



2526 SAINT PAUL STREET
BALTIMORE, MD 21218
TEL (410) 625-LGBT (5428)
FAX (410) 625-7423
www.freestate-justice.org

MEMORANDUM

Date: March 31, 2022

To: FreeState Justice Board of Directors

From: Charlotte Persephone Hoffman

Re: Major Issues Facing FreeState Justice

As today is my final day as a staffer at FreeState Justice, I felt it appropriate to memorialize my concerns about this organization in writing, along with a series of proposed changes to ensure the organization's vitality and relevance into the future.

I write this memo with a heavy heart, as I have genuinely appreciated my time at FreeState Justice and believe that we as an organization have done important work for LGBTQIA Marylanders during these past three years. However, I worry that without dramatic changes, the organization will continue its current drift.

Historically Poor Provision of Legal Services

When I joined FreeState Justice as a staff attorney in 2019, our pro bono legal services program had become centered almost entirely on name and gender change cases for transgender individuals. While it was inevitable that this would be the largest class of cases by absolute numbers, they had become existentially centric to the legal services program's raison d'être that the bulk of legal staff were spending 100% of their time on name and gender change matters, and nearly all pro bono placement and recruitment efforts were focused on these matters.

The inevitable result of this was that with legal staff and pro bono panelists focused entirely or almost entirely on name and gender change matters, it became difficult for us to on other cases affecting LGBTQIA Marylanders. Legal staff did not have sufficient expertise to handle other matters on a regular basis, including expungements, discrimination, healthcare-related matters, or routine family law issues. Worse, because our pro bono recruitment and training had focused so heavily on name and gender change matters, our panel lacked attorneys capable of handling many of these matters, and even when it did, our internal databases failed to reflect individual expertise.

To make matters worse, our prior Managing Attorney, Jennifer Kent, would routinely hoard non-name change matters for herself, denying other legal staff an opportunity to build up expertise or knowledge over time. When Ms. Kent left FreeState Justice in August 2019, she

transferred approximately a dozen cases to myself and fellow staff attorney Sandy James, most of which neither of us had ever heard anything at all.

Hyper-specialization in name and gender change matters would be a rational choice, but for the fact that legal staff and our pro bono panel routinely provided poor service that frequently took significantly longer than it would have taken clients to pursue name changes pro se. The intake process could in many cases be stretched over multiple months, as FreeState Justice awaited receipt of birth certificates, income affidavits, or other documentation from clients. Only after all documentation was received would we begin the process of placing clients with pro bono panelists—a process which could itself drag out for weeks, depending on how promptly pro bono counsel replied and completed paperwork, and was also subject to significant internal delays due to legal staff having to wear multiple hats (administrative, legal, and—especially during the legislative session—policy). And once a case had been placed with pro bono counsel, clients often had to wait once more, for the pro bono attorney to schedule a meeting with them, for the case to be filed, and finally for the court to issue a ruling. Clients were understandably frustrated by these extreme delays.

Instead of using internal legal staff to focus on contested legal matters or even to assist with more complicated name and gender change cases (e.g., cases involving minors or where a client was born in a state that required a specific form of legal order to update a birth certificate), internal legal resources were focused almost entirely on handling name and gender change cases that had been handled poorly—or not at all—by pro bono counsel. We routinely received complaints from clients that pro bono counsel was not responsive, had failed to file cases, etc. In some circumstances, clients would be placed with a second pro bono panelist, but in many situations the cases were instead brought in-house. As such, internal legal resources were focused on working on older cases that had been screwed up, rather than providing timely, competent legal services.

And yet, throughout this entire period, FreeState Justice claimed that it was focused on providing comprehensive legal services for LGBTQ Marylanders for legal matters relating to their sexual orientation or gender identity. The organization at times would take on staff or apply for grant funding with the intention of expanding offerings in other practice areas, but inevitably staff time would be shifted towards name and gender change matters “in order to catch up.”

