



February 2026

INSIGHTS TO OPPORTUNITY



NEW YEAR
NEW
OPPORTUNITIES

AGENTS, VENDORS, CONTRACTORS, AND BUSINESS OWNERS MAKE CONNECTIONS AT OUR ANNUAL MEET THE BUYER EVENT.

— *A Message from the Director*

Hello,

It's been a while since we last connected, and a lot has changed since then. 2025 was not an easy year. It challenged us—organizationally, professionally, and personally. (If you're reading this, I'm going to assume you know exactly what I mean.) We pushed through it, but pushing through doesn't mean the work is done.

Even with uncertainty in the rearview mirror, my team and I stayed focused on what matters most: making sure small businesses continue to have access to opportunity, advocacy, and meaningful support. We've worked deliberately to align with court rulings and policy requirements, while still protecting the heart of this department—the hands-on assistance and trust we've built with the small business community for more than 40 years.

Now we're stepping into 2026, and the energy feels different. The conversation has shifted. There's no more doom and gloom—there's momentum. New year. New opportunities. We embraced that mindset by hiring nearly a dozen new staff members toward the end of last year, finally giving our department the capacity to do the work at the level this city deserves. That growth is also why you're seeing this newsletter again—it's a sign that we're rebuilding, reengaging, and moving forward with intention.

We closed out 2025 on a high note with our Meet the Buyer event, which exceeded our 2024 numbers and created real opportunities for small business owners to connect directly with decision-makers. It was also a chance for our growing team to work side by side, build chemistry, and put faces to names—both internally and across the community. Honestly, it was the perfect way to transition into a new year.

Looking ahead, 2026 is shaping up to be a big one. You'll see continued investment in the programs you know and trust, along with several new and expanded initiatives designed to support businesses at every stage of growth. We're strengthening mentorship pathways, expanding industry-specific opportunities, and creating more intentional spaces for learning, networking, and capacity building. From financial symposiums and industry days to enhanced mentor-protégé programs, small business hubs, contractor development initiatives, and targeted entrepreneurship programs, our focus is simple: clearer pathways, stronger preparation, and better outcomes for Houston's small business community.

As you read through this newsletter, my hope is that you find something new—whether it's a program you didn't know existed, an opportunity you hadn't considered, or a reminder that you don't have to navigate this work alone. Some changes will feel like clear improvements. Others may just feel different. But none of them take away from our mission. If anything, they strengthen it!



Cylenthia Hoyrd
Director, Office of Business Opportunity

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Meet the New

External Affairs, affectionately known as simply “EA,” is OBO’s dedicated Communications branch. Our department’s job is to deliver crucial, informational, and fun news to our public and our team — like this very newsletter you’re reading. Since November of 2025, we have had a (nearly) complete overhaul in staff; and since it’s our faces you’ll see at events, we wanted you to get to know us.

Our Established Members



Brandon Jones **External Affairs Division Manager**

Brandon Jones is a senior external affairs and public affairs leader with more than 12 years of experience helping public institutions communicate clearly, lead confidently, and build public trust.

He currently serves as Division Manager of External Affairs for the City of Houston’s Office of Business Opportunity, where he advises executive leadership and elected officials and oversees communications and public engagement for programs serving thousands of small businesses and workforce participants across the city.

Brandon is known for steady leadership in high-visibility, high-scrutiny environments, guiding complex policy rollouts, crisis response, media relations, executive messaging, and large-scale public events. Before Houston, he held senior communications roles with the Austin Police Department and the Texas Army National Guard, supporting organizational change and statewide emergency operations.

He holds a Master of Arts in Mass Communication from Texas Tech University and a Bachelor of Arts in Communication from Oakland University, and began his career as an award-winning television news anchor.



