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Obama Foundation hires diversity consultant: Brother of former Mayor Sawyer

By Lynn Sweet
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WASHINGTON – Ending a search launched last fall, the Obama Foundation announced Friday it hired a diversity consultant to monitor whether foundation pledges about minority hiring and contracting for the Obama Presidential Center — especially from Chicago’s South and West sides — are being met.

The Chicago firm the foundation picked, Ernest R. Sawyer Enterprises Inc., takes on one of the most sensitive assignments connected to the development of the Obama Center in Jackson Park, with the tab just for the construction expected to range from \$300 million to \$350 million.

Sawyer, the founder of the firm, is a former Chicago Transit Authority executive who is the brother of former Mayor Eugene Sawyer and the uncle of Ald. Rod Sawyer, whose 6th Ward is on the South Side.

Mishaune Sawyer, a daughter-in-law, is general counsel and senior project manager at the firm and Tai Sawyer, a niece, is a project manager at the company.

Last year, former President Barack Obama said his foundation would not sign a community benefits agreement with neighborhood and other groups concerned that, despite promises, they will be shortchanged.

The foundation earlier this year laid out a series of self-imposed contracting promises. Some 51 percent of the construction business is earmarked for minority-owned firms in Chicago.

The benchmark is for at least half of the subcontractors to be diverse suppliers with set asides for racial minorities and women, veterans, the disabled, ex-offenders and LGBTQ individuals.

The foundation has been searching for new and innovative approaches to hire workers from Woodlawn, South Shore and Washington Park.

At issue is the history of minority contracting abuse in the city — and that it takes clout to get jobs and contracts. The late Mayor Sawyer contributed to this perception, what with all the news reports back in the day about his clout and putting family members on public payrolls.

One of the Sawyer firm's biggest consulting contracts is with City Hall, for \$2.5 million. The contract was signed in January 2017 by Mayor Rahm Emanuel for community development work through Sept. 6, 2021.

"Our firms' reputation is on the line here," said Sawyer when we talked on Friday. He has already started consulting, in meetings with the main Obama Center construction contractors, banded together in a consortium known as the Lakeside Alliance – where minority firms hold a 51 percent stake.

The foundation said in a statement that the Sawyer firm will "serve a key oversight function, collecting and verifying data to both monitor and enforce the commitment of Lakeside Alliance and other project vendors and will provide regular updates to the Foundation and public on this progress."

I asked Sawyer about his work. "We have documented files every day of who was out there working, what firms were doing what," Sawyer said about his firm's CTA Red Line contract compliance work.

Thousands of jobs will be generated by the Obama Center. I asked Sawyer if part of his responsibility is to level the playing field and he said, "Yes it is, and to make sure there is transparency as well."

Michael Strautmanis, the Obama Foundation Vice President of Civic Engagement told me in an email, "I am confident that we've made the right choice in the firm to join the team tasked to build the OPC and meet President Obama's aggressive goals on diversity, local participation and transparency.

"We did not consult with the city in that process. I'd also note that we looked at the track record of success by ERS in diversity on two recent high-profile projects, Malcom X College and the McCormick Place Expansion," he said.

The Sawyer firm is African-American owned and Sawyer is also a vet. The Obama Foundation on Friday also announced the hiring of a Hispanic female, Jacqueline Gomez, to be its Director of Real Estate Inclusion. She has been the Cook County director of contract compliance since 2013.