Finally, the lack of a paralegal or dedicated legal assistant position meant that the attorneys on the legal team found themselves having to take on administrative tasks themselves. Tasks which could easily be handled by non-attorneys, such as following up with clients about birth certificates or assigning pro bono cases to panelists, instead had to be handled by attorneys being paid attorney salaries. This system was grossly inefficient, and further contributed to the inability of legal staff to focus on substantive cases.

When I begrudgingly took over as Legal Director in February 2020, I drafted a plan for rebuilding our legal team, where each member of the legal staff would develop expertise in an area of the law and where administrative tasks related to pro bono management would be transferred away from attorneys and onto a paralegal position. Unfortunately, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became impossible to implement the plan for a variety of reasons. First, while legal staff had advocated for the hiring of a dedicated full-time paralegal/pro bono coordinator after the departure of FSJ's administrative assistant, Sam Kishiyama, concerns about funding meant that we were initially unable to hire a replacement for Sam at all. Without a dedicated paralegal—or even an administrative assistant for the broader organization—legal staff continued to have to shoulder administrative tasks. Second, during the summer of 2020, I was given an instruction from FSJ's executive director Jeremy LaMaster to put the practice area development plan on hold so that legal staff could focus on working through the backlog of cases. Finally, the circumstances of the pandemic affect legal staff in a number of personal ways, making me reticent to push staff too hard while working remotely. Unfortunately, FreeState Justice has not returned to regular in-office work to this day.

The above is not to minimize my own culpability in the mediocrity of FreeState Justice's legal services. I stepped into the role of Legal Director with limited expertise outside of the name and gender change realm, meaning I could not myself make up for the lack of expertise elsewhere on my team. In addition, as the months passed and I dealt with a variety of management-related issues that regularly left me feeling as if I was not the person ultimately in charge of the legal services program (see below), I sunk into a fairly deep depression during the spring and summer of 2021, which no doubt made me entirely ineffective as a legal director. My goal had always been to leave FreeState Justice's legal services program in a better position than it was in when I inherited it, and I fear that I ultimately failed at this goal. That said, I do believe circumstances conspired against me to make success nearly impossible under the circumstances, especially considering the fundamentally broken nature of what I inherited, the lack of resources needed to fix the status quo, and the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations:

I have four primary recommendations for rebuilding FreeState Justice's legal services program.

First, I recommend siloing our name and gender change practice into a Name and Gender Change Project, to be supported by a dedicated staff attorney and a paralegal. The Name and Gender Change Project should refocus work away from pro bono representation—which, as discussed above, often results in extensive delays in the process—and instead towards providing clients with resources necessary to represent themselves pro se in most cases. This is a model used by many other organizations, including Whitman-Walker in DC. Plus, with the repeal of the publication requirement and the availability of administrative gender change

options, there is little need for full legal representation in the vast majority of cases. Siloing name and gender change matters will also free up time and resources of other legal staff to focus on other types of litigation.

Second, I recommend reconsidering FreeState’s broad promise of representing LGBTQ Marylanders on legal matters arising out of their sexual orientation or gender identity—an extremely broad swath covering a half dozen or more different legal practice areas—and instead refocus the legal services program on identifiable/named projects, each of which is supported by an attorney with subject matter expertise. We have failed to represent all queer Marylanders on all queer legal matters; it is time to be realistic about what we can actually provide.

Third, I recommend refocusing the pro bono panel away from name and gender change matters and towards substantive representation in contested legal matters. Assigning uncontested matters to non-specialist pro bono counsel results primarily in delays. Meanwhile, we routinely receive requests for cases requiring specialist knowledge, especially family law or conditions of confinement. While contested cases requiring specialist knowledge are of course more difficult to place than name and gender change cases, our efficacy as an organization cannot wholly be judged by numbers—especially when those numbers ultimately reflect clients who were poorly served.

