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**The State of Rhode Island, Minority Contractors, and State Funded Public Construction
Projects**

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Research Methods and Strategies MPA 3999-02
May 5, 2023**

Abstract

The State of Rhode Island has consistently had a problem with awarding construction contracts to minority owned businesses. Even with the implementation of legislation aimed at encouraging the use of minority contractors for state issued contracts and the creation of the Office of Diversity, Equity and Opportunity, the State of Rhode Island continues to fall short of its self-imposed benchmarks to promote equity in contract awarding. The goal of my capstone is to understand what policies are in place and the reasons minority business enterprises have had trouble becoming a registered MBE with the State of Rhode Island and successfully obtaining state contracts.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	Page 4
Chapter Two: Literature Review	Page 7
Chapter Three: Review of Current Policies and State of Rhode Island Procurement Process	Page 10
Chapter Four: Inclusivity and Rhode Island’s Portuguese Community	Page 16
Chapter Five: Proposed Legislation	Page 21
Chapter Six: Recommendations for Best Practices	Page 24
Chapter Seven: Conclusion	Page 27
Appendix A: Project Charter	Page 29
Appendix B: References	Page 36

Chapter One: Introduction

Consistently, the State of Rhode Island has neglected to award minority and women owned enterprises with state funded and state directed public construction contracts. These contracts have systematically been awarded to businesses or large corporations owned by White individuals. As this has been an historical problem, the State of Rhode Island enacted legislation in 1986, Rhode Island General Law 37-14-1¹ (RIGL 37-14-1), that targeted minority and women owned businesses for participation in all state procurement and construction projects and be awarded a minimum of ten percent of all dollar value of the procurement or project.

In 1984, minority owned businesses in Rhode Island received 0.003% of state contracting.² This lack of opportunity for minority owned businesses galvanized then State Representative Harold Metts to sponsor legislation during the 1986 legislative session that would require the State of Rhode Island to award at least 10% of state contracting to designated minority and women owned enterprises (MBE, WBE). RIGL 37-14-1 was signed into law and the share of contracting being awarded to minority owned businesses increased to a meager 1.374% in 1987.³ In addition to RIGL 37-14-1, because of the State's implementation of Executive Order 13-05: Promotion of Diversity, Equal Opportunity and Minority Business Enterprises in Rhode Island, the Office of Diversity, Equity and Opportunity (ODEO) was formed within the Department of Administration in 2014.

¹ Title 37 public property and works. 37-14.1-1. (n.d.). Retrieved October 23, 2022, from <http://webservice.rilin.state.ri.us/Statutes/TITLE37/37-14.1/37-14.1-1.HTM>.

² U.S. G.P.O. (1993). Section F. In *The meaning and significance for minority businesses of the Supreme Court decision in the City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.*: Hearing before the legislation and National Security Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations, House of Representatives, One Hundred first congress, Second Session, May 9, 1990 (pp. 86–86). Essay. Retrieved October 23, 2022, from <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/488/469/>

³ idib

Despite this law and creation of ODEO, as of October 2022, the State of Rhode Island has complied with RIGL 37-14-1 only two times in the last 35 years.⁴ There are a multitude of ideas and theories on why the State cannot fulfill its own law. In 2019, a survey was sent to a dataset of 857 businesses registered as contractors with the State of Rhode Island.

Most of the survey respondents were Caucasian Americans, representing 57.50% of the businesses that responded. Black Americans were the second largest ethnic group, representing 20.00% of respondents. Male-owned businesses accounted for 52.50% of respondents. Additionally, 52.50% of all respondents had an MBE/WBE certification and 22.50% had a Small Business Enterprise certification.⁵

Survey respondents provided key details in what they deemed as barriers when engaging the State around its procurement process.

When describing issues navigating the State's procurement process, 6 out of 10 respondents reported insufficient time for submitting bids to the State. When bids were rejected by the State, twenty percent who pursued a meeting with the State found it to be helpful, while ten percent did not find the meeting to be helpful. The survey results detailed that 40 percent respondents believed that preferred contractors receive advance notice of bids and proposals. 42.5% believe the State approves multiple change orders or amendments for preferred contractors, and 55% believe the State's bid and proposal requirements favor large businesses.⁶

⁴ Roman, A. (2021, July 30). *Home*. RIBBA. Retrieved October 23, 2022, from <https://ri-bba.org/2021/07/29/rhode-island-black-business-association-issues-a-failing-grade-and-call-to-action-to-the-state-of-rhode-island/>

⁵ State of Rhode Island. (2021, July). <http://odeo.ri.gov/index.php>. Retrieved October 9, 2021, from <http://odeo.ri.gov/documents/State%20of%20Rhode%20Island%20Disparity%20Study%20Executive%20Summary%20-%20July%202021.pdf>.

⁶ *ibid*

Minority contractors note additional barriers when attempting to become a registered minority business enterprise and once a business is registered. According to Oscar Mejias, president and CEO of the Rhode Island Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, "Access to capital, and access to contracts," are barriers to Latino businesses in Rhode Island. He also added, "learning how to navigate the system." as a barrier for his community.⁷ Furthermore, Mejias notes that once a business is registered as an MBE, they are rarely notified of upcoming bids or purchase orders.

Finally, in addition to the barriers listed above, Rhode Island law makers have deemed individuals of Portuguese descent as a minority group. This has been a point of contention for minority business owners for some years as many state-registered MBEs are owned by Portuguese individuals. Because of the low threshold of 10% state contracting to be awarded to MBEs, Black and Brown business owners believe Portuguese should not be included as an approved minority designation.

Should the failure to enforce RIGL 37-14-1 continue, Rhode Island will continue to create disparity in the disbursement of state funded and state directed public construction contracts. The State of Rhode Island has already produced various studies on why it cannot meet its own mandate threshold of ten percent yet after each study is published, little action is taken to rectify this issue. The State of Rhode Island must commit to evaluating the merits of RIGL 37-14-1 with the goal of not only meeting the law but also providing additional programs that seek increase awarding of state funded and state directed public construction contracts to minority owned businesses.

