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Playing field of procurement

By: Erik Cuello



Shirley Lam's last career lasted a quarter of a century. She expects her next one to last even longer. After arriving from China decades ago, Lam worked full-time as a housewife. At 45, she decided to head back to school.

"I always wanted to have my own business," explained Lam.

Soon after graduating from Suffolk Community College with a business degree, she began selling medical supplies.

Her inspiration? A quick glance at a newspaper advertisement just a few days shy of graduation.

"It said 'baby boomer adult diapers,'" recalled Lam about the Wall Street Journal ad that instantly caught her attention and ultimately changed her life.

"This is the market I was looking for," she said. "I want[ed] to sell adult diapers."

LogowebNow, Lam is the head of a medical supply service that dispenses everything from adult diapers to surgical instruments.

"I sell so many products," said a joyous Lam, noting that her company sold in volume to hospitals, nursing homes, and clinics, among others.

She also employs nearly all of her immediate family members, including her husband whom she reports was, at first, somewhat dismissive of his wife's entrepreneurial drive.

On Thursday, Jun. 4th, Lam joined with over 700 certified Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprises (M/WBEs) at the Ninth Annual Procurement Fair at the Bank of New York Mellon. They met with purchasers from more than 70 city and state agencies in addition to private sector companies.

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In addition, the fair offered “Opportunity Rooms” in which participants learned more about contracting opportunities with projects like Build it Back and PlaNYC.

Hosted by the city’s Department of Small Business Services (SBS), the event is intended to help connect minority and women-owned businesses with public and private contracting opportunities and other resources.

“City procurement is a powerful lever that we can use to create opportunity,” said SBS Commissioner Maria Torres-Springer. “Today’s fair is a great example of how the City is ensuring that agency procurement reflects the great diversity of New York City businesses.”

The task of expanding access to M/WBEs falls to SBS Commissioner Torres-Springer; Maya Wiley, the mayor’s Chief Legal Counsel; and Lisette Camilo, Director of the Mayor’s Office of Contract Services.

The procurement fair comes at a time when the de Blasio administration has been criticized for what some say has been less than sufficient progress in ensuring that minority and women-owned businesses receive their fair share of the city’s procurement contracts.

Bertha Lewis, a founding member of the Working Families Party and President of the

Black Institute, was joined by Public Advocate Letitia “Tish” James and other elected officials and community leaders in April at a City Hall press conference during which a 60-page report titled Not Good Enough: The Myth of ‘Good Efforts and Best Efforts’ was released.

It determined that approximately 4 percent of the city’s prime and sub contracts had been awarded to M/WBEs, which Lewis deplored as “a little bit disgraceful.”

James has called for the appointment of a Chief Diversity Officer, similar to the state-level post.

“The city needs a Chief Diversity Officer solely focused on the issue of increasing opportunities for businesses of color, period; that should be their sole function,” said James at the Apr. 7th press conference.

But SBS reports that, in the last fiscal year, M/WBE contract awards totaled \$690 million, which it cites as a 57% increase from the year before. Moreover, the de Blasio administration has said that it is committed to increasing total city awards to M/WBEs to \$16 billion in the next decade.

Since 2007, City-certified Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprises have been awarded over 26,000 City prime contracts and subcontracts worth more than \$1.9 billion.

“This year, we had more live contracting opportunities available at the fair than ever before,” noted Torres-Springer. “And we will continue to work hard to strengthen the M/WBE program by increasing the pipeline of M/WBEs, improving the city’s contracting performance, and impacting policy.”

The first step for M/WBE business owners and service providers is to secure the proper certification.

To qualify, businesses must be at least 51% owned, operated and controlled by a minority or woman; must be in business for at least one year; and must be located in New York City or have a significant tie to the city’s business community.

Patrick Innocent and Iluminada Hilario certainly fit the bill.

The two business owners decided to team up in order to help their respective businesses thrive – and they say certification was key.

Innocent is the owner of a carpentry and masonry company, while Hilario, who heads a construction company, are now partners, which has amplified the range of services they can together provide potential customers. Each owner benefits from the unique strengths and expertise of the other, explained Hilario.

“He [Innocent] handles the paper work,” he said. “And we provide machinery and personnel.”

With the help of SoBRO, a non-profit organization focused on sustaining entrepreneurial development and small business ownership, they say they have been able to benefit from additional training and information that has helped circumnavigate obstacles.

“We are very close to SoBro because they keep us informed,” said Innocent. “There are a lot of opportunities and organizations that will support you.”

Business specialist Mary Olushaga said she had worked hand in hand with the entrepreneurs to ensure that they were able to access capital and information.

“Our goal is to support the growth and sustainability of businesses,” she said, adding that SoBRO offers an array of services, such as financing, accessibility to government contracts, and strategy and consultation workshops.

It is just that kind of outreach that Lisette Camilo, Director of the Mayor's Office of Contract Services, hopes to see replicated across the city.

"We've set out aggressive goals, are changing practices to benefit M/WBEs and the city as a whole and are working to connect as many contract opportunities as possible to certified firms," said Camilo.

Heading the Office of Contract Services is the most recent instance in which the Washington Heights native of Dominican heritage has chosen to work within the department. She had previously served as the Office's Acting General Counsel.

"The annual SBS procurement fair is one of the best ways to learn generally about what the City buys as well as specific opportunities – essential first steps in obtaining contract awards," she added.

Felix Abodunrin, originally from Nigeria, attended one of the sessions by the Parks Department. Abodunrin opened his general construction and building maintenance service in 2004, and said he was ready for a shot at a city contract.

"Last month, I certified my business with the city," said Abodunrin.

The decision to become certified after more than a decade in business came after many peers insisted that he should also look to the city for work.

"I always believed in the private industry," he observed. "[But] people told me, 'You are missing the boat'."

Not anymore, he said.