

OP-ED

“Do Right By US”

By: John E. Harmon, Sr., IOM

Founder, President & CEO

African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey

Since 2007 I have been honored to serve as the Founder, President, and CEO of the African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey (AACCNJ). In this capacity I seek to execute a mission that will enable the 1.2 million Black residents and over 88,000 black owned businesses to be acknowledged for their contributions and a value proposition that displays a willingness to be strategically aligned with those who possess the resources, opportunities, and information to derive a transformational, favorable impact on an underperforming sector of the state's economy. In short, a win, win for a more competitive New Jersey.

Last month, the AACCNJ was recognized in Atlanta, GA, at the 124th Anniversary of the National Business League), formerly known as the Negro Business League, which was founded by Booker T. Washington in 1900. Over the past few years, the National Alliance for Black Business (NABB) has included the National Black Chamber of Commerce (NBCC) as a collaborating partner in this event. Accordingly, the AACCNJ received “National Black Chamber of Commerce of the Year,” for its excellence in governance, organizational growth, its ability to forge strategic partnerships that provide value to its members and its unwavering advocacy to them as well. An example of a strategic partnerships that we have been able to leverage is that of the US Chamber of Commerce (USCC), the world's largest business federation, not only does the AACCNJ have a board seat but has obtained the highest level of accreditation for a statewide chamber of commerce; **we are the only chamber in New Jersey out of its 154 chambers which possess such a recognized an esteemed honor from the US Chamber of Commerce**. Through this partnership with the USCC, we have been able to successfully advocate on behalf of a select group of members of the AACCNJ to participate in a significant event on September 13th in Washington D.C. This event will address and highlight the value proposition offered by black businesses through a panel discussion and networking exchange with corporate members of the USCC, the Executive Leadership Council (ELC) and the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). It is through these types of relationships that we can counter adverse perceptions of our constituency and mission and engage in a constructive dialogue towards mutual success and benefits.

Similarly, in New Jersey, wherein the AACCNJ was founded, we have experienced the same types of outcomes working with various industries within the private sectors; health, insurance, banking, retail, pharmaceutical, construction, and relative government agencies. While serving as the vanguard for the 1.2 million black residents and over 88,000 black businesses on socio-economic issues we have had some favorable outcomes within the public sector of New Jersey's economy, however, they have not been commensurate with the level of investment from a taxation or aggregate voter participation **such that blacks provide over 90** percent of its vote to the democratic party which has served as the majority party in power for a number of years in New Jersey

This fact was confirmed via the release in **January 2024** of a disparity study conducted by Mason Tillman, a consulting firm on behalf of the State of New Jersey which covered the availability and utilization of Blacks, Hispanic, Asian, Women and White Owned businesses in areas of Construction, Professional Services, and Goods and Services from 2015-2020. During this time period blacks along with its over 8 million residents paid taxes which funded billions of dollars of public contracts across our state, notwithstanding the documented availability of black businesses, they only received 13 of the contracts awarded in one category for \$3.3 million dollars, white woman received 250 contracts for \$277

million dollars and white male owned companies received 2500 contracts for \$10 billion dollars, these are all approximate numbers. I will admit that we expected results from this study would be bad, however not to this degree. Immediately following the release of the disparity study, the AACCNJ mobilized into action. We released statements voicing our displeasure on behalf of our constituency, established a Disparity Study Task Force which searched regionally and nationally to assemble best practices to propose to the New Jersey State Legislatures and to the Murphy Administration; recommendations of a more transparent, accountable, and equitable public contracting process for Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Women, Veterans, and LGBTQ in proportion to other businesses within New Jersey. Additionally, our Disparity Study Task Force has held several town hall meetings across the state of New Jersey sharing information about the study and proposed recommended changes in policy, procedural changes, and accountability measures.

Additionally, the Task Force met with the Murphy Administration on several occasions exchanging ideas. The Murphy administration has been engaged with the AACCNJ since the release of the disparity study, with ongoing meetings, and they are now deliberating on our proposed legislative recommendations and executive order. Similarly, we have shared information with Assemblywoman Shavonda Sumter, Chair of the Legislative Black Caucus. We also proposed a moratorium on all public contracts until such time we had agreement from the Legislators and the Murphy Administration on a more equitable public procurement process going forward. There has been no response to date on this proposal, or any recommendations to date, from Assemblywoman Sumter.

