



Photo by Bill Greenblatt/UPI
A construction worker carried tools past metal shelves built to hold bodies in an overflow morgue, the Dignified Transfer Center, in Earth City on April 17.

Kwame raising scholarship funds without golf

Because of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, The Kwame Foundation has canceled its 17th annual golf tournament, which raises tens of thousands of dollars each year for scholarships for first-generation, college-bound students. The Kwame Foundation, a 501c(3) organization, is fundraising online so they can

■ “The needs of our college-bound students continue in significant ways.”

– Kim Thompson, Kwame Foundation

continue to help students. Donations can be made at www.kwamefoundation.org/donate.

Since 2003, the foundation has endowed over \$1.5 million in scholarships and grants at over 12 different universities. Although the foundation serves students of all races, the

primary focus is minority students who are bright, talented, high-achieving individuals but might not otherwise have an opportunity for higher education.

“The needs of our college-bound students continue in significant ways,” said Kim Thompson, executive director of The Kwame Foundation and cofounder along with Anthony (Tony) Thompson, CEO of Kwame Building Group.

For more information on Kwame Foundation, visit www.kwamefoundation.org or call (314) 754-5619.

Minority exclusion at the makeshift morgue

Less than \$1K of \$1.67M in public contracts went to minority firms

By Rebecca Rivas
Of The St. Louis American

In early April, officials at the St. Louis County Department of Public Health made a grim realization: the region would need a temporary morgue for anticipated deaths from COVID-19.

They worked with St. Charles County to build an overflow facility they called the Dignified Transfer Center in Earth City in about 10 days. The project cost almost \$1.67 million, with St. Louis County paying more than \$1.13 million and St. Charles County paying about \$531,000. But, like so many other aspects of the COVID-19 crisis, business opportunities resulting from these contracts were not awarded equitably.

A joint investigation between the *St. Louis American* and Type Investigations found that African-American contractors earned only a tiny fraction of the publicly-financed construction dollars available. Despite a county law requiring 24 percent of contract dollars go to minority-owned business enterprises (MBEs), less than \$1,000 was awarded.

If minority businesses had received 24 percent of contract dollars, they would have earned nearly \$400,000.

■ Despite a county law requiring 24 percent of contract dollars go to minority-owned business enterprises (MBEs), less than \$1,000 was awarded.

In fact, officials at the St. Louis County Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, which oversees compliance of the 2018 inclusion law, were not informed about the morgue’s construction, in violation of protocol. The director of the inclusion office said her team learned about the morgue from a news broadcast.

The *American* has found that the county’s failure to comply with the law pre-dates the current crisis. Pre-existing “on call” contracts used for emergency situations like the morgue project were never adjusted to include the minority contracting requirement. These lapses have left Black contractors left out of business opportunity in the midst of a crisis that has impacted their community more than any other.

St. Louis County makes up the western, more suburban part of the metropolitan region and has a population of about one million people. African Americans make up about 26 percent of the county’s population. To the east, the City of St. Louis is the keeper of the iconic Gateway Arch and other tourist attractions but only has about 300,500 residents, and almost half are African-American.

Of the 500 people who had died of COVID-19 in St. Louis County as of

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Lucas named principal of Hanna Woods Elementary

Will replace retiring Kristy Roberts, effective July 1

Cartelia Lucas has been selected as the principal of Parkway’s Hanna Woods Elementary, effective July 1. She replaces Kristy Roberts, who is retiring.

Lucas currently serves as principal of Highcroft Ridge Elementary. She previously served as assistant principal at both Highcroft Ridge and Ross Elementary schools.

Prior to her leadership roles, she was an instructional coach, literacy coach, reading intervention specialist and classroom teacher at Parkway elementary schools for 13 years. She holds a doctorate in education

leadership from Missouri Baptist University and both a bachelor’s and master’s degree from Webster University in education.

Parkway Superintendent Keith Marty said Lucas “is a positive and energetic leader who is committed to developing relationships with students, staff, families and the community she serves.”