⁷ Serreze, M. (2022, June 6). *Providence Business First*. Retrieved April 30, 2023, from <https://www.bizjournals.com/rhodeisland/news/2022/06/06/capital-and-contracts-ri-business-leaders-of-colo.html>.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In order to better understand the plight of minority owned contracting businesses and their lack of access to state funded and directed projects, I reviewed a number of government issued studies as well as legislation that set targets for the State. Additionally, I read articles from local news outlets that reported on efforts by current and former administrations with the goal to meet the State's mandated targets for minority contractors. The purpose in reviewing these articles and studies was to better understand if current efforts are substantial enough to recruit and maintain minority owned contractors on State projects. It was also an examination into the ways in which the State of Rhode Island can build more impactful relationships with minority owned contractors that are beneficial to both parties.

Because of pushback and critics from both the Rhode Island Black Business Association and Rhode Island Hispanic Chamber of Commerce regarding the lack of state contracting with minority owned businesses, then Governor Gina Raimondo commissioned a disparity study in 2019 to examine how contracts are granted by the State of Rhode Island and where disparities lied in regards to minority and women owned enterprises. The study, conducted by Mason Tillman and Association with assistance from the staff of the Office of Diversity, Equity and Opportunity, examined Rhode Island State Agencies' prime contract and subcontracts from fiscal years 2014 to 2017 to determine if minority and women owned enterprises were underutilized in the awarding process of these contracts. The Rhode Island Disparity Study determined that the State had indeed fallen short in providing opportunities for minority and women owned businesses in their contracting awarding.⁸

⁸ State of Rhode Island. (2021, July). <http://odeo.ri.gov/index.php>. Retrieved October 9, 2021, from <http://odeo.ri.gov/documents/State%20of%20Rhode%20Island%20Disparity%20Study%20Executive%20Summary%20-%20July%202021.pdf>.

Disparity in Minority Contracting for State of Rhode Island Funded Construction Projects

Purchase orders awarded by the State Agencies during the July 1, 2014 to June 30, 2017 study period totaled \$1,674,521,813, with \$917,562,643 for construction, \$201,234,137 for construction-related services, \$336,660,239 for services, and \$219,064,794 for goods, commodities, and supplies.⁹ Of the over \$1.6 billion spent on contracting during the study period, 2.26% of contracts were awarded to minority owned businesses and 3.81% were awarded to Caucasian women owned businesses while the bulk at 93.94% were awarded to none-minority males. These figures show that though policy is in place, RIGL 37-14-1 has not been effective in impacting the intended constituencies it originally aimed to uplift and support.

As previously noted, there have been two years that RIGL 37-14-1's threshold of 10% has been met. Those years were 2018 and 2019 which all fall under the leadership of then Governor Gina Raimondo's administration. Ahead of her 2018 reelection bid and coupled with increased pressure from groups like the Rhode Island Black Business Association, Rhode Island Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Rhode Island Latino Political Action Committee, and Providence Chapter of the NAACP, Governor Raimondo signed two executive orders in 2017 aimed at assisting minority owned businesses in Rhode Island in the process of obtaining state contracts. These executive orders established a Diversity in Construction Working Group and a new council to advise the state's Office of Diversity Equity and Opportunity.¹⁰ The implementation of these executive orders and prioritization from the Raimondo administration indeed caused an increase in state contracts being awarded to minority owned enterprises. As reported in the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity's report on M/WBE projected contract dollars awarded and utilization, both fiscal years 2018 and 2019 exceeded the 10%

⁹ IBID

¹⁰ Dunn, C. (2017, January 6). *Raimondo takes steps to boost minority businesses*. providencejournal.com. Retrieved October 9, 2021, from <https://www.providencejournal.com/news/20170105/raimondo-takes-steps-to-boost-minority-businesses>.

threshold.¹¹ Unfortunately, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, minority owned businesses were no longer prioritized in contracting while many felt completely shut out of the process. Likewise, when there is not a central office to collect information for and on RIGL 37-14-1, and other laws that also tie into promoting diversity in state employment or contracting, until 30 years after the legislation was signed into law; we must be honest about the lack of urgency by the State.

My secondary sources for research were news articles from local news outlets that reported on the efforts of the State to increase minority participation in state funded and directed construction projects. In addition to news outlets, I sourced information from organizations like the Rhode Island Black Business Association (RIBBA) that has been actively advocating on behalf of Black contractors since 2010 and pushed the State to publicly release the 2019 Disparity Report. The Disparity Report did not paint the State in the most positive light in terms of their commitment to diversity and equity, especially during a time of heightened racial tension in the summer of 2020. Again, as a lifelong Black Rhode Islander, and a former senior staff member for a general officer, I have watched firsthand how easily the requirements in RIGL 37-14-1 are disregarded by lawmakers and various stakeholder groups such as trades unions, local commissions, and chambers of commerce. It was important for me to include publications from RIBBA as it showcased the raw emotions and disappointment from members of the minority community after the release of the disparity study.

¹¹ *State of Rhode Island: Office of Diversity, Equity & Opportunity*. Home- Rhode Island -Office of Diversity, Equity & Opportunity. (n.d.). Retrieved October 9, 2021, from <http://odeo.ri.gov/offices/mbeco/companydetail.php?ID=2577>.