Finally, I reiterate the need for legal services-specific support staff, whether in the form of a paralegal, non-attorney pro bono coordinator, or legal assistant. This would allow attorneys on staff to focus efforts on legal, rather than administrative, matters, and would more efficiently and responsibly use FreeState Justice’s limited monetary resources.

Poor Reputation

Unfortunately, FreeState Justice maintains an exceptionally poor reputation statewide, especially among the transgender community and communities of color. While this is in large part a result of our poor history in the provision of legal services, several other factors have played a key role here, including the historical centering of white cis policy issues (something we have worked hard to remedy in recent years), the organization’s focus on Baltimore at the expense of the rest of the state, and the feeling that the organization (and especially its leadership) is not representative of the broader LGBTQIA community.

While FreeState Justice has significantly improved in its focus on transgender and intersectional issues in recent years, we continue to suffer from the perception build over years that we are fundamentally a mainstream queer organization centering the interests of white cis gays and lesbians. Much of this reputation was inherited from Equality Maryland, which was seen to fight hard for marriage equality, and then disappeared for the fight for trans rights. While the reality is far more complicated—decreased funding after

the marriage equality win made the organization fundamentally unsustainable, leading to the merger with the FreeState Legal Project—the perception remains. Indeed, FreeState Justice is often viewed with suspicion by transgender Marylanders and queer Marylanders of color, who worry they will be sold out during back-room compromises. While I and others at FreeState have worked hard over the past several years to remedy this this historical bias, we still have far to go, especially in repairing our reputation.

Second, there is a strong perception, especially in Montgomery County, that FreeState Justice is fundamentally a Baltimore organization claiming the mantel of statewide legitimacy. Historically, we have taken very few cases from outside of the Baltimore region and often have difficulty finding pro bono placement for the cases we do take. In the DMV, Whitman-Walker and Trans Maryland are far more relevant to the lives of most LGBTQIA individuals than is FreeState Justice. While we have strong connections with the Montgomery County legislative delegation, our on-the-ground efforts in Montgomery County and Prince George’s County are nearly non-existent. To repair our reputation, especially in the DMV, we will need to be present in a way we have not in the recent past.

Finally, there is a strong perception that FreeState Justice’s staff—and especially leadership—do not reflect the state’s LGBTQIA community. There was predictable outrage among parts of the community when FreeState Justice announced the appointment of Jeremy LaMaster as Executive Director, as he was incorrectly perceived to be the latest in a line of cis gay men in the role. Although staff members had suggested that the Board be prepared for this sort of response and should coordinate a pro-active public relations campaign to emphasize why LaMaster was the best person for the job and how his vision of the organization would take it forward into the future, this was not done. Instead, the predicted blowback occurred, with predictable results.

While the organization has made significant efforts to hire transgender individuals and people of color in key roles, there is an ongoing perception that the organization minimizes the voices and roles of non-white, non-cis, and non-male staff. High turnover exacerbates this perception, under a belief that “where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”

Recommendations:

FreeState Justice needs to engage in a statewide outreach effort, focused not only on the DMV, but also Western Maryland and the Eastern Shore, in which we rebuild relationships with community organizations. This outreach must go both ways—not merely asking local organizations how they can help up, but asking how we can help them. This effort has already begun under programs director Tina Jones, but needs to be expanded.

As discussed below, FreeState Justice needs to take issues of retention and employee satisfaction seriously, as it is hard to combat the sense that the organization has fundamentally changed when trans staff and staff of color routinely leave the organization within two years or less.

Employee Retention Due to Mismanagement

Employee retention has been a longstanding issue for FreeState Justice. At 34 months of tenure, I am currently the most senior staff member at FSJ. During this less than three year period, I have seen all over staff positions in the organization turn over. Multiple employees have come and gone since I began, and at least one additional employee has already given notice at the time of this writing. While some turnover is to be expected, FreeState Justice has a history of paying poorly, treating staff badly, and providing few opportunities for career advancement. None of this turnover was inevitable and none of it should be attributed to broader macroeconomic factors (e.g., the “great resignation”), as the problem has existed for years and issues cited by departing staff have focused primarily on poor management, rather than better opportunities elsewhere.