Cartelia Lucas

Four power hitters to lead United Way Campaign

Steward, Osborn, Pennington and Baxter are 2020 spokespersons

By Chris King
Of The St. Louis American

Faced with unprecedented need because of the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic devastation, the United Way of Greater St. Louis has unprecedented firepower beyond its 2020 fundraising campaign. The campaign typically has two chairpersons. This campaign has spokespersons – and they are power hitters by any standard.

Those four spokespersons are David Steward, founder and chairman of World Wide Technology; Kathy Osborn, president and CEO of the Regional Business Council; Penny Pennington, managing partner of Edward Jones; and Warner Baxter, chairman, president, and CEO of Ameren Corporation.

“As our region and neighbors face unprecedented challenges and impacts amid the COVID-19 crisis and the call for racial equity, our support of United Way and its work is more critical than ever,” Steward said.



David Steward



Kathy Osborn



Warner Baxter



Penny Pennington

“This year it’s more important than ever that those in our community who can support this work step up and continue to do so,” Osborn said.

“United Way leads our community in supporting and maintaining our region’s safety net nonprofits to help keep our neighbors whole,” Pennington said.

“Through United Way, thousands of people in our community receive vital resources, like food, shelter, mentorship for young people, job training, and so much more,” said Baxter.

United Way’s Board Chair Michael Moehn noted how unique of a situation it is to have four key leaders unite to lead the campaign.

“Certainly, this year is unprecedented in all we do, and this calls for an unprecedented approach in rallying the community behind United Way,”

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Morgue

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June 15, 186 — about 37% — were African American. Black residents of St. Louis County are dying from COVID-19 at almost twice the rate of white residents: 77.4 per 100,000, compared to 42 per 100,000 for white residents.

“The African-American community is disproportionately dying because of COVID, and we needed to ensure that our businesses didn’t roll up and die as well,” said Yaphett El-Amin, executive director for MOKAN, an advocacy group for minority contractors.

St. Louis County isn’t the only place where minority-owned businesses have been left out of contracts for emergency building funded through the CARES Act. Throughout the country, temporary facilities for hospital overflow were built quickly as well, and it appears that minority contractors were also left out of this work.

About \$721.6 million has been spent on building nearly 40 facilities nationwide. Minority-owned construction companies earned \$26.2 million, or about 3.6 percent of those dollars. Black-owned businesses were awarded \$66,856 in contracts — or 0.009%.

Since the *American* began making inquiries, El-Amin said that St. Louis County Executive Dr. Sam Page has called on MOKAN to assist the county in writing inclusion language for awarding federal COVID-19 response dollars going forward.

“We are going to make these changes,” said Page’s spokesman, “and we’re going to work with our procurement department. We’re going to work with our Office of Diversity, and we’re going to work with minority contractors to assure that there are no carve-outs or exemptions to the bidding process — emergency or not.”

‘It’s a total disregard for us’

When media outlets began reporting on the temporary morgue in early April, Hazel Erby started getting calls from black business owners.

“They were pretty upset with me because they felt I was not fighting for them, and that wasn’t the case,” said Erby, director of the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. “We pressed upon them that we did not know anything about it. They went around us.”

Erby told the *American* that her team found out about the morgue project on the news, just like county residents. Contracts had been awarded by the county’s Department of Transportation and Public Works, without her knowing. She and her team immediately started asking questions.

According to protocol, Erby’s office must be given an opportunity to review contracts to ensure compliance with the inclusion law. She said she got no information or answers.

Twelve contracts were generated to complete the temporary morgue, including ones for electric, plumbing, roofing and general contracting. The 2018 law stipulates that 24% of the money awarded to each of these contractors must go to minority-owned subcontractors. On this project, only one of those companies met that goal: Professional Environmental Engineers, or PE, the only business that is itself minority-owned. This firm received the second-lowest contract at \$1,650 — \$690 of that total was subcontracted to a non-minority business. The minority-inclusion stipulation was included in only one of the 12 contracts; about \$450,000 for electric work, but that company, Reinhold Electric, did not award any of the money allocated for the morgue project to a minority-owned business.

One black contractor said the exclusion of minorities on this project was “unfortunate, sad and ridiculous.”

“Small businesses are getting hit harder than anyone else,” said Tony Thompson,

chairman and CEO of Kwame Building Group, a black-owned firm based in the City of St. Louis. “So you would think that when there’s an opportunity like this to provide business to smaller firms, that they would be all over it. And that has not happened. It’s almost like whenever there’s misery in the world, minority firms get the brunt of that as well.”

