



Testimony of Corrina Freedman, Political Director, Writers Guild of America, West

**Before the Joint Informational Hearing of Assembly Committees on Arts, Entertainment,
Sports, Tourism & Internet Media and Revenue and Taxation**

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Good afternoon. My name is Corrina Freedman and I'm the Political Director for the Writers Guild of America, West (WGAW), a labor union representing 8,000 members working in film, television and online video. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss California's expanded Film & Television Tax Credit Program ("Tax Credit"), which has been critical in attracting and retaining film and television production in California.

Los Angeles is the home of the entertainment industry and home to the majority of WGAW members who are employed in the film, television and online video markets. With such a high concentration of talent and resources in this city, local production is a driving force in the Los Angeles economy. In 2014 alone, the entertainment industry in Los Angeles County was responsible for 166,300 jobs and nearly \$17.9 billion in income.¹ The enactment of AB 1839 has leveled the national playing field by encouraging production to return to or remain in California, thereby combatting runaway production and generating local revenue. With generous tax incentive programs in competing states like Georgia, Maryland, Louisiana and New York, it was incumbent upon the California legislature to ensure that this state could continue to compete and maintain its role as the entertainment capital of this country.

California has the largest number of creative industry workers in the United States, with those in the entertainment industry topping the list.² Sustaining this industry are hundreds of thousands of middle class workers who are represented by the unions and guilds present here today. At a time when the overall unionization of the American workforce continues to decline and the federal government is threatening to further weaken the labor movement, the entertainment industry in California is a critical stronghold for the middle class. The entertainment industry locally has the

¹ Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation, *2015 Otis Report on the Creative Economy, California* (Otis College of Art and Design, February 2016), pp. 24,41, <http://www.otis.edu/otis-report-creative-economy>.

² *Id.* at 26.

highest rate of unionization of entertainment sectors elsewhere in the country.³ The Tax Credit Program helps ensure the creation and protection of these well-paying union jobs, both through shorter-term employment in feature films, and longer-term employment in television production, which can often span several seasons.

The Tax Credit applies specifically to “below the line” workers and has the intended effect of both creating jobs and keeping production local. While the credit does not apply to writers, and a majority of writing rooms remain in Los Angeles even when production occurs in other locales, it is advantageous to all involved to have the writing and production in the same city. For example, the award winning show *Veep* relocated from Maryland to California as a result of the Tax Credit Program and showrunner David Mandel has said that “the California film tax credit is and was a critical component of *Veep*’s ability to shoot in LA, and was instrumental in the show’s move back to California. The majority of our writers live in California with their families.” Kevin Falls, showrunner of the new Fox television series *Pitch*, a show about an African American, female baseball pitcher, explained that “there’s nothing like overseeing production on a lot as opposed to Skype calls and plane trips. Something always falls through the cracks when a show is shot out of town where the writers are based in LA, which can lead to an inferior product.” Several other writers have credited this tax credit with allowing production of television series to film in Los Angeles, including *Rebel*, a new television series from writer and director John Singleton.

We have some anecdotal evidence that the benefits of the Tax Credit extend to the ability to hire from a diverse pool of individuals. Falls explained that keeping production of *Pitch* in Los Angeles has contributed to the hiring of a more diverse staff as compared to in other locales, because in Los Angeles he has had “more access to diverse industry workers in all departments from writers to actors, from craft service to grip and electric.” Working locally has the added benefit of increased training opportunities for the writers on staff. Falls has noted that “at a time where we are trying to be more inclusive with our diversity hires and training them to matriculate up the chain of command, never has it been more important to expose them to how a show is run. It’s expensive to fly writers to sets in other cities and a lot of studios frown on spending the money to do it. By shooting out of town, all writers lose a valuable part of the learning process.”

The Tax Credit has had the intended effect of boosting the economy in Los Angeles, one of the most diverse cities in the country. The WGAW strongly supports the Tax Credit and we are also taking on the issue of diversity among storytellers with several of our own initiatives.

