

New member joins Hawkins' administration

Gidigbi becomes second woman with Washington connections to become chief of staff

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer

Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. again has reached into the world of Washington to hire his new chief of staff.

Stephanie Gidigbi's hiring was announced by the mayor on Monday. It also capped a period which included the reassignment of former Chief of Staff Tahirah "Tai" Cooper.

Almost two weeks ago, the administration announced Cooper would move from the mayor's office to assisting Business Administrator John Mason as the city's deputy director of administration. The post was created after Mason wrote to Hawkins and asked for help with the department's duties with a shortage of workers due to layoffs and furloughs instituted by the city.

Like Cooper, Gidigbi comes with experience gained through a member of Congress: in this case, U.S. Rep Don ald Payne.

Hawkins said Gidigbi will be paid \$67,000 annually.

"She is a talented government professional who has demonstrated competence and leadership as a senior legislative assistant for Congressman Payne," said Hawkins. "Because she has previously worked on behalf Orange while on the staff of Congressman Payne, I have every confidence that she will hit the ground running."

Hawkins said Gidigbi's credentials are dwarfed by her experience. In the same way as Cooper, who worked for U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg before she came to Orange when Hawkins became mayor in July 2008, Hawkins said Gidigbi comes with great references. The mayor added he believed those past political ties could benefit the residents of Orange. "While working for the congressman, Stephanie was involved in a wide range of legislative issues, specialized in helping communities secure federal funding, represented the congressman at events and meetings, and organized policy briefings and conferences," said Hawkins. "This appointment is part of our ongoing reorganization process and necessary downsizing that will leave Orange with fewer employees than when I took office. Her expertise in securing federal grant money will be valuable, as we aggressively seek more federal and private sector funding."

Hawkins said Gidigbi will work with Mason and him to "direct policy development, municipal legislation, budget policy, strategic planning and research." He added she will serve as the liaison to the City Council and residents, as well as community and business organizations. It may be a critical role, in light of last year's executive decree that council members are not to deal directly with department directors.

Gidigbi said she believes she will be able to follow the challenges of her new job.

"Orange has a special place in my heart," said Gidigbi. "In my role with Congressman Payne, I helped bring federal dollars here, and I look forward to working with Mayor Hawkins, the City Council and community groups to build a more secure, economically strong and prosperous Orange."

Gidigbi earned a bachelor's degree in political science and communications, with a concentration in international and public relations, from Kean University in 2006. She followed this by earning a master's degree in communications from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in 2009.