

Black Business Group Demands City And State Leaders Commit To Boosting Minority Contracts

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An influential Massachusetts black business council called on local elected officials Wednesday to use next week's Martin Luther King Jr. holiday to commit to significant expansion of contracts for minority businesses, in the wake of [reports by WGBH News](#) showing that contracting to minorities has declined statewide over the past two decades.

"Especially as we're coming up on Martin Luther King Day, I think all of us, especially in the black community, are used to the same statements that we hear every year," Segun Idowu, Executive Director of the Black Economic Council of Massachusetts told WGBH News. "Which is about how far we've come as a community, as a city, as a state, as a nation since the days of the civil rights movement. But as the WGBH report showed us, we actually have not come that far, and actually in many ways are going backward."

The group called on Gov. Charlie Baker, Senate President Karen Spilka, House Speaker Robert DeLeo and Mayor Marty Walsh to come to Boston's 50th annual Martin Luther King Jr. memorial breakfast on Monday with specific plans for expanding contracting opportunities for black businesses.

Among other things, the group is calling on both the city of Boston and the state to convert existing supplier diversity offices into free-standing entities with bigger budgets and direct enforcement and oversight of other city and state agencies. The statewide Office of Supplier Diversity used to be free-standing but was moved into the state's larger procurement agency during the administration of former Gov. Deval Patrick.

Since then, the agency's staff and funding has declined, though the head of the supplier diversity office told WGBH News they have managed to cull funding from other government offices to make up the shortage.

Political leaders "should be able to make an announcement five days from now, which should have been done 15 years ago, 20 years ago," Idowu said. "It doesn't take leaps and bounds to achieve the things that we've laid out. It really just takes a commitment and political courage on the part of all of those leaders that we mentioned, Governor Baker, President Spilka, Speaker DeLeo and Mayor Walsh."

BECMA said Boston should set and enforce goals for city agencies to ensure minority-owned business account for 7 percent, 14 percent and 20 percent of city contracts over the next three years. The city reported last year that its minority contracting totals were less than 5 percent.

In October, Walsh issued his second executive order in three years to press city agencies to do more to create business opportunities for minority contractors, but the order did not update numeric goals for minority participation in city contracts that were set out in his 2016 order.

The group also called for the expansion of a program [being piloted by the Massachusetts Port Authority](#) that requires developers on major projects to have a minority partner at the start of the bidding process, rather than simply promising to later hire minority subcontractors.

Idowu said executives like Walsh and Baker have the power and responsibility to implement systemic change in how minority-owned business are treated with regard to government contracts.

"The Office of Economic Development is under his [Walsh's] office. The ability to institute equity and diversity through capital projects is something that would come from Mayor Walsh's office," Idowu said. "The budget that's introduced comes from the mayor's office. ... [A]t the end of the day, it's the mayor that has to show the commitment and to have the courage and to hold his own staff accountable if they're not meeting his goals."

"So if the mayor is saying that he's committed to doing things like this, and if the governor is saying that he's committed to achieving equity in contracts, then that not only needs to be evident in the data, but it also needs to be proven."

WGBH News reached out to the officials mentioned in the BECMA statement though they did not immediately respond to requests for comment.