Historically, the legal services team was hit hardest by turnover, something I worked to change upon taking on the role of legal director. When I joined FreeState Justice in June 2019, I was one of four attorneys on staff, including managing attorney Jennifer Kent, staff attorney Sandy James, and legal fellow Chrysanthemum Desir. I was hired in the role of staff attorney/pro bono coordinator, to fill the vacancy left several months prior by Laura McMahan, who had left FreeState due to poor treatment by Ms. Kent and lack of any prospects for advancement. By the time of my start date, Mx. Desir had also provided notice that they would not be seeking to renew their fellowship with FreeState Justice, again citing personal conflict with and racist conduct by Ms. Kent.

Within several weeks of starting at FreeState, staff was informed that Ms. Kent would be leaving the organization, effective early August 2019. Over the next six weeks, Ms. Kent visited the office roughly one day a week and spoke to no one on staff except for me, her newest hire, who she was at that time trying to maneuver to take over her position when she left. Ms. Kent’s initial transition plan included transferring the bulk of her responsibilities and cases to me, which would have had the effect of promoting me to acting managing attorney over Mr. James, a black trans man who had seniority over me within the organization. Fortunately, then-executive director Mark Procopio recognized the issues with this plan (after they were pointed out to him), and Ms. Kent’s responsibilities were instead split evenly between Mr. James and myself.

Unfortunately, Mr. James would himself depart FreeState Justice in early December 2019, citing historically poor treatment and racial discrimination under Ms. Kent, lack of professional development opportunities, and a bait-and-switch that had occurred in his hiring process, where he was told he would take on contested litigation, but was instead assigned entirely name and gender change matters once he began working.

Thus, within six months of starting at FreeState Justice, I found myself as the sole attorney on staff, shouldering the increasingly difficult burden of four attorneys’ caseloads.

As the process of hiring a new managing attorney dragged on for multiple months, Mr. Procopio recognized the untenable position I was in, and in December 2019 or January

2020 volunteered that the organization would be extending me “hazard pay” to compensate me for the situation, as well as granting me the title of interim legal director until the position was filled. At the beginning of February, I was sent a memo putting this into writing for the first time, at which point I learned that my “hazard pay” was a salary bump from \$65,000 per annum to \$66,000 per annum—a mere 1.5% salary bump that after taxes would amount to less than \$40 per paycheck. Before I could speak to Mr. Procopio about the matter, he sent me a second memo, offering me the position of legal director at \$70,000 per annum, a salary less than that paid to Ms. Kent at the time of her departure.

Over the next two months, two new staff attorneys were hired, both at a salary \$10,000 per annum lower than their predecessors. In both cases, their lower salaries were attributed to them having less legal experience than Mr. James or myself.

At about the same time that I agreed to be elevated to legal director, Mr. Procopio announced that he was stepping down in June 2020, at the end of the fiscal year. At roughly the same time, our case manager, Ezra Halstead, was promoted to director of education and outreach. While I am not privy to all of the circumstances relating to Mx. Halstead’s promotion, my understanding at the time was that it was an intentional effort to retain through the transition period a good employee who was otherwise at risk of leaving the organization. The effort worked, and Mx. Halstead remained at FreeState Justice for approximately another 14 months before ultimately leaving due to broader mismanagement of the organization.

While FreeState Justice has always had issues with proper management, Mr. Procopio’s high level of organization had helped to make up for the deficiencies of other members of staff during his tenure as executive director. Unfortunately, his successor, Jeremy LaMaster, was not up to the task of managing a small organization without extensive support staff.

