



**Honorable Illinois State Senator Senate Majority Leader, 4th Senate District Kimberly A. Lightford**



In January 2019, Kimberly A. Lightford made history when she became the first Black woman to serve as Illinois' Senate Majority Leader. This 104th General Assembly marks 27 years of her continued dedication to her career of championing her passion for education and youth development.

As the youngest person elected to the Illinois Senate in 1998, Lightford emerged as a leading voice in Illinois on education issues that increase access to an excellent education for every child in Illinois.

As the former Chair of the Senate Education Committee for 25 years as either a sitting member, Vice Chair, or Chair, Lightford passed notable education reform legislation recognized as a national model.

This legislation led to the establishment of stronger methods of evaluating teachers and tracking student progress. Lightford started the state's universal preschool for all program, established no-bullying zones on school playgrounds, and reformed disciplinary practices that were

disproportionately affecting at-risk and minority students in 2016.

In 2000, Leader Lightford ensured that students could have access to breakfast at school by requiring the State Board of Education to establish the school breakfast incentive program.

In 2001, Leader Lightford increased the MAP grant for full-time undergraduate students and for part-time undergraduate students, providing aid for underprivileged students. Leader Lightford also helped to re-enroll high school dropouts by establishing the Illinois Hope and Opportunity Pathways through Education Program in 2009.

In 2023, Leader Lightford passed legislation for to ensure every student in the state has access to full-day kindergarten, and implemented proposals brought forth by the Whole Child Task Force to make certain we continue to meet the need of a every child's development.

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan hailed the Senator's landmark education reform law, Senate Bill 7, as "a national model" which aimed at boosting student performance through accountability for schools, administrators, and teachers. The legislation, approved in 2011, was the most significant education reform in 30 years, with the hope to ensure every child in Illinois public schools has a quality teacher.

Leader Lightford also sponsored Senate Bill 100, which was created to address the issue of Black students being expelled disproportionately more than their peers. Effective 2016, the bill created a set of criteria that mandates that all other appropriate interventions have been exhausted and that out-of-school suspensions longer than three days, expulsions and disciplinary removals to alternative schools are reserved for situations when a student's presence is a safety threat or substantial disruption to the learning environment.

In 2017, a measure aimed at reducing teen suicide and the stigma of mental health issues was signed into law. Leader Lightford led the effort that requires social and emotional screenings for children as a part of their school entry examinations to promote life-altering early detection. And, after finding that cursive was becoming lost in younger generations, Leader Lightford brought back a requirement for students to receive cursive writing instruction in elementary school. Understanding the important role recreation centers play in communities, Leader Lightford

secured nearly \$3 million for the project, which was named the Lightford Recreation Center on Dec. 1, 2018, by the Maywood Park District upon its completion.

In 2021, Lightford spearheaded the first in the nation state-funded network, establishing the statewide Phillip Jackson Freedom Schools program.

In January 2026 prioritizing workers, Lightford passed her first piece of legislation in 1999 that provides worker protection and transitional assistance for persons targeted for layoff. Her support for minority businesses has also led to several legislative changes, starting with another 1999 proposal extending the date of the Business Enterprise Program for Minorities, Females, and Persons with Disabilities Act. Leader Lightford was the lead sponsor in passing legislation that established Illinois' Equal Pay Act in 2003. Leader Lightford strengthened the act in 2010 by allowing women who have been discriminated against more time to file an action against an employer, and in 2018, Lightford passed the African American Equal Pay Act to help combat the wage gap for African Americans. In 2005 and again in 2010, Leader Lightford fought to reform the Payday Loan industry and is responsible for raising the minimum wage in Illinois three times, including a 2019 measure that gradually increases it to \$15 per hour by 2025. In 2023, Leader Lightford sponsored legislation that will guarantee paid leave for all Illinois workers employed by businesses of any size.

Leader Lightford served as the Joint Chairman of the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus from January 2015 to January 2021. While serving as Joint Chairman, her vision created and she led the effort in crafting the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus' four-pillar agenda to rid Illinois of systemic racism. The passing of this historic legislation created a more equitable Illinois in; I. Criminal Justice Reform, Violence Reduction and Police Accountability, II. Education and Workforce Development (Lightford wants this pillar to indicate she carried this bill), III. Economic Access, Equity and Opportunity, and IV. Health Care and Human Services.