Chapter Three: Review of Current Policies and the State of Rhode Island’s Procurement Process

Rhode Island Office of Diversity, Equity and Opportunity

The State of Rhode Island’s Office of Diversity, Equity and Opportunity (ODEO) is a division housed in the Rhode Island Department of Administration. Created in 2014 following an executive order from Governor Lincoln Chaffee, Executive Order 13-15, ODEO is charged with the promotion of diversity, equal opportunity, and minority business enterprises in the State of Rhode Island. As ODEO’s work has spanned almost a decade, the vision of the office is “to create and support a diverse and inclusive state government culture that values and reflects the changing demographics of Rhode Island by advancing equitable and fair opportunities for all Rhode Island Citizens to be employed by and/or do business with the State of Rhode Island.”¹² Furthermore, the division has three key goals as it seeks to promote diversity and inclusion in state government and state business. These goals are:

1. To ensure that the state government workforce reflects the demographics of our state’s labor force, with an emphasis on increasing the representation of people of color in the higher level management positions.¹³
2. To improve the culture within state government to be more equitable, inclusive, and engaging for all employees, as well as to improve the quality of service to our customers and clients.¹⁴

¹² <https://dedi.ri.gov/about-office>

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ ibid

3. To increase opportunities for minority and women-owned business enterprises, disadvantaged business enterprises, veteran business enterprises, as well as disability business enterprises, to participate in our state's procurement activities.¹⁵

Office of Diversity, Equity and Opportunity Leadership and Divisions

The Office of Diversity, Equity and Opportunity is led by an Associate Director of Administration, Tomas Avila, and has nine full time equivalent employees allocated in their operating budget. The division has two units, the Equal Opportunity Office and the Minority Business Enterprise Compliance Office, for the scope of this project, I will focus on the Minority Business Enterprise Compliance Office.

“The Minority Business Enterprise Compliance Office (MBECO) promotes the development of certified Minority Business Enterprise, Women Business Enterprises, and Disadvantaged Business Enterprises. It does this by facilitating their participation in Rhode Island's business and economic development opportunities. Specifically, MBECO provides services in certification, enforcement, business assistance and advocacy. MBECO works extensively with state and local agencies to help them fulfill their business purchasing goals, actively promotes the participation of certified businesses in public and private purchasing and contracting programs, and also assists with new legislative and policy proposals that facilitate the involvement of minorities and women in the mainstream of the economy.”¹⁶

MBECO's goals include increasing the number of MBE, WBE and DBE firms available for contract competition; fostering relationships between MBE, WBE and DBE firms with state

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ <https://dedi.ri.gov/about-office>

agencies, quasi-state agencies, purchasing agents and prime vendors; providing opportunities for growth and development of MBE, WBE, and DBE firms; and ensuring compliance with the participation of MBE, WBE and DBE firms on all state procurement activities.

State of Rhode Island's Minority Business Enterprise Program

The Minority Business Enterprise Program is a State of Rhode Island Program that promotes the State's policy of supporting the fullest possible participation of firms owned and controlled by minorities and women in state funded and directed public construction programs and projects, and in State purchases of goods and services. MBE Program support includes providing assistance to MBEs throughout the life of contracts with the State of Rhode Island. Minorities include Black, Hispanic, Portuguese, Asian American, American Indian, Native Alaskan, and other groups or individuals found to be economically and socially disadvantaged by the Small Business Administration. It is a goal of the MBE Program to increase the number of MBE's available for contract competition. The program seeks to:

1. Maximize opportunity for business participation by MBEs;¹⁷
2. Stimulate MBE development and growth;¹⁸
3. Encourage that MBEs are awarded not less than 10% of the dollar value of state funded or directed procurement and projects;¹⁹
4. Establish a strong MBE support presence in minority communities and with MBE organizations.²⁰

In order to be certified as a minority business enterprise, a small business or publicly owned business must be at least 51% owned controlled by one or more socially and economically

¹⁷ <https://dedi.ri.gov/about-office/minority-business-enterprise-compliance-office/faqs>

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ *ibid*

disadvantaged individuals and whose management and daily business operations are controlled by one or more such individuals.²¹ To apply for MBE certification, businesses must be owned and controlled by one or more minorities or women. Firms seeking certification as an MBE and/or WBE must complete and submit the MBE and WBE certification application form. Firms located outside of the State must be certified by their home state certifying agency prior to submitting an application to Rhode Island.²² These requirements are specific to the State of Rhode Island and vary slightly from the federal government's designation of a minority business enterprise. There are 620 registered and certified minority and women business enterprises in the State of Rhode Island.²³

The State of Rhode Island's Procurement Process

The State of Rhode Island's Division of Purchases, housed in the Department of Administration, manages the State's procurement process. Procurement is the process of acquiring goods or services from an external vendor or business and there are many reasons government must acquire goods or services from a private vendor. Several mechanisms exist to procure goods and services in The State of Rhode Island uses various mechanisms for procurement of goods and services that include request for quotes or proposals, sole source, single source, master price agreement, and continuous recruitment master price agreement. According to the RI Division of Purchasing, "Master purchase agreements cover requirements for universal need for goods or services for a specified contract period on a state-wide basis. They are solicited as requests for proposals or requests for quotes and may have cap limits for pricing and cap limits for project cost. The agreements provide agencies with access to qualified