Jesse Rubio **Workforce Development Coordinator**

Jesse Rubio is the current Workforce Development Coordinator at the Office of Business Opportunity. Serving in this role for over 3 years now, he leads the development and launch of signature workforce initiatives, overseeing project scope, budgets, timelines, and deliverables to ensure measurable community impact. Jesse holds a Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies from The University of Texas at Austin and a Master of Business Administration from the University of Texas at San Antonio. Previously, Jesse worked as a Management Analyst for the City of San Antonio, where he supported cross-departmental projects, developed standard operating procedures, evaluated RFPs and RFQs, and ensured compliance with federal, state, and local regulations. Earlier in his career, he built a strong foundation in financial services at USAA, originating high-volume loan portfolios and strengthening customer relationships. Jesse is a native San Antonian who enjoys watching and playing basketball and football. His hobbies include going to the gym, taking his dog, Benito, for walks, and hanging out with friends for game nights and sporting events.

External Affairs Team

Our New Members



Taylisha Clark
Business Development Coordinator

Taylisha Clark is a Business Development Coordinator with the City of Houston's Office of Business Opportunity in External Affairs. She has served the City of Houston for over nine years, with extensive experience in Contract Compliance. Taylisha supports small business owners by connecting them with resources, certification programs, and partnerships that help entrepreneurs start, grow, and succeed across Houston.



Conrad Garcia
Communications Specialist

Conrad Garcia is a graduate of the University of Houston and currently getting his M.S. in Marketing Research at Texas Tech University. He began his Communications and Marketing career in 2014, working for ESPN Houston. He is also a former high school Journalism teacher. Conrad is currently the Communications Specialist for OBO, managing social media, creating graphics, capturing photos and video, and developing the department newsletter.



Alejandro Guajardo
Business Development Manager

Alejandro was born in Laredo, Texas. He is a United States Marine Corps combat veteran who served honorably from February 2010 to February 2014 as a Communications/Electronics Specialist or O621/Field Radio Operator with one successful combat deployment to Afghanistan. During that time, he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant or E-5. He graduated from Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) in December 2019 where he earned a Bachelor of Business Administration concentrating in Management. He continued his education at TAMIU and earned a Master of Business Administration in July 2021. He enjoys spending time outdoors, traveling and hanging out with friends and family. He joined the City of Houston - Office of Business Opportunity as a Business Development Manager in 2025 and is ready to serve you!



Kel Victor
LGBTQ+ Economic Empowerment Coordinator

Kel is a Houstonian through-and-through. Raised in Greenspoint, Kel became an inner-looper while attending the University of Houston. After graduating, they looked for work that could directly impact Houstonians in need. Through AmeriCorps, they addressed food insecurity for preschool-aged children, seniors, and local food deserts. At the Houston Food Bank, they partnered with organizations in neighboring counties to increase enrollment in social and health services. In 2025, Kel joined the Office of Business Opportunity as the LGBTQ+ Economic Empowerment Coordinator, heading a pilot program connecting job seekers and small business owners to government and community support. In their free time, you can find Kel biking along Brays Bayou and Columbia Tap, supporting local musicians and performers, or volunteering at one of their favorite nonprofits.



MBE-Certified Project Management Group PMG, LLC Gives OBO Tour of Terminal B Project

Certified Minority Business Enterprise Project Management Group PMG, LLC and its President and CEO Vladimir Naranjo gave OBO Director Cylenthia Hoyrd a tour of its Terminal B reconstruction project at George Bush Intercontinental Airport. Also in attendance were project partners United Airlines and Manhattan Construction Group.

The tour itself lasts about 2 hours as the group barely made a dent traversing the three-level, 765,000-square-foot structure.

“The tour of the Terminal B expansion with PMG, a certified firm, and United Airlines was a display of equitable partnership between large and small firms and public and private entities,” Hoyrd said. “The work at the airport is an example of what happens when small firms have access to work and strong values. The result is a city where small businesses grow and contribute greatly to the infrastructure of Houston and the economies of our communities.”

In November of 2023, United announced the over-\$2 billion investment to overhaul its

Terminal B. To help streamline the project, they tapped on the services of the local Houston company PMG.