Leader Lightford passed HB2170, School Code Seal of Biliteracy, which created the Education and Workforce Development Pillar.” Leader Lightford continued to strengthen Black history in Illinois, by establishing June 19th as a state holiday for Juneteenth National Freedom Day in 2022 and by declaring February 28th as Black Women's History Day in 2023.

Since 1998, Leader Lightford has represented the 4th Senate District, which includes more than a dozen suburban communities in western Cook County and the Austin community area on Chicago's West Side.

Leader Lightford is committed to community pride. Lightford created the Uplift Our Future youth programs: the KAL Saturday University offers free supplemental services in reading, math, and writing for middle school students, an annual college fair, a back-to-school event, and mentoring for 8th-grade students. She also hosts an annual Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Hall of Fame Award Celebration, We Adore Our Women Breast Cancer Awareness, and We Love Our Men Prostate Awareness Events.

As a life-long resident of her district, Leader Lightford was born in Chicago, raised in Maywood, and resides in Westchester. She holds a bachelor's degree in public communications from Western Illinois University and a Master of Public Administration degree from the University of Illinois at Springfield.

She is a Hunt-Kean Leadership Fellow and Erikson Institute Fellow. She gained extensive management experience working at the Illinois Department of Central Management Services, the Illinois Department of Corrections, and the Illinois Secretary of State.

Leader Lightford serves on eight statewide Taskforce and Commissions dedicated to improving education, ending poverty and enhancing the quality of life for Illinois. During the 104th Illinois General Assembly,

Leader Lightford serves on the following committees as Chair of Assignments, Cannabis, End of Life Issues, and Special Issues, in addition to Education, Executive, Health and Human Services, and Higher Education.

Lightford is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and The Chicago Network. She has received numerous awards and serves as the Vice Chairman of The State Legislative Leaders Foundation and Loretto Hospital, and is on the Board of Directors for Proviso-Leyden Council for Community Action, Inc., The West Cook County Youth Club, and Sustaining Our World.

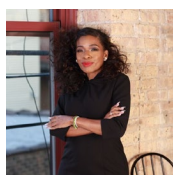
**Leslie Hardin, Community Engagement Director, Brooklyn, IL**

A graduate of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE), Leslie Hardin is a dedicated community activist and faith-driven leader from Brooklyn, IL, recognized for her unwavering commitment to fostering inclusive, vibrant, and resilient environments. Blending her professional expertise with local advocacy, she serves as the Community Engagement Coordinator for the Village of Brooklyn, IL, a role where she designs impactful outreach strategies, mobilizes diverse stakeholders, and builds strategic partnerships with local organizations and civic leaders. In this capacity, Leslie orchestrates community-driven campaigns to address local needs, ensuring the community has a clear voice in public planning and municipal policy.

Leslie's passion for civic engagement began early through being a part of neighborhood cleanups and outreach programs as a child. Today, she channels her creative and strategic talents as the CEO and Founder of Everything Beautiful - Marketing and Content Creation, where she has spearheaded high impact awareness campaigns for political figures and community events.

Leslie holds several vital leadership positions across the region and has been instrumental in campaigning for upgraded recreational facilities and safe public spaces in Brooklyn, firmly believing that well-maintained parks and neighborhood events cultivate community pride, promote healthy lifestyles, and offer transformative opportunities for local youth. Through mentorship and collaborative leadership, Leslie continuously works to empower the next generation, driven by the core philosophy that a community is strongest when its youth are actively engaged and uplifted.