TRENTON, NJ. — February 26, 2024. The African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey (AACCNJ) seeks the support of the Murphy Administration, NJ State Senate President Nicholas P. Scutari, Assemblyman and Speaker, Craig J. Coughlin, and NJ State Representative, and NJ Legislative Black Caucus Chair, Shavonda E. Sumter, in its request for a moratorium and on all non-emergency public procurement contracts up to five million effective immediately.

What is of greater consequence to our efforts is the deafening silence from Chairwoman Sumter on the Disparity Study. As the leader of the Black Caucus, we expected an aggressive pursuit of an expeditious process, and at a minimal, public advocacy for resources and policies that would align with the AACCNJ to institute best practices and safeguard the assurances that taxpayer funded opportunities were available to all to compete for fairly and awarded equitably.

It is also important to note that the AACCNJ has put forth program proposals and strategies that would educate small, minority, and woman owned businesses about the public procurement process and provide them with the tools that would effectively help position them to compete in the marketplace for opportunities within the public and private sectors of our state.

Included in these proposals were similar strategies for adults and K-12 students that provided upskills training and exposure to innovation and technological systems that over time would enhance the competitiveness of New Jersey, unfortunately, our ideas were not funded in the last two budget appropriation cycles. This begs the question of who is advocating on behalf of blacks within the statehouse, especially following the Disparity Study that was released some 9 months ago and still no announcements of proposed changes to New Jersey's Public Contracting policies or process. Where is the sense of urgency? The 1.2 million black residents and 88,000 black businesses have the current social-economic standing in New Jersey; the highest poverty, unemployment, net worth \$17,000 vs \$322,000 for whites, 40 percent of blacks own homes vs 76 percent for whites and 93 percent of black business owners are sole proprietorships.

To date, the Legislative Black Caucus has not issued a statement or held a press conference to state their disappointment in the lack of inclusion of the diverse sectors of New Jersey's economy or made any declarations as to what they would do in the future to reverse this societal injustice especially to their constituency. Assemblywoman Sumter is not alone, as is Speaker Coughlin and Senate President Scutari on the lack of equitable participation of blacks in New Jersey's public contracting systems. Their collective silence and inaction are beyond disrespectful, it underscores the lack of reciprocity for the vote of hard working loyal black people and "taxation without representation." If our current administration had been Republican, the Black Caucus and Democratic leadership across the state would have convened at the Statehouse and made all types of overtures reflecting their dismay. Leading us to question whether their actions were political theater or not.

As the AACCNJ continues to advocate for a more transparent, accountable, and equitable public procurement process we seek your help in bringing this desired outcome to fruition. This is a defining moment in the history of our state and an opportunity to reconcile our mutual interests for the betterment of all of New Jersey.

QUESTIONS FOR THE LEGISLATORS

1. Where is your response to the recent Disparity Study? Black businesses received less than half of one percent of public contracts.
2. Why did you refuse to support the last two budget appropriation requests that would have supported programming of the African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey?
3. Why have these legislators failed to lend their support of a Black Business Agenda offered by the African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey?



Pictured left to right: Assemblywoman Sumter, Senator Scutari, Speaker Coughlin

Assemblywoman Shavonda E. Sumter (D) - N.J. Legislative Black Caucus Chair - District 35

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[Contact Your Legislator](#)

Senator Nicholas P. Scutari (D) Senate President - District 22

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Assemblyman Craig J. Coughlin (D) Speaker – District 19

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About the African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey

The African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey (AACCNJ) is dedicated to economically empowering and sustaining African American communities and businesses through entrepreneurship and capitalistic initiatives throughout the state of New Jersey and through its partnership with the National Black Chamber of Commerce, Inc. AACCNJ joins the top 3% of all chambers in the U.S. that are accredited, is the only accredited chamber in New Jersey, and is the only accredited African American chamber in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Federation.

The AACCNJ performs an essential role in the economic viability of New Jersey. While providing a platform for New Jersey's African American business leaders, to speak with a collective voice, the AACCNJ advocates and promotes economic diversity fostering a climate of business growth through major initiatives centering on education and public policy. The Chamber serves as a proactive advocacy group with a 501(c) 3 tax exemption, which is shared by the National Black Chamber of Commerce.