isn’t happening in a vacuum. Black women have long had a pivotal, yet overlooked, role in politics and government. They believed in women’s suffrage back when (white) women’s suffrage didn’t truly believe in them, as local voting rights activist Sarah Jane Smith Thompson Garnet did over 100 years ago. They believed that a Black woman belonged behind the Resolute Desk decades before one was elected a heartbeat away, as New York Rep. Shirley Chisholm did when she ran for president in 1972. They agitated, organized, ran and served, still breaking barriers long after it seems reasonable that they have to.

Today, state Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins is second in the line of succession to the governorship. State Attorney General Letitia James is two steps behind her, and making national headlines. Mayor Lovely Warren runs Rochester, the state’s third-largest city, while the list of Black women vying to lead its largest city grows.

In this special collaboration with The New York Amsterdam News, we’re speaking to Black women who hold – and have held – leading roles in state government and politics, to hear what drives them despite the challenges they face and to learn how they navigate the corridors of power.

- Sheryl Huggins Salomon, Guest Editor

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**Jennifer Jones Austin, CEO, FPWA;  
Chair, New York City Board of Correction**



*Jennifer Jones Austin ( Delphine Diallo )*

- Throughout my career some white men with power have attempted to minimize, and even silence, my voice. Having been raised by a prominent Black man who was in full command of his power and who taught his daughters to own their voice and power, and by a Black woman who defied dominating men – white and Black – I’ve sometimes wondered if white men have been perplexed by me and my audacity to believe my voice matters as much as theirs.

- My ever-maturing approach to navigating these sometimes turbulent waters is to first stay true to my voice, then deal head on with issues, expressing emotions only inasmuch as they are tied to the issues themselves – and seek and achieve common ground wherever possible.
- As a deputy commissioner in a city agency I was told by the commissioner to not ask questions and seek clarification on key issues and decisions, but rather just do as I was told. Couldn't do it. Won't do it. Asking questions and seeking clarification is constructive and ensures mutual understanding, which is especially critical when working on matters affecting the safety and well-being of thousands of people.
- The refueled and reinvigorated racial crisis in America has provided yet another platform for my work to dismantle poverty-perpetuating policies and practices. Poverty, race, gender and justice involvement have been inextricably linked in our society for 400-plus years, but it hasn't always been political or strategic to speak directly and unapologetically to these intersectionalities when advocating for changes in law and policy, and funding. With race matters on the minds of many, my organization is seizing the moment and audaciously confronting and engaging in solutions-building with the numerous sectors that have long contributed to racism and bias in every pillar of our society.
- I have long experienced and continue to experience bias as a woman of color from white men, white women, and even from Black men and Black women. For example, I've had white staff who reported to me openly express surprise about my analytical, strategic and problem-solving skills. I've had Black men who reported to me challenge and defy my decisions. And I've had Black female staff actually follow the desires of men who also reported to me, all the while ignoring my directives.
- More than 20 years ago when working a full-time, demanding position in city government, I was asked by the agency leader to assume a second role, to actually perform full-time two challenging roles with no diminution in responsibility and with no additional pay. I hesitated and was ready to reject the offer of the second role because I wasn't being paid my worth, especially after the agency leader expressly stated that he couldn't even give me a standard 8% increase because he needed to keep the nearly \$100,000 he would be saving to give raises to others. I confided in one of my advisers who strongly suggested I take on the additional title and responsibilities because even if I wasn't getting paid, the experience would be rewarded in the long run. I did, and less than six months later I landed outside of the agency a bigger role and title with a significantly greater salary and benefits.
- Early in my career, I earned a seat at the decision-making table, but I quickly learned that the seat didn't always come with a voice that would be heard and listened to. There were several occasions when, as a senior leader in government, my thoughts and opinions were ignored, and decisions debated after the fact.

*Sheryl Huggins Salomon*

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