### **Tiffany Hightower, Executive Director of the Illinois Black Caucus Foundation**



Tiffany D. Hightower is a seasoned public servant with over a decade of impactful service. Currently, Tiffany is the CEO of the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus Foundation, where in under 2 years she fortified and created a programmatic pipeline with an innovative vision; she has also increased new revenues tenfold. Tiffany has served as a consultant/political strategist for a democratic gubernatorial candidate and numerous other political candidates. Tiffany has served as the Director of Operations for the Treasurer of the City of Chicago (Overseeing a \$4.2-million-dollar budget and Human Resources). She was also the Executive Director for Developing Communities Project, Inc., where President Barack Obama was the first Executive Director. As the Executive Director for DCP, Inc.- She oversaw transportation orientated development, environmental equities, economic empowerment, violence prevention/public safety, youth leadership, and mortgage/ foreclosure advocacy. She has also served as a Deputy Director for Community Assistance Programs, focused on workforce development and corporate partnerships. Tiffany serves as President of the Board of Social Change, Member of the Board of Directors for the Salvation Army-Metropolitan Division serving as the 2022 Co-Chair for the Civic Luncheon (raising \$750,000), and Commissioner (Vice-President) for the 4th Medical District of Illinois in the Roseland neighborhood to name a few. She also was the 21st Central Region Director of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc., having overseen the programmatic, service, and social efforts for 13 states in the Midwest and 4 countries. Prior to that office she was the International Communication and Public Relations Officer which included but was not limited to, media relations, drafting press releases, and speech writing. She has also served on Congressman Danny Davis' Homelessness prevention task force and hosted the Russ Meek Speaks Show on CAN-TV. Previous work experience has also included being the Advocacy Programs Manager and certified domestic violence professional for a domestic violence organization on the west side of Chicago and surrounding suburbs (including Berwyn, Melrose Park, Oak Park, and etc.) Her work led to her also being a participant in the 2014: Cultivate

Women of Color Leadership Cycle funded by Chicago Foundation for Women, Crossroads Fund, Woods Fund, and Chicago Community Trust. In 2023, She was requested by the National Caucus of Black State Legislators to conduct a national training for elected officials and staff on how to build a Foundation Arm, work collaboratively, and create sustainable metrics to increase fundraising opportunities. Her work and passion for the further empowerment and success of young women and girls led her to be a co-founder of the #SheWoke Committee which led to the first ever creation of a Congressional Caucus on Black Women and Girls led by Congresswomen Robin Kelly, Yvette Clarke, and Bonnie Watson-Coleman in 2016. She was also a part of the 2018 IWIL (Illinois Women in Leadership) Class. Hightower has received a BA in Psychology from The University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, studied at Johns Hopkins-Bloomberg School of Public Health in their Summer Institute on Mental Health Research, UIC-School of Public Health, St. Xavier University focused on MBA Coursework, and received a Masters of Science in Organizational Leadership from Dominican University. Tiffany has also been featured in Rolling Out, Urban Arts, and a guest on the Michael Colyar morning show. Ms. Hightower is an outstanding orator, poet, and inspirational speaker. She has also authored articles for Oprah.com and Heart and Soul Magazine. She is also a member of the advisory council for I Speak Media and the 2022 Inaugural recipient for the BANboree Black Alumni of the Year, representing the University of Michigan Ann Arbor. She was honored to be acknowledged by Crain's Business Chicago as a 2022 Notable Black Leader and Executive and also by Rolling Out Magazine recipient of the 2022 Sistahs with Superpowers Award. In 2023, 2024 & 2025, she was chosen by the Society of Mannequins as one of the Top 10 dressed women in Chicago for her style, civic and professional achievements. She was also recently honored by Senate Majority Leader Kimberly A. Lightford as an Inaugural recipient of the 2023 Bad A\*\* Woman Award. Also, she has served as the Keynote Speaker for the Peoria, Illinois (2022), South Suburban Branch of Chicago (2023), and Alton Branch (2024) of the NAACP Freedom Fund Banquets. In December 2023, she organized a press conference and policy summit through her Executive Director role with the ILBCF featuring the National President of the NAACP, Ambassador Carol Mosely Braun, the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus, and more (this event was captured by Fox and NBC news). In June 2024, she was selected to be a recipient of the Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award. Most recently in 2025, she was bestowed an Honorary Doctorate in Humanities for her global work and leadership, named the Top 25 Nonprofit Leaders by The Chicago Defender, and

selected for the 2025 Edgar's Fellowship Cohort. In 2026, Tiffany became a PhD Student focusing on Global Leadership and Change. She received the Carson-Valdez Human and Civil Rights Awards which is named after one of the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. mentees from the Decatur Seven. Ms. Hightower was also honored by the Illinois Black Chamber of Commerce for her excellence in leadership with legislative, policy, and business engagement. And most recently, she was a featured panelist at the Power Rising Summit which featured numerous headliners including Former Vice President Kamala Harris, Minyon Moore, Donna Brazile, and more.