While Mr. LaMaster had received the unanimous approval of FreeState’s then-staff directors (myself, Mx. Halstead, and development director Eli Washington) at the time of hiring, it quickly became clear that his skills managing a project within a large institution the size of Johns Hopkins were not what was needed to run a small nonprofit that did not have a separate HR department, administrative support staff, etc. This is not a castigation of Mr. LaMaster, as I have at all times seen in him weaknesses that I also see in myself. But, where I had self-knowledge to not apply for the executive director position when it became available, Mr. LaMaster not only did so, but also failed to be honest with staff and the board about the situation he found himself in once it was clear he needed additional support.

Throughout the fall of 2020, Mr. LaMaster introduced a staggering number of new technological solutions and economic models designed to help the organization become more effective. While each may in isolation have been helpful, the aggregate effect was a feeling among staff that new solutions were being introduced before any could be fully implemented. Ultimately, the leadership team drew the conclusion that Mr. LaMaster was

seeking a silver bullet to solve the organization's issues quickly, rather than deal with the difficult work of restructuring the organization from the ground up.

Due to my role within the organization, other staff members would regularly come to me to talk about their issues with particular proposals, with the expectation that I would raise the issues with Mr. LaMaster. Unfortunately, doing so led to a perception by Mr. LaMaster that I was an enemy. Soon after, he began cancelling meetings with me, as well as scheduling meetings with legal staff to which I was not invited. When I discussed these issues with him, I was assured that meetings with legal staff without me would no longer happen, but in actuality they were continued through my entire tenure as legal director.

As a result of poor management, both Mx. Halstead and Mr. Washington began pursuing employment opportunities elsewhere, with both giving notice in a period of about two months in the spring of 2021. Both Mx. Halstead and Mr. Washington raised issues with mismanagement at the time of their exit interviews. Despite my own efforts to reach out to the board for discussions during the time period, no representative of the FreeState Justice board ever spoke with me about my experience with regards to Mr. LaMaster until after the February 10, 2022 board meeting.

On the day that Mx. Halstead gave notice, I spoke candidly with Mr. LaMaster, noting that it felt as if we were in a sinking ship that staff was desperately trying to use buckets to keep afloat, while he was in the cabin installing new navigation software. His response to this was "That's fair." I further encouraged Mr. LaMaster to consider whether he was genuinely the person FreeState Justice needed at this point in time. He said he would do so. Several days later, he informed me that upon considering the matter, he was more certain than ever that he was the person FreeState needed.

With it obvious that Mr. LaMaster did not intend to leave the organization of his own free will and without any sign of action by the board, I began looking into alternative positions at other organizations. I quickly realized, however, that were I to ramp up my own job search in the fall of 2021, it would likely mean I would end up leaving the organization either immediately prior to or following the beginning of the 2022 legislative session. Given my concerns that my last minute departure would significantly weaken FreeState's ability to get its legislative agenda passed, I instead spoke candidly with Mr. LaMaster in early September 2021, stating that it was clear that it was time for me to start looking for something else, but that I did not want to abandon the organization at the start of legislative session. Instead, I proposed that I take the lead on FreeState's policy agenda through legislative session, then begin my search for a new position, with the understanding that I would leave FreeState no later than the end of the fiscal year, aka June 30, 2022. I also offered that Mr. LaMaster could begin the process of hiring a new legal director while I was still on staff, ensuring continuity and avoiding the same extended period without leadership for the legal services team that I had seen in 2019. At the time, Mr. LaMaster happily agreed, noting that he had been afraid I was going to provide notice

myself. He agreed to all of my suggestions, including shifting me into the role of policy director once a new legal director was hired.

Once I was in the role, however, it became clear that Mr. LaMaster did not actually intend for me to act as policy director in reality. Instead, Mr. LaMaster retained a policy coordinator, who nominally reported to me, but who was routinely given assignments directly by Mr. LaMaster, including oversight of policy interns. Once again, I requested that Mr. LaMaster please allow me to manage my department myself and was once again given assurances that inappropriate conduct would cease, but as before, Mr. LaMaster continued holding one-on-one meetings with the policy coordinator without my presence or knowledge, delegated projects directly to the policy coordinator, and transferred policy interns to report to the policy coordinator rather than to me.