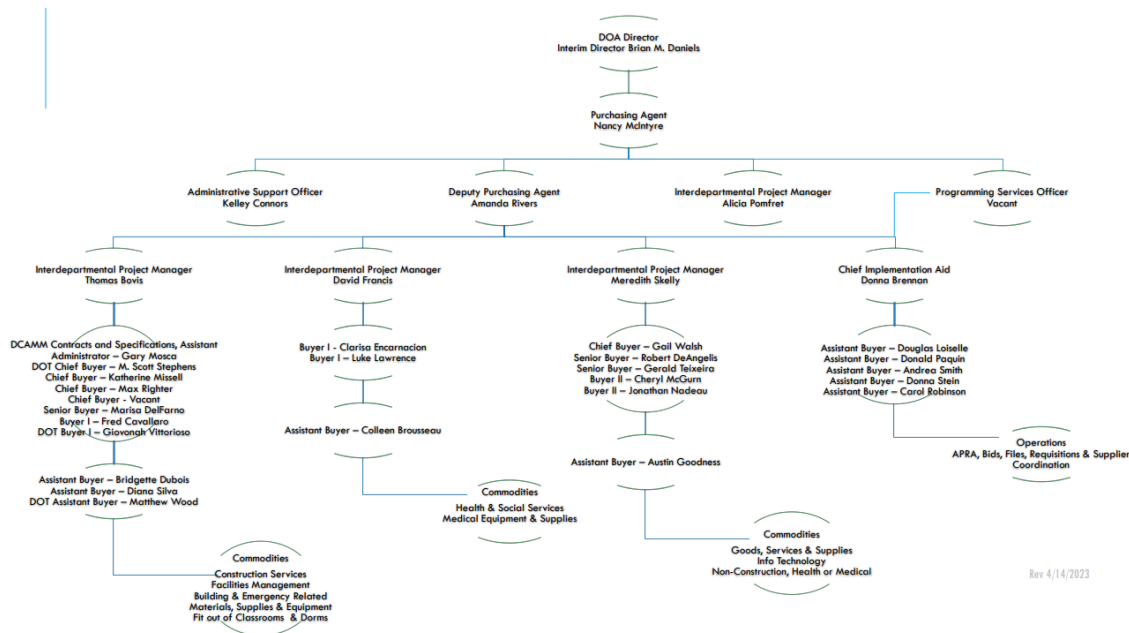
²¹ *ibid*

²² *ibid*

²³ <https://dedi.ri.gov/about-office>

Disparity in Minority Contracting for State of Rhode Island Funded Construction Projects

vendors, expedited process, and opportunity for mini-bid. State agencies order their requirements for these items individually, as the need arises.”²⁴ The Division of Purchasing is led by a Purchasing Agent, Nancy McIntyre, and has a staff of 38 full-time employees that are split into four teams.



25

As discussed, many minority business owners lament about the process of becoming a certified MBE and they note bidding on a contract is cumbersome. When a master purchase agreement, request for quote, or request for proposal is formalized by an agency, the Division does not provide notifications to vendors rather vendors must continuously monitor the Division’s database for open solicitations. Additionally, it is widely known that some purchase buyers provide advance notice of upcoming bids to select vendors, who are generally larger businesses throughout the state. The process of becoming a certified MBE with the State and

²⁴ <https://purchasing.ri.gov/stateagencyinfocenter/docsforms/purchases-mpa-faqs.pdf>

²⁵ <https://ridop.ecms.ri.gov/about-us/division-purchases-organization-chart>

Disparity in Minority Contracting for State of Rhode Island Funded Construction Projects

attempting to bid on a contract are major barriers for minority owned businesses as they seek to do business with the State of Rhode Island.

Chapter Four: Inclusivity and Rhode Island's Portuguese Community

Portuguese Community in Rhode Island

Rhode Island is home to the third-largest population of individuals of Portuguese descent. According to the United States Census Bureau, there are 74,857 individuals of Portuguese descent in Rhode Island and Portuguese is the third most spoken language in the state.²⁶ There have been a few waves of immigration to Rhode Island from Portugal since the founding of the state with the most recent wave being in the early 1900s when Portuguese whalers began migrating to New Bedford and Fall River, Massachusetts. These whalers and their families began to move across the bay, settling in Rhode Island towns like Tiverton, East Providence, Pawtucket, and the Fox Point neighborhood of Providence. The Portuguese community in Rhode Island is very civically engaged, they are leaders in their neighborhoods and religious organizations, and they have contributed immensely to the vibrant culture of the Ocean State.

Is a Portuguese individual a minority? No, the United States designates individuals of European descent as White²⁷ furthermore, Portuguese individuals are not classified as Latino or Hispanic.²⁸ Considering, anecdotally, that Portuguese individuals view themselves as White and not minorities, it is concerning to learn that Portuguese individuals are being counted towards diversity, equity, and inclusion metrics for state contracting. Rhode Island is not the only state to have included Portuguese individuals in their DEI metrics, Massachusetts did as well.

²⁶ Bureau, U. S. C. (n.d.). Census Data. Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://data.census.gov/table?q=people%2Breporting%2Bancestry&t=Ancestry&g=0400000US44&tid=ACSDT1Y2021.B04006>

²⁷ <https://wonder.cdc.gov/wonder/help/populations/bridged-race/directive15.html>

²⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/09/15/who-is-hispanic/>

Massachusetts' Designation of Portuguese as a Minority

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is home to the second largest Portuguese population in the United States with 253,913 people of Portuguese descent.²⁹ Data indicates that Portuguese American families in Massachusetts earn a median of \$103,400 a year, being one of the highest incomes for Portuguese people in America.³⁰ In contrast, the median income for a Black family in Massachusetts is \$41,200.³¹ Just like Rhode Island, Massachusetts included Portuguese as a minority category when the Commonwealth formed its laws and procedures around equity and inclusion in state contract awarding.

MGL C.7-57-61 promotes the use of minority, woman, and veteran owned businesses while creating a supplier diversity office and defining key equity and inclusion terms and metrics.³² This law previously included Portuguese under the minority category for business enterprises, but this inclusion was ruled illegal in 2018 after a lawsuit was filed. The suit filed in Massachusetts Superior Court in 2013 accused the Supplier Diversity Office of “wrongfully awarding more than 100 public construction contracts to Portuguese-owned businesses”.³³ The suit was heard in 2016 after a Black woman was passed over for state projects that were awarded to Portuguese-owned businesses. In 2018, Judge Douglas Wilkins ruled that Portuguese-owned construction companies receive an illegal and unfair advantage by participating in a state affirmative action program for public construction projects. “Wilkins also ruled that a former director of the Supplier Diversity Office in 2007 ‘arbitrarily’ categorized Portuguese businesses

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ da Silva, L. (2022, June 14). In which states do Portuguese-Americans earn the most? The Fall River Herald News.

