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Printed from ChicagoBusiness.com

Has Chicago's moment to shine dimmed a bit more?

By Paul Merrion April 25, 2012

(Crain's) — One of the big payoffs for hosting the NATO summit in Chicago — a chance for the city to star on the international stage — won't be quite as stellar as once hoped.

Over 2,100 journalists applied for credentials by the April 13 deadline, according to a NATO spokesman. That's at the low end of expectations that between 2,000 and 2,500 journalists would show up.

It's not about filling hotels and restaurants during the summit, it's about filling airtime and column inches with stories about the city's appeal as a business center and tourism destination.

"There's not only 2,500 journalists coming to Chicago. They're all coming to do, what I think is most important for us as a city, because we are an international city," Mayor Rahm Emanuel reportedly said at a news conference in March. "Bringing the world to Chicago and Chicago to the world. That's a huge economic opportunity."

About 3,000 reporters covered the G20 summit in Pittsburgh in 2009, according to local tourism officials who tracked about 7,000 stories mentioning the city. For the G20 summit in Toronto two years ago, estimates range widely between 3,000 and 5,000 reporters.

And the NATO spokesman said there's no breakdown available on how many reporters seeking credentials to cover the Chicago NATO summit work for U.S. news outlets vs. foreign media.

"Mostly we're hearing, 'We don't know who's coming yet,'" said Thom Clark, president of Community Media Workshop, a Chicago nonprofit group that is working in conjunction with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs to target and call several hundred foreign news editors to promote stories about the city.

They have posted a website with story ideas and sources for visiting NATO reporters — chicagostories.org — but while it's getting more traffic than expected, Mr. Clark said most hits so far have come from computers in Chicago. The effort is funded by several local foundations and one individual, he added.

Chicago's NATO host committee recently invited reporters who requested credentials to have a "home-cooked meal" with Chicago families who have volunteered their hospitality during the summit.

Late requests for press credentials may be granted on a case-by-case basis, according to a NATO spokesman.

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