

More To Come In WGBH Investigation Into State's Lack Of Minority Contracts

By Paul Singer and Arun Rath
January 15, 2020 All Things Considered
wgbh.com

This week, WGBH's New England Center for Investigative Reporting launched a new series, [The Color of Public Money](#), about the racial disparities in public contracting in Massachusetts. Paul Singer, editor for NECIR, spoke with WGBH All Things Considered anchor Arun Rath Wednesday about the first two parts of the series and what's coming next. This transcript has been edited for clarity.

Arun Rath: To start off, could you give us a recap on what we heard in the first two parts of the series?

Paul Singer: Part one was simply the dearth of public contracts going to minority businesses in the state of Massachusetts, in both state and local contracting. The data uncovered by Chris Burrell, my colleague, who is a reporter also working on this, show the total annual value of contracts to minority businesses dropped by about 25 percent over the past two decades.

And this was the thing that we found sort of fascinating — never mind that minority contractors aren't getting a lot of contract dollars. I think that was not all that revelatory. But the fact that it was decreasing — it's \$135-million dollars less per year than it was 20 years ago — that's stunning to us.

Rath: For an issue that's going back over that amount of time, this many years, how did you get a sense that there was a story there?

Singer: It started with my own ignorance. I mean, really, this was one of those things where I had just moved to Massachusetts, I didn't know anything about Massachusetts. I got here two years ago from Washington, D.C., and so I decided to go look for where the government posts its public records. And I found the Massachusetts Central Register. It has all the regulatory announcements of the state agencies and it also has the announcements of contracts that are available. But it turns out that it was behind a paywall.

Rath: Online, you had to be a subscriber or pay money.

Singer: You had to be subscriber, which I found stunning. Like, this is government information, what you mean it's behind a paywall?

So I signed up, and I thought it should be more publicly available than it currently is, so I hired a bunch of students from Boston University, a bunch of computer science students, and they went through and they scraped all the data for me and we got all the contracts.

And what we ended up with was 13,000 contracts that have been awarded over a 10-year period. And we found that of those 13,000, about 250 had gone to minority contractors. And suddenly we thought, there's a story in there.

Rath: So when you found those big numbers in the sheer numbers, why didn't you just write that story from there?

Singer: Because it was clear to us there was more to it. The contract pile we had, the data was clearly very messy, we knew it was a limited universe of the contracts in the state. So we thought, let's figure out what's really going on, and it turned to be true. Chris started to take the lead digging into this, and every piece of data we got from the state or from various state databases showed the same thing. There's hundreds of millions of dollars in school construction funding, almost no minority participation. A report by city of Boston showing almost no minority participation in city contracts. Statewide studies going back two decades that showed the use of minority businesses declined. Every single layer of this onion we peeled away showed the same result: minorities were not being included.

Rath: I think as you said at the outset, what's surprising here is maybe not so much the low number of contracts, but that it's been going down. It kind of goes against what might be our public perception of how the state has been operating in recent years. Have you had any response from state, local, any kind of authorities to these findings?

Singer: We've had some. First of all, keep in mind there are several different state entities involved in this, which is one of the reasons why we're getting the results we're getting. In part two of our series, we actually wrote about MassPort, the local port authority, that is doing some things that are really improving minority participation. So, to some degree, the state was saying, oh, look, we're working on projects. There is also some pushback from the state saying, 'oh, well, you are not paying attention to where we have succeeded. You're not paying attention to the growth, for instance, in state agencies' own budgets' — some of that is going to minority contractors. And they're saying that we underestimated some of that stuff and ignored it. And we've also heard some interesting response, I'd say, from the state, that there are actions going on that we don't know about or don't yet know about or are not yet public, that maybe will indicate they are more aggressive than we think they are. It's really hard when someone says to you, yeah, but we're doing stuff you don't know and you didn't give us credit for it.

It's like, yeah, fair enough.

Rath: Hard to respond to that. So in terms of what you can talk about, I have to think that there's more there in this massive pile of data that you've gone through, more shoes to drop.

Singer: Yeah, I really do think we're going to spend most of this year doing stories falling out of this thing. For instance, I don't know if we can prove that there are contractors out there who claim to be minorities but aren't, or companies that claim to be paying minority contractors and they are not doing so. I know it's going on. The question is, can we prove it and is it going on a lot? We don't know. That's kind of stuff we're going to dig into.