³¹ Schuster, L., & Ciurczak, P. (2018, October). Boston's booming... but for whom? Boston's Booming... But For Whom? Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://www.bostonindicators.org/reports/report-website-pages/shared-prosperity>

³² Massachusetts General Law Section 58. General Law - Part I, Title II, Chapter 7, Section 58. (n.d.). Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleII/Chapter7/Section58>

³³ Standard-Times, M. L. T. (2016, May 6). Lawsuit: Portuguese owned businesses don't merit minority classifications. Fall River Herald News. Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://www.heraldnews.com/story/news/crime/2016/05/07/lawsuit-portuguese-owned-businesses-don/30593406007/>

Disparity in Minority Contracting for State of Rhode Island Funded Construction Projects

as minority-owned firms without investigation to determine whether the companies have been discriminated against. As a result of the minority-owned designation, Portuguese companies were awarded \$15.6 million in state construction projects in 2015, or about 61 percent of funds that went to minority business enterprises, or MBEs, that fiscal year, according to court documents.”³⁴

Local Opposition from Black and Brown Leaders

There have been two years that RIGL 37-14-1’s threshold of 10% has been met. Those years were 2018 and 2019 which all fall under the leadership of then Governor Raimondo’s administration.³⁵ This vital information was confirmed in the disparity report as well as reporting from ODEO, again it is important to note that the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity was only created in 2014 so there was not an office in state government that was uniquely responsible with maintaining and curating the data around minority contracting awards from the inception of RIGL 37-14-1 for 30 years. When there is not a central office to collect information for and on RIGL 37-14-1, and other laws that also tie into promoting diversity in state employment or contracting, until 30 years after the legislation was signed into law; we must be honest about the lack of urgency by the State. What was also confirmed in the study was the staggering amount of construction contracting being awarded to Portuguese-owned businesses thus inflating the data on how many minority business enterprises are receiving state purchase orders for construction. In order for there to be more equity in the awarding of state purchase orders, particularly in respect to construction awards, it will be necessary for Rhode Island to remove Portuguese-owned businesses from the classification as a minority business enterprise.

³⁴ Judge rules Portuguese companies are not minority-owned. The Bay State Banner. (2018, March 29). Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://www.baystatebanner.com/2018/03/29/judge-rules-portuguese-companies-are-not-minority-owned/>

³⁵ State of Rhode Island. (2021, July). <http://odeo.ri.gov/index.php>. Retrieved October 23, 2022, from <http://odeo.ri.gov/documents/State%20of%20Rhode%20Island%20Disparity%20Study%20Executive%20Summary%20-%20July%202021.pdf>.

Unlike Massachusetts, there have not been any lawsuits filed in any Rhode Island courts challenging the classification of Portuguese-owned business as minority business enterprises for state contracting but there have been vocal opponents to their inclusion. Former Rhode Island Representative Anastasia Williams, an Afro-Latina that represented Providence's House District 9, over the years has submitted legislation aiming to remove Portuguese as a minority designation.³⁶ This bill has been co-sponsored by Representative Grace Diaz, a Dominican-American representative from Providence. Opposition from the Portuguese community organizations and advocates has been fierce arguing they are indeed a minority because the Portuguese community accounts for less than 10% of the overall population of Rhode Island. By this logic, individuals of German, Finnish, or even Greek descent should be considered as minorities in Rhode Island because they too account for less than 10% of the overall population. Additionally, PALCUS, the Portuguese American Leadership Council of the United States, strongly opposes this legislation going as far to note the organization's support of the Black Lives Matter movement and solidarity with the Black community.³⁷ The bill has not passed and will likely never pass because there lacks a political willingness to address this issue.

The Rhode Island Black Business Association (RIBBA) has been actively advocating on behalf of Black contractors since 2010 and pushed the State to officially release the 2019 Disparity Report. The Disparity Report did not paint the State in the most positive light in terms of their commitment to diversity and equity, especially during a time of heightened racial tension in the summer of 2020. RIBBA, along with the Rhode Island Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, have privately discussed their displeasure with the inclusion of Portuguese-owned businesses as

³⁶ RINewsToday. (2020, August 1). RI Bill to remove "Portuguese" as minority business category. RINewsToday.com. Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://rinewstoday.com/ri-bill-to-remove-portuguese-as-minority-business-category/>

³⁷ *ibid*

Disparity in Minority Contracting for State of Rhode Island Funded Construction Projects

minority business enterprise but there has been very little open criticism of this policy by either organization.

Chapter Five: Proposed Legislation

Each year, there is various legislation proposed that seeks to change the rules around state contracting and awarding to minority owned businesses. During the current legislative session, there are bills in both chambers that would increase contract awarding to MBEs. Senate Bill 144, sponsored by Senator Sandra Cano, and House Bill 5748, sponsored by Representative Joshua Giraldo, would increase the minimum required state contract awarding to minority business enterprises and women business enterprises to 20 percent while also requiring minority business enterprises and women business enterprises to be awarded 10 percent each. A version of this legislation has been introduced in both chambers since 2020 with Senator Cano and Representative Giraldo sponsoring the bills since 2021.

