

Hoping to ensure diverse workforce, Obama Foundation appoints firm, hires a new staffer

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Months before they are set to break ground on the Obama Presidential Center, the Obama Foundation has appointed an agency and hired a staff member to ensure that the workers building the center are a reflection of the community it will sit in, officials said.

Ernest R. Sawyer Enterprises Inc., a firm owned by the brother of former Chicago Mayor Eugene Sawyer, will work as an outside watchdog to make sure the construction firm meets its diversity goals.

Meanwhile, Jacqueline Gomez, who was last with Cook County government, will work within the foundation as a point person to make sure that at least half of the subcontracts awarded on the project go to minority- or women-owned firms, and agencies owned by veterans, residents with disabilities or workers that identify as LGBTQ.

The announcement, the foundation said, is a reflection of its determination to have the center benefit a wide swath of residents of the South and West sides.

And although foundation officials said they long intended to have an oversight component to the project, the recent action gives activists and residents a way to hold the foundation accountable for local hiring.

“When you start getting hundreds of subcontractors, workers on the site, it’s important that someone is there literally tracking workers, talking to businesses that have subcontracts and making sure there is accuracy and transparency in the reporting,” said Michael Strautmanis, the foundation’s vice president for civic engagement.

“The diversity goals we have aren’t just on a piece of paper, they translate into jobs and business opportunities,” he said.

Activists who have been closely monitoring the development of the center have long pushed for a signed contract and city ordinance guaranteeing local residents jobs and other amenities. The foundation has refused to sign a community benefits agreement and instead issued a written list of promises, which included hiring from local neighborhoods.

The foundation wants most of the key roles and decision-making positions to go to women, people of color and other minorities. It also set goals to hire residents returning from prison and to have jobs for residents who live in troubled and struggling neighborhoods from across the city.

The project is expected to create about 5,000 jobs during construction and lead to about 2,500 permanent jobs.

By having diversity consultants on-site, the foundation is essentially creating a system to double-check that the hiring is on par with what it has promised. The contractor, Lakeside Alliance, can be financially penalized for not meeting the diversity goals, Strautmanis said.

The diversity consulting firm is expected to, among other tasks, be present on the site and issue frequent written reports on the jobs picture.

“We know we are seeking to do something ambitious,” Strautmanis said. “We have been told our goals around workforce and business opportunity are high. We know there are high expectations that the community has for the (former) President and for this project — it’s not business as usual.”

Foundation officials would not say how much the contract ERS has been awarded is worth. And while the foundation has been pressing for a diverse workforce during construction of the center, it has not released statistics on the current racial and gender makeup of the current staff.

ERS has provided similar diversity consulting work at other job sites, like the construction of parts of McCormick Place.

Mishaune Sawyer, a senior project manager with ERS, said the firm has a role as a watchdog. But they also work as partners to help the contractors get access to pools of applicants to consider hiring.

“If there are ideas that I have from past experiences, that my team has learned from other projects, best practices we’ve learned, we will chime in,” she said.

This recent move is just another step the foundation is taking toward actual construction.

Foundation officials want to break ground on the project by the end of the year. The entire project is expected to cost more than \$500 million.

In some ways, the foundation’s intentional hiring model highlights the patterns of inequities and job access and pay in Chicago.

According to the most recent figures available, the city’s unemployment rate was 10.9 percent in 2016.

But in the neighborhoods around the Jackson Park site where the Obama center is to be built, unemployment was nearly twice that number, an analysis of census data shows.

In Washington Park, the unemployment rate was 27.2 percent and in South Shore it was 21.4 percent. In Woodlawn, the rate was 18.7 percent.

“This is the long-lasting legacy and persistence of racial inequality,” said Matt Wilson, an economic development planner with the University of Illinois Great Cities Institute, which developed a map of unemployment figures by neighborhood. “It is so embedded within society. When you look from the bottom up — educational access and provision of resources — you see the stark inequality in segregated areas.”

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