

# Editorial: Minority inclusion in public contracts helps level the playing field

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In rapid succession, the St. Louis Board of Aldermen and St. Louis County Council recently [approved legislation](#) establishing standards for minority participation in local government contracts. The bills' unanimous approval shows that elected officials understand they need to pay more than lip service to sharing the financial pie from government contracts.

Inclusion was a long time coming in both jurisdictions. The goal of eliminating discrimination in public contracts is a worthy one, even if the formulas the two boards concocted are awkward and potentially problematic.

Contracting practices that reward companies with experience tend overwhelmingly to favor white male contractors. Continuing those practices can only help stifle opportunities for financial advancement among women and minorities. The longer such practices go unaddressed, the harder it is to break the cycle of exclusion.

While these bills open the door, the hard work will be managing and enforcing the resulting quotas. Authorities struggled with earlier versions of minority-inclusion measures to make sure that primary contractors observed the requirements instead of using front companies with token minority ownership to circumvent the requirements.

Karlos Ramirez, president and CEO of the St. Louis Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, [argued](#) that the [city's measure](#) separating requirements by race and ethnicity extends segregation and could influence which minority groups participate.

The city's bill requires contractors to make a "good faith effort," depending on availability, to hire subcontractors whose ownership fulfills quotas of 21 percent African-American, 11 percent women, 2 percent Hispanic-American, 0.5 percent Asian-American and 0.5 percent Native American.

The sponsor, Alderman Jeffrey Boyd, 22nd Ward, said the percentages are based on a 2015 study that showed 74 percent of subcontracts between 2007 and 2012 went to white, male-owned companies. The breakdown reflects subcontractors that are certified as minority- or women-owned businesses and is not an attempt to pit minorities against each other, Boyd said, adding that the percentages are overall goals per project.

Mayoral executive orders, which did not carry the weight of law, were used in earlier efforts to push minority inclusion. Boyd said that under this bill, contractors will be monitored for compliance and penalized for not meeting goals.

St. Louis County's measure requires subcontractors on construction projects to include companies that are 24 percent minority owned and 9.5 percent women owned. Architecture and engineering projects require participation by businesses that are 16 percent minority owned and 15 percent women owned.

Like the city's measure, the percentages are based on a 2015 study that found too many contracts were being awarded to white, male-owned businesses. St. Louis County Executive Steve Stenger commissioned the study soon after his election.

Both bills give discounts to bids from eligible minority- or women-owned businesses and develop programs for the growth of such businesses.

Leveling the playing field will help pave the way for economic parity.

*Editor's note: This editorial has been edited to correct the elected position Stenger held when he commissioned the study.*