2023 Legislative Session

During each session, the bills have support from advocacy groups like the Rhode Island Black Business Association (RIBBA) while being opposed by organizations like the Narragansett Bay Commission (NBC). When HB 5748 was heard on March 15, 2023, RIBBA submitted a letter of support for the legislation stating, “Since the MBE law’s inception in 1986, Rhode Island has complied three times. The most common reason for not complying with the statute: there aren’t enough MBEs available. The pipeline seems to be getting smaller. In 2021, there were 769 MBEs reported in RI. Today, the directory lists 620 enterprises. However, saying that there aren’t enough does not excuse noncompliance, especially when noncompliance leaves the state open to discrimination lawsuits.”³⁸ Likewise, NBC submitted a letter in opposition stating, “Despite best efforts, satisfying the current ten percent requirement set forth in the law is

³⁸ Fox, K. (2023, March 15). Testimony in support of HB5748 An Act Relating to Public Property and Works—Minority Business Enterprise. *Rhode Island Legislature*. Retrieved April 29, 2023, from <https://www.rilegislature.gov/Special/comdoc/House%20Labor%202023/03-15-2023--H5748--RIBBA.pdf>.

challenging, and often results in delays in projects that are essential and necessary to NBC's functions and operations."³⁹ As noted in the letter submitted by RIBBA, there are 620 enterprises listed on the directory published by ODEO annually and yet organizations such as NBC insist they cannot meet the current requirement of ten percent let alone an increase to twenty percent.

Governor McKee's Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Initiatives for ODEO

In Governor Daniel McKee's recommended budget for fiscal year 2024, there are funds allocated to include a 50 percent increase in overall MBE/WBE awards, from 10% to 15%. This budget article requests that certified minority owned businesses be awarded a minimum of 7.5% and certified women owned businesses by awarded a minimum of 7.5%; this was a recommendation from the disparity study. "Our proposal to increase the overall MBE/WBE participation to 15% is based on our current best available data, as well as the data provided in the disparity study. Our participation rate last year for MBEs/WBEs was 13.16%, which was an increase from the previous year. Moreover, the disparity study showed that we currently have the market availability to meet a 15% participation rate."⁴⁰ said Associate Director Avila in a letter of education submitted to the Rhode Island House of Representatives Committee on Labor. Avila notes the division's openness about lacking adequate software necessary to provide a comprehensive review of the MBE/WBE landscape. He continues stating "Over the past year, ODEO has worked diligently to increase its community outreach with the goal of increasing the total pool of certified MBEs in Rhode Island. These efforts have included our partnering with the Rhode Island Builders Association on Spanish- language certification workshops, placing

³⁹ Harrington, J. (2023, March 15). Testimony Against HB5748 An Act Relating to Public Property and Works—Minority Business Enterprise. Rhode Island Legislature. Retrieved April 29, 2023, from <https://www.rilegislature.gov/Special/comdoc/House%20Labor%202023/03-15-2023--H5748--Narragansett%20Bay%20Commission.pdf>

⁴⁰ Avila, T. (2023, March 15). Letter of Education for HB5748 An Act Relating to Public Property and Works—Minority Business Enterprise. Rhode Island Legislature. Retrieved April 29, 2023, from <https://www.rilegislature.gov/Special/comdoc/House%20Labor%202023/03-15-2023--H5748--DOA.pdf>

recruitment advertising in minority media outlets, expanding our social media presence, and having informational tables and presentations at targeted community events. As noted above, these efforts resulted in growing our MBE/WBE base and ultimately achieving a 13.6% MBE/WBE participation rate last year. We look forward to continuing to work with all stakeholders involved and reaching our goal of increasing the participation rate to 15% in 2023.”⁴¹

⁴¹ *ibid*

Chapter Six: Recommendations for Best Practices

Upon review of RIGL 37-14-1 history and current policies as well as proposed legislation, I have determined three key recommendations to increase usage of minority business enterprises by the State of Rhode Island. These are recommendations that seek to ensure compliance with RIGL 37-14-1 and showcase the State's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion through impactful policy. Although, I believe Portuguese individuals are not minorities and should not be included as a designated minority business enterprise, I concede that it is very unlikely that the legislature will move to amend that language in the law. Thus I will not be recommending that the designation change rather I will focus on recommendations that are realistic in the approach of continuously meeting or exceeding the requirements outlined in RIGL 37-14-1.

Recommendation One

Governor McKee's recommended budget includes increased funding to the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity to provide the agency with the resources needed to meet their increased goal of 15% M/WBE contract awarding. This budget includes funding allocated toward the analysis of the M/WBE landscape in Rhode Island. The Rhode Island Legislature should pass the Governor's recommended budget for ODEO as proposed. I believe the information collected through an updated in-depth market analysis would build a foundation for a much needed strategic plan for ODEO. This strategic plan would seek to address the concerns raised in the market analysis and should include input from various stakeholders such as the Rhode Island Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Rhode Island Black Business Association, Providence Chamber of Commerce, Northern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce, local labor groups, Rhode Island Builders Association, and elected leaders. The strategic plan should

include metrics of success, short and long term goals, timelines, and implementation strategies. This strategic plan should dictate all outreach, programmatic initiatives, and legislative priorities for ODEO. Each year, ODEO should evaluate their progress on their goals based upon the strategic plan and adjust their approach accordingly if goals have not been met. Additionally, this strategic plan should be published on their website along with an annual report detailing progress on those goals along with key benchmarks that have been achieved.

Recommendation Two

The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity should seek to add additional full-time employees to focus on community outreach and contractor support. These employees would be responsible for developing outreach programming to engage minority owned businesses and provide them with the support needed to register as a certified minority business enterprise. In addition to assisting with certification support, they will also provide MBEs with notification of upcoming bids and purchase orders. These employees will help to address the ongoing concerns from MBEs regarding the cumbersome process to become a registered MBE and the lack of notification of when bids are open. These employees will engage with the Secretary of State's Business Services Division along with the Department of Business Regulation to ensure MBEs are walked through all relevant processes when establishing a business in Rhode Island. These employees will also work to be a liaison for MBEs with the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation and United States Small Business Administration. Finally, these employees will be responsible for providing MBEs with notice of upcoming bids and purchase orders from the State of Rhode Island. They will do this through email notifications and social media posts in English and Spanish.