I’d like to share some of what we are doing to increase diversity in the hiring and retention of writers in the entertainment industry. The WGAW has a Diversity Department that oversees eight committees, including the American Indian Writers Committee, Asian-American Writers

³ Patrick Adler, Chris Tilly and Trevor Thomas, , *From ‘15 to \$15: The State of the Unions in California and its Key Cities in 2015*, (Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, University of California, Los Angeles, September 2015), p. 24, <http://www.irle.ucla.edu/publications/documents/SOU2015.pdf>.

Committee, Committee of Black Writers, Career Longevity Committee, Latino Writers Committee, LGBT Writers Committee, Women Writers Committee and the Writers with Disabilities Committee. These committees work with writers and collaborate with producers, studios and network executives to conduct programs and events with the goal of increasing employment opportunities and the availability of writing assignments for diverse writers.

Beyond individual projects of the eight diversity committees, the WGAW has institutional programs designed to increase opportunities for diverse writers at all stages of their careers, starting with the “Staff Writer Bootcamp.” Launched in 2014, the “Bootcamp” is a one day seminar designed to give first time Staff Writers, which is the entry level position for television writers, a crash course in the skills necessary for success. For diverse writers this course continues with a second day-long seminar titled “Hungry and Diverse,” which specifically brings ethnically diverse writers together to learn from panelists who share their stories about being a diverse writer and sustaining a writing career.

For mid-level writers the Guild launched the Feature Writer and TV Writer Access Projects. The Feature Writer Access Project, which began in 2012, seeks to identify outstanding diverse writers and makes their scripts available to entertainment industry decision-makers, including producers, studio executives, agents and managers to help raise their profile and generate potential employment. To date, the Feature Writer Access Project has recognized 24 writers. The TV Writer Access Project is a peer judging program designed to identify excellent diverse writers with television experience and to provide a resource for accessing their work to showrunners, industry executives, agents and managers. The TV Writer Access Project has recognized 110 writers since its inception in 2009.

For senior-level writer-producers, the Guild’s Showrunner Training Program conducted in partnership with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, is designed to train writers to be successful showrunners, and includes diversity in episodic television in the curriculum and invites representatives from the DGA and SAG-AFTRA to participate.

The Guild also has a Diversity Advisory Group that is headed by Shonda Rhimes and Glen Mazzara. This Group helps strategize on the Guild’s ongoing effort to enhance employment opportunities for diverse writers.

The WGAW also commissions a biannual “Hollywood Writers Report,” written by Dr. Darnell Hunt, Director of the Bunche Center at UCLA and Professor of Sociology and African American Studies. These reports examine employment and earnings trends for writers in Hollywood and specifically examine the state of minority, women and older writers who traditionally have been underemployed in the industry as compared to their male, white and younger counterparts. The 2016 Hollywood Writers Report revealed trends among women and minority writers that

employment rates have only modestly progressed and are far from reflecting the demographic realities of America.⁴

In addition to these efforts, the Guild advocates in Washington D.C. for legislative and regulatory policies that promote diverse and independent programming. Most notably, the Guild has been a strong supporter of the Federal Communications Commission's Open Internet rules because a free and open Internet allows writers to create diverse and independent content and deliver it directly to consumers. In 2014, the Guild brought WGAW member Issa Rae, creator of HBO's new series *Insecure* and *Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl*, to speak to FCC Commissioners and legislators about the role the Open Internet played in launching her career. After being rejected by traditional outlets, Rae gained recognition by releasing her series direct to consumers online, where she proved there was a large audience for her work and traditional networks took notice. Rae's HBO show *Insecure* is written primarily by diverse writers and reaches a broad, national audience. The Guild is now fighting to preserve the Open Internet, which is an essential tool to increase diversity in programming.

The Writers Guild of America, West is deeply invested in increasing diversity among writers, through its programs, collaborations and policy advocacy, knowing that there is a need and demand for diverse stories to be told, which can only come from a diversity of individual storytellers.

Thank you.

⁴ Darnell Hunt, *2016 Hollywood Writers Report: Renaissance in Reverse?*, Ralph J. (Bunche Center for African American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, March 2016), p. 14, http://www.wga.org/uploadedFiles/who_we_are/HWR16.pdf.