

Karen French Testimony in Support of 21-0050R

The Walters Art Museum is one of the great attractions of Baltimore City and Maryland. I have been lucky enough to work there as a conservator for almost 28 years, in the third-oldest conservation lab in the country, world-renowned for its conservation treatments and technical research. I work alongside a group of talented and dedicated staff caring for the wonderful collections, and helping to present and interpret them.

During these almost 3 decades at the museum, I have seen many changes and reorganizations, and heard promises for other improvements. Personally, over this time I have been part of two “short-term” committees that met for several years each, attempting to facilitate changes within the museum structure; however, some things were slow to alter, and others never changed at all.

Recently the museum committed to a set of public goals to increase diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. These new goals included:

- building "a team culture that is based on clarity, inclusivity, and accountability"
- "a new compensation strategy that is understood by staff and promotes pay equity"
- "efforts to "diversify the staff and support diverse staff and perspectives"
- “Strengthening open and clear internal communication”
- “Creating clarity around the museum’s decisions and decision-making processes”

I, along with many of my co-workers, feel the most direct, inclusive, and transparent way to achieve these important goals is for the Walters to have a single union representing workers from across all departments in the museum, so we may work together identifying our priorities for collective bargaining with a representative and democratic process.

Walters staff are city workers at a quasi-city agency. We deserve the same guaranteed rights to collective bargaining as virtually all other city workers, and therefore urge the Baltimore city council to support the bill to amend the municipal code, correct the oversight that excluded us from this, and enable the Walters staff to move forward with a successful union election.

A wall-to-wall union will allow us to work together efficiently to achieve the museum's goals and should result in a stronger and better Walters Art Museum. Amending the municipal code to enable a union election through Baltimore City will signal that the city supports its workers and the arts, and should benefit the Walters, our families, and communities across the city and state.