Recommendation Three

The State of Rhode Island and the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity should leverage a private-public partnership to include key stakeholders from industry, government, and nonprofits that is tasked with building a coalition that provides MBEs with the space and opportunity to engage with larger enterprises that they could potentially collaborate with. This approach of building community to cultivate cross-industry collaboration and partnership is a proven method of success in Rhode Island government as various program and laws have been passed because of private-public collaboration. In addition to the collaboration, this type of partnership would provide MBEs with mentorship from business leaders in the Southern New England region.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Saying you are committed to equity and inclusion for all citizens is an easy thing for elected leaders to say. We hear the sound bites on the news and see virtue-signaling social media posts yet when we examine the policies and actions of these elected leaders, we see their inaction when it comes to issues of equity and inclusion. Rhode Island elected leaders have this problem and oftentimes, the individuals appointed to executive roles in government suffer from this problem as well. Rhode Island General Law 37-14-1 was established in 1986 by well-meaning legislators that sought to provide equity in the State's approach to contract awarding. Unfortunately, the State has fallen short of its goals since the inception of this law.

Rhode Island is increasingly diverse and the Latino community provided Rhode Island with a slight increase in population, according to the 2020 U.S. Census. Contract awarding by the State of Rhode Island should reflect the diversity of the state. Examining the disparity in contracting, reviewing the history and investigating the policies of RIGL 37-14-1, and the creation of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity, there has been slow movement by the State in terms of equity in contract awarding. Minority business owners continue to face barriers to become a register minority business enterprise with the State and if they do become registered, they often miss opportunities to bid on contracts due to lack of communication from the State. Proposed legislation continues to stall in committee during each legislative session due to influence from stakeholders arguing it is too difficult to meet the current threshold of 10% contracting to minority or women business enterprises. With more than 600 registered minority and women business enterprises in the state, there is ample opportunity for the State and large businesses to increase use of minority business enterprises.

Disparity in Minority Contracting for State of Rhode Island Funded Construction Projects

As noted in the Disparity Report, there are a number of ways in which Rhode Island can work to make state contracting more equitable to increase the number of state contracts awarded to minority business enterprises. Additionally, during then Governor Raimondo's 2018 reelection bid and coupled with increased pressure from groups like the Rhode Island Black Business Association, Rhode Island Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Rhode Island Latino Political Action Committee, and Providence Chapter of the NAACP, Governor Raimondo signed two executive orders in 2017 aimed at assisting minority owned businesses in Rhode Island in the process of obtaining state contracts. The recommendations put forth focus on three budgetary, policy, and outreach initiatives that the State of Rhode Island can accomplish through the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity. These recommendations do not need additional legislation and would allow for major stakeholders to have direct input on developing and implementing best strategies to ensure equity in state contract awarding. They are also proven methods and tactics used throughout government for successful programs in Treasury and higher education.

Evidence has shown that when enforcement of RIGL 37-14-1 is prioritized by a governor and the General Assembly's leadership, minority owned businesses can gain access to the procurement process to ultimately be awarded state funded and directed contracts. It is upon our elected leaders to fully embrace the growing diversity of Rhode Island and best serve all constituencies that call the Ocean State home. Minority owned business should not need extra supports when attempting to procure business with the State and yet, unfortunately they do. With the enforcement of RIGL 37-14-1 and expansion of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity, minority business enterprises have the opportunity to not only represent 10% of the total contracts awarded by the State but grow to represent the new diverse landscape of Rhode Island.

Disparity in Minority Contracting for State of Rhode Island Funded Construction Projects

Appendix: Project Charter

School of Professional Studies

Project Charter

The State of Rhode Island's Neglect of Minority Contractors and State Funded, Directed Public Construction Projects

TABLE OF CONTENTSERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

1 PROJECT OVERVIEW 30

1.1 INTRODUCTION

1.2 MAJOR STAKEHOLDERS

2 PROJECT GOAL AND SCOPE 4

2.1 PROJECT GOAL

2.2 PROJECT SCOPE

3 ASSUMPTIONS..... 5

4 CONSTRAINTS..... 5

5 RISKS..... 6

6 COMMUNICATION STRATEGY..... 6

7 MEASURES OF SUCCESS..... 7

8 STAKEHOLDER SIGN-OFF 7

1 Project Overview

1.1 Introduction

The State of Rhode Island has consistently had a problem with awarding construction contracts to minority owned businesses. Even with the implementation of legislation aimed at encouraging the use of minority contractors for state issued contracts and the creation of the Office of Diversity, Equity and Opportunity, the State of Rhode Island continues to fall short of its self-imposed benchmarks to promote equity in contract awarding.

These contracts have systematically been awarded to businesses or large corporations owned by white individuals. The State of Rhode Island enacted legislation in 1986 (Rhode Island General Law 37-14-1) that targeted minority and women owned businesses for participation in all state procurement and construction projects and be awarded a minimum of ten percent of all dollar value of the procurement or project. Additionally, in 2014, the State formed the Office of Diversity, Equity and Opportunity (ODEO) within the Department of Administration because of the State's implementation of Executive Order 13-05, entitled: Promotion of Diversity, Equal Opportunity, and Minority Business Enterprises in Rhode Island.

Research has shown that despite the creation of ODEO, as of July 2021, the State of Rhode Island has complied with RIGL 37-14-1 only two times in the last 35 years. Minority business owners complain that the State cannot fulfill its own law because the process to be certified as an MBE or WBE by the State is both tedious and complicated while also lacking clarity and support from the State. Additional barriers include lack of transparency in the contract bidding process, inadequate communication from the State's purchasing office, slow payment, as well as a lack of enforcement of the law.