### **Kelly Evans, Vice President of Entrepreneurship and Economic Development**



Kelly is currently the Vice President of Entrepreneurship and Economic Development at the Chicago Urban League where she is responsible for setting the strategy and agenda for the business building and community impact efforts for small businesses. Understanding the intersection of small business and community economic development, Kelly also works with community and municipal leaders to determine business needs and assure that small businesses receive the support necessary to successfully integrate into the communities that they serve.

As the former National Director of Community Integration and National Director of Workforce Development for Cresco Labs, one of the country's largest, vertically integrated cannabis companies, Kelly was responsible for creating and implementing social equity and social justice initiatives, workforce development and educational programming on a national platform by creating partnerships with community organizations, local businesses and educational institutions throughout the country.

Prior to her work at Cresco Labs, Kelly was the Chief of Staff for former Illinois State Senator and "Cannabis Czar" Toi Hutchinson. There she was responsible for leading district programming, community engagement, and handling legislative community/business concerns.

As the former Director of Economic and Community Development for the Village of University Park, Kelly was responsible for working with various Fortune 500 companies, providing business development services for local businesses and providing marketing and public relations for local municipalities for business attraction and community engagement and was an integral participant in the Southland Economic Development leadership.

With a BA in English from Knox College, and an MS in Social Service Administration from the University of Chicago, Kelly commands an overwhelming understanding that the collaboration of community, education, business and government is imperative to ensuring the future of a globally competitive economy and is the intersection of true community engagement and ultimate change.

### **Matt Simpson, Vice President of Entrepreneurship and Economic Development**



Matt Simpson is a Rockford-based entrepreneur and development strategist with more than 16 years of experience in economic and community development. His career includes leadership roles with the City of Rockford, the Rockford Area Economic Development Council, and the Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity. He currently serves as Managing Partner of Eight Fifteen Impact and Co-Founder of Gretaira Coffee.

### **Carlton T. Meyers II, Esq. Vice President of Entrepreneurship and Economic Development**



Carlton T. Mayers, II, Esq. brings over 10 years of experience advocating for racial justice and criminal justice reform, which includes advancing policy reforms in more than 30 states and on Capitol Hill. Mayers directed the National Criminal Justice Reform program at the NAACP National Office. He also co-authored the NAACP report called “Born Suspect: Stop-And-Frisk Abuses & the Continued Fight to End Racial Profiling in America,” which was published in 2014 and provides the public with resources for ending racial profiling by state and local law enforcement.

Mayers also worked for NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. in Washington, D.C. as Policy Counsel for the Policing Reform Campaign. In this role, he supported advocacy efforts in Ferguson, Missouri, Baltimore, Maryland, North Charleston, South Carolina, New York City, and on Capitol Hill during President Obama’s Administration. Additionally, Mayers advocated for juvenile justice reform in Florida at the Southern Poverty Law Center and advanced reentry reform in Illinois as the Senior Policy Manager of Criminal Justice Reform at Heartland Alliance.

Currently, as the Founder, Owner, and CEO of Mayers Strategic Solutions, LLC, Mayers works with communities nationwide to reimagine public safety by using the Community Empowerment-Centered® Approach to identify, strategize, and implement long-term and positive change in practices, policies, and culture through the C.A.T. Method®, which stands for Community Empowerment, Accountability, and Transparency. He has also been published in the Chicago Tribune and featured on BBC News as a national expert on public safety and policing reform. Likewise, Mayers volunteers as the Criminal Justice Chair of the NAACP Chicago Westside Branch.

Mayers has his bachelor’s in science in neuroscience and behavioral biology with a minor in environmental studies from Emory University. And his juris doctorate and master’s in environmental law and policy from Vermont Law School.