Thompson said the rumbling from the minority contractor community about the morgue job was immediate.

Because the project had to be completed within a week, county officials said that they largely used their “on-call contracts,” which are standing agreements with businesses that have already gone through the bidding process the county has in place in case of emergencies.

All of the on-call contractors that worked on the morgue had their contracts extended or issued after the inclusion law was in place; however, only one contract (with Reinhold Electric), included the minority-inclusion stipulation.

Jennifer Keating, acting director of administration who oversees procurement, recently told members of the St. Louis County Council’s Oversight Committee that they haven’t included the minority-participation stipulation in these agreements when they come up for extension. Keating said the terms and conditions couldn’t be changed on existing contracts, even when they were being extended.

This is one of many ways procurement officials have gotten around adhering to the inclusion law, said Jack Thomas, the county’s former chief diversity officer.

“The county counselor said we could not do that because we were changing the terms,” Thomas said. “Our position was if negotiated...the contrac-

tor could either agree to include minorities and women at that point or they could disagree, in which case we would rebid the work. It seemed like a pretty simple solution to us.”

That was a battle that Thomas repeatedly lost during his nearly two-year tenure at the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

Doug Moore, spokesman for the county executive, said the actual execution of the emergency on-call contracts was likely appropriate in the morgue project.

“But what was not executed appropriately were these continued renewals of the contracts without amending them, so that a group is exempt” from the minority-participation requirements, Moore said.

Thomas took his position as the county’s first chief diversity officer in July 2018 and built the MWBE program from scratch. But he left his post in March after being disheartened by the program’s slow progress and constant pushback

from county administration, he said. The *American* asked how he would have reacted if the morgue had been built without his knowledge.

“I would have been livid, and I would have let that be known,” Thomas said. “It’s a total disregard for us, our role, the community and our constituency.”

According to internal emails between Reinhold and county officials, the company was hired as the electric contractor by the general contractor, Landmark Contract Management, which is based in St. Charles County. A Reinhold employee wrote that the company was not told the morgue project was a St. Louis County job until the end of construction. The employee wrote that Reinhold was not aware it was being hired through its standing on-call contract with the county, which includes the minority-inclusion stipulation. Reinhold’s supplier, Butler Supply, accounted for all of the project’s women-owned business enterprise (WBE) participation — which was 4.2 percent.

St. Louis Electric was the minority subcontractor listed in Reinhold’s contract. James Jackson, president of St. Louis Electric, said he would have sent workers over had he been called, but they weren’t hurting for work at that time. Jackson isn’t surprised that the project had virtually no minority participation — had such guidelines not been established by the city and with other public entities in the region, his business would have never got off the ground, he said.

“A lot of these big projects — were there not minority participation requirements, obviously, they would go through their friends, their associates,”

Jackson said. “So minority participation has definitely been an asset to me throughout the duration of my company.”

Jackson’s company has now been certified for more than 25 years, he said, and has been the prime contractor on multi-million-dollar contracts.

In a statement to the *American*, Reinhold said, “Reinhold Electric complied, in full, with each and every requirement provided by the owners’ representative.”

Despite county officials’ claim that they used pre-existing contracts that lacked the minority-inclusion stipulations for the morgue project, that wasn’t the case for every company. There were two major contracts that were new: the general contractor — a \$375,944.07 contract — and the roofer — a \$12,300 contract.

According to Thomas, minority participation could have easily been included in these two contracts, especially if the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion had been brought to the table. The businesses that were contracted have been around a long time and know how to employ minority contractors, he said.

Tony Thompson, of Kwame Building Group, agreed.

“At this juncture, everyone knows who the viable minority firms are and who they are not,” Thompson said. “However, they were able to select those majority firms to get this work done. They could have easily selected the minority firms at the same time. And they didn’t do it.”

Overall, it didn’t matter that the on-call contracts didn’t have minority participation written into them, Thomas said. The county could have simply asked the contractors: these are the goals, what can you do? Most of the companies have some familiarity with minority-participation requirements because their other customers have them: the City of St. Louis, the St. Louis Housing Authority, Metropolitan Sewer District (MSD), and even some of the universities, Thomas said.