In 2019, then Governor Gina Raimondo commissioned a disparity study to examine how contracts are granted by the State of Rhode Island and where disparities lied regarding minority and women owned enterprises. The study, conducted by Mason Tillman and Association with assistance from the staff of the Office of Diversity, Equity and Opportunity, examined Rhode Island State Agencies' prime contract and subcontracts from fiscal years 2014 to 2017 to determine if minority and women owned enterprises were underutilized in the awarding process of these contracts. The Rhode Island Disparity Study determined that the State had indeed fallen short in providing opportunities for minority and women owned businesses in their contracting awarding.

Of the over \$1.6 billion spent on contracting during the study period of 2014 to 2017, 2.26% of contracts were awarded to minority owned businesses and 3.81% were awarded to Caucasian women owned businesses while the bulk at 93.94% were awarded to none-minority males. These figures show that though policy is in place, RIGL 37-14-1 has not been effective in impacting the intended constituencies it originally aimed to uplift and support.

1.2 Major Stakeholders

The stakeholders listed below are necessary to propose legislation and/or policy and programmatic changes.

Governor
Speaker of the House
Senate President
Secretary of Commerce
Secretary of State
General Treasurer
Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity

The stakeholders listed below are necessary to ensure advocacy and lobbying for any proposed legislation and/or policy and programmatic changes.

Rhode Island Black Business Association
NAACP
Rhode Island Foundation
United Way of Rhode Island
Coalition of Black Women Rhode Island
Rhode Island Coalition of Black Contractors
Black and Latino Legislative Caucus
Black Biz Live
Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
Providence Chamber of Commerce
Newport Chamber of Commerce
Northern Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce

2 Project Goal and Scope

2.1 Project Goal

The overall goal for my capstone is to understand what policies are in place that perpetuate the lack of state contract awarding to Black owned businesses and the reasons minority business enterprises have had trouble becoming a registered MBE with the State of Rhode Island and successfully obtaining state contracts.

My secondary goal for my capstone is to provide the Governor of Rhode Island and Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity with a comprehensive report on the status of contract award

to registered Black minority owned enterprises while outlining tangible ways in which they can realistically support Black MBEs through existing programming and policies.

2.2 Project Scope

In Scope:

I will conduct research into all laws, regulations, and policies pertaining to minority contracting and awarding for the State of Rhode Island. I will do this using the Rhode Island State Library and access to Rhode Island state laws.

By conducting this research, I will draft a proposal that will include summaries of policies and programs that are successful in their attempt to promote registered Black MBEs, laws that aim to increase awarding to W/MBEs, and similar programs in other states that have been deemed successful. This proposal will be provided to the Governor of the State of Rhode Island and his Associate Director of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity. It will also be distributed to the chair of the Black and Latino Legislative Caucus and Legislative Leadership.

Out of Scope:

Proposing and drafting legislation to change the mandated targets enacted through the 1986 law. It is important to first meet consistently the already agreed upon goals before pushing for new ones.

3 Assumptions

- There is no real, targeted outreach to Black owned businesses to assist them with becoming a registered MBE.
- Black MBEs are attempting to bid on state contracts.
- The process to become a registered MBE is too cumbersome for many small business owners.
- Lack of real assistance is a direct cause to why Black business owners do not register as MBEs.
- A lack of prioritization of this issue demonstrates the way elected officials view the Black community and Black voters.

4. Constraints

Because of the research needed to deliver on my proposed goals, time is going to be a major constraint on this project. I will need to spend hours poring through legislation, calling various offices to discuss their policies, and meeting with stakeholders to learn more about their current programs. I will try to leverage my role in government to align with the goals of this capstone so I can use time at work to research as well as hold meetings.

5 Risks

The number one risk of this project is how it may impact my actual job. As Deputy Treasurer for the State of Rhode Island, it is a political risk for me to be critical of the current Governor and his team. The Governor can view the examination of his team's approach to this issue as a critique or he can view it as an opportunity, and I cannot control his attitude. I will try to combat any negative blow back by discussing this project with my Chief of Staff and explaining why it is not only important work but an opportunity for Rhode Island and possibly, the General Treasurer.

Likewise, the number one consequence of this project is the positive impact it may have on the Black community in Rhode Island through the creation of additional resources to best serve the Black business community. This project can help to spur real economic mobility for Black families in Rhode Island thus providing economic stability for the community.

6 Communication Plan

I view three entities, or people, as my clients. They are Governor Daniel McKee, Associate Director Tomas Avila, and Black business owners.

- I will communicate with the Governor through his legislative and policy teams. I have worked closely with this staff and will be able to discuss the project with them. I will work with them to communicate my intent to the Governor and meeting with the Governor to present my proposal.
- I will communicate directly with Associate Director of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Opportunity Tomas Avila. I will use email, phone calls, and meetings to communicate with Mr. Avila.
- I will communicate with Black business owners through a collaboration with the Rhode Island Black Business Association and NAACP Providence Branch. I will also work with the Rhode Island Foundation as they have been instrumental in promoting Black business throughout Rhode Island. I have worked with the leadership of these organizations and will communicate with them through email and meetings.

I will utilize a project management software like Asana to ensure communication with the key stakeholders and clients are met throughout the project timeline.

7 Measures of Success

Project Outcomes	Measure of Success
Complete detailed proposal on ways to increase state contract awards to registered Black MBEs	Submit completed white paper to Governor via legislative and policy team
Increase targeted outreach to registered Black MBEs	ODEO to track data on their outreach to Black MBEs
Increase in registration of Black businesses as Minority Business Enterprises	Data tracked by ODEO shows an increase in the amount of Black owned businesses successfully obtaining MBE status
Increase in award contracting to Black MBEs	Data tracked by ODEO shows an increase in the number of Black MBEs being awarded state contracts

Stakeholder Sign-off

This project charter has been signed off by the client, capstone advisor and project team members.

Mary M Piecewicz MPA Senior Leadership Capstone Advisor December 12, 2022



_____ Name	_____ Title	_____ Date
_____ Name	_____ Title	_____ Date

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