

U.S. Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship:
*Promoting Opportunity: The Need for Targeted Federal Business Programs
to Address Ongoing Racial Discrimination*

Written Testimony of Mrs. Ronnette Myers
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Monday, May 6, 2024

My name is Ronnette Meyers, and I am the President and CEO of JLAN Solutions. My journey as an entrepreneur in government contracting, particularly within the 8(a) program, has been profoundly shaped by confronting and overcoming both overt and subtle discrimination and adversity. This narrative is not just about my professional growth but also an exposé of the persistent barriers that minority and women entrepreneurs frequently encounter, as well as how these barriers directly affect my business operations.

Before launching my own business, my career with the Federal Government took a transformative turn from administrative to technical roles. This shift was catalyzed by the support of a center director who sponsored my college education in technical fields, validating my potential and fueling my determination. However, my journey as a technical specialist was marred by discrimination from the outset. On my first day in a new position, I faced unsettling questions from my boss that seemed to challenge not just my professional presence but also my racial and gender identity. “Why are you here?” “Why did they send you?” he asked. Throughout my tenure, I endured a consistent undercurrent of bias, which left me feeling isolated and marginalized. Despite my dedication and achievements, the toxic environment became unsustainable, prompting me to seek new opportunities and embark on a journey of self-empowerment and entrepreneurship.

Transitioning to a government contractor role in Washington, D.C., I found a workplace that valued my skills and where I felt a genuine sense of belonging. This positive change was significant, but the scars from my previous experiences were indelible. They served as a stark reminder of the challenges that lay ahead as I ventured into establishing my own company, JLAN Solutions.

Founding JLAN Solutions in 2010 under the 8(a) program was a dream fueled by ambition and the legacy of resilience passed down by my mother, a retired Chief Master Sergeant of the U.S. Air Force. Yet, this new beginning was quickly tempered by the harsh realities of entrepreneurship in a space where resources were unevenly distributed, and support for minority-owned small businesses like mine was minimal.

My initial forays into partnerships with Majority-Owned businesses were promising but ultimately disappointing. These collaborations, which I had hoped would bolster my businesses standing and visibility, instead often left me feeling exploited and sidelined. The first

partnership I formed to secure an opportunity within a federal agency disintegrated when the company's leadership unexpectedly withdrew the partnership due to my company being a minority small business, a professional rejection that felt personal and left me devastated. It wasn't just a setback; it was a deeply personal blow that left me questioning my worth and place in the industry.

The subsequent challenge came when another Majority-Owned business protested our successful contract bid, a move that jeopardized not just a significant financial opportunity but also the stability and future growth of JLAN. An employee from this company explicitly warned me about racial issues he observed, prompting all minority-owned businesses to unite and address the situation through a collective letter. This protest underscored the systemic obstacles faced by minority businesses, including financial, structural, and discriminatory barriers that can hinder our progress. This protest was not just a professional setback; it was emblematic of the larger systemic obstacles that minority businesses often face—obstacles that include not only financial and structural barriers but also discriminatory practices that can derail even the most promising ventures.

During a recent meeting in Virginia, I found myself among a group predominantly comprised of White males, with only two other black women, including myself, and another woman of lighter complexion. As the networking session commenced, it became painfully evident that we were being overlooked and dismissed by our peers. The palpable sense of isolation and exclusion weighed heavily on me, stirring up feelings of frustration, anger, and disbelief. Glancing at the other black woman, we shared a knowing look, silently acknowledging the shared experience of being marginalized. With a mutual understanding, we gravitated towards each other, seeking solace and solidarity in our shared identity. As we exchanged glances, we conveyed the unspoken question: "Do you feel the same sense of disregard and discrimination that I do?" With a heavy heart, she confirmed my suspicions, affirming that the dismissive treatment was indeed rooted in our race and gender. In that moment, I couldn't help but question: "Is it me, or is it us?" Yet, the answer was painfully clear – it was not a reflection of our worth or capabilities, but rather a stark reminder of the systemic biases and prejudices that continue to pervade our society.

Throughout these experiences, the role of the 8(a) program has been twofold: it has been a crucial lifeline, providing access to opportunities otherwise out of reach; and it has also been a constant reminder of the disparities that still exist in the business world. This dual reality drives my commitment to not only navigate these challenges but also to advocate for and support other minority and women entrepreneurs facing similar battles.

As I reflect on my journey, the lessons are clear. Each instance of discrimination, while painful, has left an indelible mark on my resilience and determination. While these experiences have undoubtedly strengthened my resolve, I cannot overlook the tangible losses they have inflicted upon me and my family. They've taken away real opportunities, translating to dollars out of my pocket and food off my family's table. It's a harsh reality that when individuals engage in discriminatory practices, they directly impact the bottom line of my company, resulting in significant losses and setbacks.

They have also deepened my commitment to breaking down the barriers that minority and women entrepreneurs face, ensuring a more equitable and inclusive industry for the generations to come. Racial discrimination, and the barriers it has imposed, has at times hindered my business operations and ability to receive contracting opportunities. However, I believe that my story, marked by both setbacks and successes, is a testament to the enduring strength and potential of those who continue to fight for their rightful place in the business world.