Over the subsequent months, Mr. LaMaster would also regularly intervene in policy priorities identified as under my aegis, including having conversations with legislators and legislative staff that were not relayed to me (but were relayed to the policy coordinator) and intervening in decisions regarding which staff members (including myself) would testify on bills. In one instance, a key legislative priority (HIV decriminalization) was dropped by the sponsoring legislator the day before the scheduled committee hearing as a result of this interference.

On February 8, 2022, shortly after raising concerns about the discriminatory treatment of a fellow employee (see below), I was informed that my last day would be March 31, and that any subsequent work would be on a contract basis. During this conversation, which lasted a mere five minutes (the entirety of which Mr. LaMaster conducted while driving), I suggested that a March 31 departure date was inappropriate, as the legislative session continues through April 11, and that I had hoped to use the weeks following to help transition relationships and policy priorities for our policy coordinator. At that time, Mr. LaMaster stated he would “look into” whether he could make that work. He did not raise the matter again for a full month, leaving me uncertain as to whether my position would be ending prior to our original arrangement.

Mr. LaMaster’s mismanagement extends well beyond myself and the leadership team at the time he assumed office. Numerous employees hired over the past two years have come to me to express concerns regarding his management, citing concerns from discriminatory pay structures and broken promises about advancement, inappropriate delegation of personal tasks, providing little or no instruction or oversight of delegated tasks, and even inappropriately using the legitimacy of a minority-led organization as a front for grant applications where the majority of funding would go directly to FreeState Justice.

Recently, FreeState Justice’s new legal director, Phillip Westry, raised concerns regarding an institutional issue with responding to emails or other requests in a prompt manner. I immediately offered that this has historically been an issue at FreeState, that I and Mr. LaMaster are no doubt the biggest offenders, and that it is an area where our institutional

culture needs to change. Mr. LaMaster initially stated that he agreed, but then argued that exceptions were necessary for individuals in upper management, tacitly adopting a “do as I say, not as I do” policy.

Recommendations:

FreeState Justice needs to take decisive action to address this ongoing mismanagement. Given the facts that 1) Mr. LaMaster has lost the confidence of FreeState Justice staff and 2) prior steps taken by the Board of Directors to improve Mr. LaMaster’s management skills have proven unsuccessful, swift and decisive action is needed. I recommend dismissing Mr. LaMaster for cause and immediately launching a search for a new executive director.

(To alleviate all doubts: I will not now or in the future apply for the executive director role at FreeState Justice. While in the past I could see a future in which I stayed at FreeState for many years and eventually worked up to that role, any possibility of that is now past.)

Hiring Decisions

When I began at FreeState Justice in 2019, the organization had developed an equitable hiring framework designed to ensure that candidates were drawn from a broad, diverse base, rather than from people we already knew. While we did not always conform to this policy 100% (for instance, our former administrative assistant Mr. Kishiyama was initially hired on a contract basis after cold emailing us about a potential position, and his position was not later posted publicly when it was made permanent), the policy was followed in most circumstances, including hiring of interns.

This has not been the case for the past two years. Instead, individuals are routinely hired on a contract basis without a position being posted, job descriptions are drafted with “target candidates” in mind, contract staff are promoted to full staff without ever going through a formal interview process, and in at least one circumstance a director-level position was filled over the weekend over the objection of staff members who had participated in the interview process. In virtually all cases, these decisions are made solely by Mr. LaMaster without consultation with other members of staff. In many circumstances, staff have not been clear on precisely who is on staff, who is a contractor, and who is an unpaid intern. Org charts, to the extent they exist at all, are often equally unclear on this front.

This was a decided shift from prior practice, where the executive director had discussed all potential hires with staff members in advance, staff had a chance to consult on position descriptions, and hiring decisions were made collectively after interviews with multiple members of staff.

