

# ANNUAL AIRPORT BUSINESS DIVERSITY CONFERENCE

# THE MAGIC OF FLIGHT

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## Airport Industry DBE Liaison Officers Are Among America's Civil Rights Heroes

When the 21<sup>st</sup> century chapter of America's civil rights history is written it should surely include a group of heroes and sheroes called DBELOs and ACDBELOs.

Those initials stand for Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Liaison Officers and Airport Concessions Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Liaison Officers. These men and women toil daily in the transportation industry to "develop, implement and monitor DBE programs."

The federal DBE programs, which began to take shape in the 1980's, are designed to help small businesses owned and controlled by socially and economically disadvantaged individuals, including minorities and women, participate in contracting opportunities created by U.S. Department of Transportation financial assistance programs nationally.

As rules and regulations governing the procedures to achieving these participation goals became more and more complicated, transportation agencies created liaison positions to handle all of the aspects of the DBE programs. This can include everything from gathering and reporting statistical data to coordinating social events and seminars to alert the community of contracting opportunities and processes.

A comprehensive list of DBELO's astonishingly wide-ranging responsibilities can be viewed in Section 26.25 here: <https://www.transportation.gov/osdbu/disadvantaged-business-enterprise/49-cfr-part-26-sample-disadvantaged-business>

Essentially, these stalwart professionals manage the convoluted, detailed, data-driven and outreach-oriented process of making sure that local, state and national DBE transportation programs are meeting goals to help small minority businesses get a fair share of contracts in all areas of opportunity.

Recently, the Airport Minority Advisory Council (AMAC) spoke with a number of the liaison officers in the aviation industry to learn more about their skills, challenges and rewards.

"AMAC's mission to promote the inclusion of minorities and women in employment and contracting opportunities throughout the aviation industry is clearly synergistic with the role of the DBELO," notes the organization's President and CEO Krystal Brumfield. "We are proud to list a large contingent of these professionals among our members, and we want all of our members to be aware of their work in support of our mutual goals."

AIRPORT MINORITY ADVISORY COUNCIL

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“The official DBE program was rolled out in 1999,” says Gene Roth, National Team Lead for the FAA’s DBE/ACDBE Program Compliance Team. “The goal was to ensure a level playing field and foster equal opportunity in DOT-assisted contracts.”

There is no question that the job of a DBELO is a challenging one which requires juggling multiple priorities, but the rewards are significant,” he says, “particularly when you have worked through a ton of obstacles and connected a small business owner with a solid opportunity at the airport.”

“We are in the business of capacity building for small businesses,” says George Morning, Director of Small Business Development for the Greater Orlando Airport Authority. “What we do can have significant effect on the communities we serve. Small businesses are the ones who hire our next door neighbors.”

Morning notes that the skills required to do a good job in the position are comprehensive. “You need to have good communications skills at all levels—written, oral, interpersonal and organizational,” he says.

“You have to be persuasive in order to change the ‘rules of engagement’ for small business,” he continues. “Too often small business involvement is looked at as an ‘add-on’. You may need to change a whole value system in order to make a stronger case. When you try to do that, you may be met with resistance.”

Tamela Lee, Vice President of the Business Diversity and Development Department at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, agrees. “You have to have good negotiation and influencing skills,” she says. “Added to that is a need to be able to write and understand technical jargon. You have to read regulations, interpret them ... and truly care about them,” she says with a smile.

Amber Gooding, Director of Business Diversity Development and Community Programs at St. Louis Lambert International Airport in St. Louis, MO, offers an additional list of skills and personality traits needed for the position. “It helps if you’re just a bit discontented,” she says. “You can’t be a person who is content with the status quo. You need to be willing to roll up your sleeves and make changes.”

Bravery is essential because you may need to fight for what you believe in, Gooding says. Then she adds, “But be careful to pick your battles. Be willing to step back and compromise if need be.”

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A DBELO also needs to be a 'data geek', she continues. "When the battle is joined, your best weapon may be spread sheets that show the value that small businesses bring to the table."

Gooding says she has a "fix-it personality" that drives her to try to move mountains for the cause of equality. It's in her genes – her uncle was the renowned Benjamin Hooks, who served as executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1977 to 1992, and throughout his career was a vocal campaigner for civil rights in the United States.

For Dawn Hunter, Los Angeles World Airports Business Relationship Manager, the requirement that is foremost in her job is commitment and passion. "You really do have to care about the people you are representing and the environment that you are in."

Los Angeles is a unique market because it has one of the most diverse populations in the country, she says. "In addition to Hispanics, African Americans and Middle Easterners, there are Pacific Islanders and Samoans and Asians from a wide range of countries, cultures and religions."

"My passion," she continues, "is to be sure that our DBE program reflects the remarkable mosaic that is California."

The interviewees all agree that their membership in AMAC is a vital part of helping them enhance their careers and manage the challenges of their positions. "At AMAC I meet other DBELOs and have the opportunity to share best practices," says Lee. She notes that when she attends an AMAC conference or event, she networks with key influencers and opinion leaders in the airport industry. "The major concessionaires are there, the airport managers and decision makers are there, the FAA and government leaders are there, my peers are there," she says.

"At AMAC events I can meet with my DBE clients in a relaxed setting that prompts them to share information more freely with me," adds Hunter. "And, the FAA training programs and seminars help me to gain insights that make my job easier."

They all encourage other DBELOs to join. "There is power and influence in consensus," says Morning. "I urge my peers to join and put forward their ideas, strategies, resources and support."

"At AMAC you will find comradery and the connection of like minds," he continues. "We learn and we build off of one another."

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For Roth, who once served as Executive Director of AMAC, the organization is essential. "I fell in love with AMAC's mission," he says. "It has affected me throughout my career. Now that I am working on the government side helping to create policy, my experience with AMAC informs my decision making."

By: Charlotte Roy