

Diverse Business Advisory Council in NJ Sets Its Sights on Improving State Contracting Opportunities

MARLBORO, NEW JERSEY, USA, August 11, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A diverse coalition of chambers of commerce and similar associations in New Jersey have come together for the primary purpose of holding the state accountable for improving procurement opportunities for New Jersey's minority, women, veteran, disabled veteran, and LGBTQ+ owned small businesses. Diverse Business Entities (XBE), have not gotten their fair share of contracts with the state of New Jersey.

This coalition, unsurprisingly named the NJ Diverse Business Advisory Council, sets itself apart from similar confederations by being composed of a genuinely wide range of organizations which encompasses something of the enormous diversity of the state. Its founding members are Carlos Medina, President of the Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey ([SHCCNJ](#)), Luis De La Hoz, Chairman of the Board of the SHCCNJ, John Harmon, Founder, President, and CEO of the African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey ([AACCNJ](#)), Colonel (Ret) Jeff Cantor, Founder & CEO of the New Jersey State Veterans Chamber of Commerce ([NJSVCC](#)), Robin Berg Tabakin, Esq., Public Policy Leader for the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners (NJAWBO), Indy Samra, Co-Chair of the Punjabi Chamber of Commerce (PCC), Priti Pandya-Patel, President of the Asian Indian Chamber(AIC), Terrence Clark, President & CEO of the NY & NJ Minority Supplier Development Council, Jessica Dahl, WBE Representative, and Steven Garibell, Executive Board Member, NJ LGBT Chamber of Commerce.

State contracting opportunities for XBEs have languished in recent years and the council wants this fixed. Despite the establishment of a chief diversity officer in 2018, along with several laws and regulations adopted to increase contracting opportunities, there has been little measurable progress.

In 2018, there was cause for optimism. Governor Phil Murphy had just appointed a chief diversity officer, Hester Agudosi, to the nascent Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and expressed a deep commitment toward addressing the struggles faced by the state's diverse populations, in education, in the government work force, and in state procurement opportunities for its diverse range of businesses. For state awarded contracts, existing laws establish a 25% set aside for properly registered small business enterprises (SBEs) and a 3% set aside for certified disabled veteran owned businesses (DVOBs). Very few contracts have been awarded to DVOBs under the

state set aside law, which was passed in 2015, and has been public law for six years. "The state does not even come close to 3% in their commitment to those who have fought for this country and bear the scars to prove it", said Colonel (Ret) Jeff Cantor, Founder & CEO of the NJSVCC.

A system was in place where businesses could certify as a SBE, a DVOB, a veteran owned business (VOB), and a minority or women owned business (M/WOB). They would then be listed on the New Jersey Selective Assistance Vendor Information (NJSAVI) portal to be more easily located by companies and agencies preferring to deal with diverse businesses. It seemed the stage was set for minority owned businesses to finally flourish in New Jersey, enabled and emboldened by a major increase in opportunities to contract directly with the state, as well as similar commitments by major businesses located in New Jersey. Unfortunately, that opportunity never appeared.

Despite repeated flourishes and positive gestures by state leadership, little has improved between 2018 and today. This is unacceptable to the council, which has a potential solution and is looking to meet with the Governor to discuss ways to move it forward.

Identifying the underlying cause of the lack of progress has been difficult. SHCCNJ President, Carlos Medina, believes that implicit bias has something to do with it. In 2019, he noted that marketing as a Hispanic-owned business caused potential clients to shift their body language. He said leaders in business and at the state level believe that a minority owned business cannot accomplish the task at hand, even if it has a long established and proven track record of doing so, that awarding a contract is a form of handout. NJSVCC CEO, Colonel (Ret) Jeff Cantor, points out that state competitive bidding opportunities have not been adequately adjusted to incorporate the 3% set aside for DVOBs into the process. State agencies uniformly give waivers to companies who have said they have done a "good faith effort" in trying to find qualified DVOBs to perform the work. "There have been numerous occasions where there has been a disabled veteran business willing, able & available to do the work, but the state ignored their pleas and waived the requirement for the 3% set aside for that group.

Whatever the underlying cause may be, or whether it is a complex interplay of many factors, with the council assembled, their next move is a call to action. "I would urge the Murphy Administration to study New York and emulate its successful efforts in awarding government contracts to diverse businesses," said John Harmon, Founder, President, and CEO of the African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey. "During the 2019-2020 fiscal year, New York agencies and public authorities awarded MWBE firms \$3.14 billion in contracts out of a total of \$10.6 billion for the year, according to the annual report filed by New York's Division of Minority and Women Business Development," he noted, "resulting in a 29.5% utilization rate." They are awaiting a reply from the governor to schedule a meeting where solutions can be discussed and where the state and the council can determine the best way forward. "We have a solution to this problem. We just need the Governor to put a command emphasis on fixing the problem", said Colonel (Ret) Jeff Cantor.

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