The turning point was the hiring of replacement for Mr. Kishiyama in the winter/spring of 2021. Given Mr. Kishiyama's training as a paralegal, I had argued that it was appropriate to replace him with a full-time paralegal who could help support the legal services team. Initially Mr. LaMaster tentatively agreed, and asked me to draft a position description for a paralegal. After doing so, however, he revised the position description to instead be an administrative assistant reporting to the director of education and outreach. While Mr. LaMaster's argument that we needed an administrative assistant was persuasive, I continued to make the case for also hiring a paralegal, noting that the legal team's salaries were over \$20,000 less than they had been in 2019, as all legal staff were being paid less than our predecessors in the roles, with the two staff attorneys each being paid \$10,000 less per annum than either myself or Mr. James in the same roles. This request was also denied. Despite my efforts to recuse myself from the decision, I was ultimately required in a meeting with other directors to state that I affirmatively agreed with the decision to hire an administrative assistant rather than a paralegal, an action that was clearly designed to demonstrate superiority over me. Following this incident, I was never again consulted on job descriptions, including for positions where I had a specific knowledge or interest, including the posting for my successor as legal director. To my knowledge, this was the point at which Mr. LaMaster also stopped consulting with other staff regarding job postings.

Finally, in several circumstances, individuals were hired in staff positions with the tacit understanding that they would later be promoted to director-level positions, only for these promises to later be rescinded. In at least one circumstance, this has led to the staffer leaving FreeState Justice.

Recommendations:

FreeState Justice needs to develop a clear, articulated hiring policy that covers how job descriptions are drafted, how they are shared, and how candidates are evaluated. The policy should articulate what is to happen when interviewers disagree on hiring decisions, what candidates are told about potential for advancement within the organization, and how salary bands are determined for positions. The policy should also specify how contract and intern positions are to be hired, with a focus on ensuring equitable hiring decisions regardless of the position level.

Board Disengagement

Board engagement is something that many nonprofits struggle with. That said, over the past two years, it has often felt like FreeState Justice's board has become entirely disengaged from the reality of the organization. Perhaps most disappointing has been the way in which the board has seemed to ignore significant concerns raised about the management of the organization beginning in early 2021.

When both Mx. Halstead and Mr. Washington gave notice within a period of about two months in 2021, I made an attempt to reach out to a member of the board with whom I had worked closely in the past so that I could discuss my own concerns regarding the state of the organization. I was repeatedly told that something would be scheduled with me, but it never was. Indeed, no one from the board of directors ever reached out to me about the state of the organization. Meanwhile, any actions that may have been taken behind the scenes in regards to Mr. LaMaster were done without the knowledge or consultation of staff.

Later, when I raised specific concerns about the discriminatory treatment of a fellow employee, I was informed the board would contact me in the near future to discuss the details of my complaint. To this day, this has not happened, nor did anyone from the board at any time reach out to the employee in question to discuss their treatment.

Finally, when I communicated concerns to members of the board that I was being constructively terminated—and that the termination was a result of bringing a credible allegation of discrimination involving another employee—I received complete and total radio silence from board members. Whether this silence was a result of board disengagement or a gag order targeted at me, it reinforces the perception that the board simply does not care about the day to day (mis)management of FreeState Justice.

Recommendations:

The Board of Directors needs to develop and fully implement new policies regarding responding to allegations of mistreatment and discrimination, establish formal and informal channels for staff members to discuss significant concerns, and improve general communications so that individuals are not left weeks or months without a response.

I would also encourage all present members of the board who cannot promise to be fully engaged in board management to resign immediately.

Conclusion

FreeState Justice needs significant, substantial, and immediate reforms if it is to continue to serve the LGBTQIA community in Maryland. Present management has utterly failed and has lost the confidence of both staff and the community. It is time for the organization to clean itself up or to disband and allow funding to go to more deserving organizations.