“It was a foreign concept to the county but not to most anybody else,” Thomas said. “You might not have had the 25 and 10 (percent minority participation), but you certainly would have had more than zero.”

‘Zero or pretty close’

The City of St. Louis has had an inclusion program to ensure the participation of minority businesses on publicly funded projects for almost three decades, but St. Louis County only established its program in 2018 when then-County Executive Steve Stenger tapped Jack Thomas.

“It was that challenge of being able to start a program from scratch in an area where there has not been one,” said Thomas, who had helped lead the city’s diversity initiatives for many years. “I knew that there would be some resistance. That was, by and large, what I

found.”

Thomas brought on a team of three officials, most of whom had decades of experience working in compliance in the region.

He and his team were up against a small but authoritative group from the Office of Procurement, Department of Transportation and the county counselor’s office, who had a “vested interest” in keeping things the same, Thomas said.

Thomas said these people would have preferred a weak inclusion law that had a lot of loopholes. As part of the process, the contracts had to go to Thomas’ office before they were awarded to ensure that there were sufficient minority subcontractors employed on the project — or that the contractors made “good-faith efforts” to do so.

On several occasions, Thomas’ team would recommend that the prime contractor not get the contract, for a variety of reasons.

Sometimes the minority- or women-owned firms weren’t certified or were so-called pass-through companies — which is when a prime contractor agrees to pay a pass-through company, but that subcontractor agrees to subcontract the work to a non-diverse firm. Yet, the Office of Procurement would ignore Thomas’ team’s recommendations, Thomas said. In some cases, he added, they wouldn’t even tell his team that they awarded the contract.

This is why the fact that protocol wasn’t followed on the morgue project wasn’t surprising, Thomas said. And the fact that the project came back with almost no minority participation was even less of a surprise.

“We tend to know the outcome if nobody is pushing it up front,” Thomas said. “If there is no requirement or if it’s not stressed in the bidding process, then we know what to expect — that it will be zero or pretty close to that.”

Page, the current county executive, recognizes that “change often takes far too long,” said Moore in an email, but that Page is committed to this work.

“As part of his commitment, the county executive asked MOKAN and other stakeholders to help identify the best way forward to increase the opportunities for minority-owned and women-owned businesses,” Moore said. “We look forward to working with them to move the initiative forward.”

County Executive Page is grateful for the work that Hazel Erby, Jack Thomas and Fran Lyles-Wiggins have done to bring this program to life. With Ms. Erby’s continued leadership concerning diversity initiatives in St. Louis County, we hope to continue making progress so that everyone has a fair opportunity to compete for county contracts.”

This article was reported in partnership with Type Investigations.



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Moehn said. Having leadership from four major St. Louis entities join together in this way will help to align our local resources and create our most successful path forward.”

United Way of Greater St. Louis supports over 1 million

people in 16 counties throughout Missouri and Illinois to create strong and healthy communities. Additionally, United Way manages 2-1-1, a free and confidential helpline that connects people to resources and services. Since March 12, 2-1-1 has received nearly 43,000 calls, compared to 18,800 for that same time period in 2019.

United Way’s annual campaign runs in the fall from

September through mid-November. The dollars raised through campaign support 167 Safety Net agencies that help people through five impact areas: provide food and shelter, establish financial stability, foster learning, improve health, and strengthen communities. View the list of Safety Net agencies at <https://helpingpeople.org/funding/>.

“Dave, Kathy, Penny, and Warner are such passionate and dedicated leaders, and all have been longtime supporters of United Way,” said Michelle Tucker, president and CEO of United Way of Greater St. Louis. “This year will require collective and historical fundraising efforts to help respond to the complex challenges across our St. Louis region.”

Recently, United Way has been responding to the immediate and long-term needs of the community due to COVID-19 and its economic impacts. So far, United Way has invested more than \$1.2 million into nonprofits throughout the St. Louis region that are providing access to food, medicine and personal care items; rent, mortgage and utility assistance; childcare for essential workers; and mental health support.

For more information and to contribute, contact 314-421-0700 or visit www.HelpingPeople.org.

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