“Together, between United and the City, they value the participation of small business,” Naranjo said. “We’re grateful to be part of the project management team that is helping the City and United to build this great project.”

2026 marks exactly 20 years that the small company has been in business. For nearly the entirety of its existence, PMG has been certified with Houston and has experienced great success working on city projects.

“I highly encourage any small business in the city of Houston to get certified, regardless of what you do,” Naranjo said. “You will get emails. You will be notified to events. You will be able to be connected with other partners in the industry. Believe me, you will grow.”

Completion of the project is expected for fall of 2026. You can learn more about PMG at PMGUnited.com



New Program



New Pilot Program Creates Pathways for the LGBTQ+ Community

The Office of Business Opportunity (OBO) launched its LGBTQ+ Economic Empowerment pilot program on Oct. 6, 2025, with one clear goal: to break down barriers and create real opportunities for queer job seekers and entrepreneurs across Houston.

This program was built in response to what we were hearing directly from the community—that too many LGBTQ+ individuals face challenges accessing jobs, growing businesses, and navigating systems that weren't always designed with them in mind. Through both long-standing and new partnerships, our program coordinator, Kel Victor, is providing hands-on support, guidance, and resources that help move people forward—whether they're starting a business, expanding one, or looking for their next career step.

You'll often find OBO showing up at events hosted by the Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce, one of our long-time partners. At these events, Kel has connected with queer and allied business owners at every stage—first-time entrepreneurs, established brands, and everyone in between—sharing information about the many ways OBO can support their growth.

That outreach continued at the 2026 Thrive Business Summit on January 29, 2026, where OBO's External Affairs team met with small businesses to talk through certification opportunities that can open doors to contracting with the City of Houston. One of those options, the LGBTQBE certification, is a national designation for businesses that are at least 51% LGBTQ+-owned and operating across a wide range of industries. To help demystify the process and highlight its impact, Kel recently interviewed two LGBTQBE-certified business owners, who shared how being openly queer and certified has positively influenced their professional journeys. Keep an eye on OBO's social media channels for clips from those conversations and details on how to get your business certified.

But this work goes beyond events and certifications—it's about taking action and meeting people where they are. Over the past few months, Kel has worked one-on-one with LGBTQ+ job seekers by identifying open roles, reviewing resumes, making industry connections, and providing personalized guidance.

In partnership with the Montrose Center, OBO hosted its first resume workshop on January 21, 2026. Participants received a digital resource packet filled with resume templates, articles, videos, and job-search tools they could continue using long after the workshop ended. Feedback from attendees was overwhelmingly positive. One participant shared, "My attitude toward job hunting has become more optimistic," while another said, "After this workshop, I feel confident that my resume will stand out for the next position I apply for." Additional job-seeker support events are planned for February and beyond.

Economic empowerment is not out of reach for queer Houstonians. The City of Houston—alongside community partners like the Montrose Center, the Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce, and many others—is committed to building clear, accessible pathways to success. Whether you're growing a business, searching for work, or supporting someone who is, help is available. To get started, contact kel.victor@houstontx.gov



The City of Houston and OBO roll out 2 new Veteran-specific certifications in 2026

SDVOSB - Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business

Applies to firms owned and operated by service-disabled veterans who hold Veteran Small Business Certification with the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Veteran-Owned Small Business

Applies to firms owned and operated by veterans who hold Veteran Small Business Certification with the U.S. Small Business Administration.



Taking Measures to Expedite the Certification Process

This year, we're taking incredible strides to ensure the user experience is faster and more efficient for business owners. This couldn't have been a top goal for us if it wasn't for the Herculean efforts of our certification team.

Since 2017, our office has been dealing with a myriad of obstacles that got in the way of getting business owners certified in a timely fashion. For starters, we took on a small business initiative during the 2017 Super Bowl that consumed a lot of time and manpower in Certifications. That manpower was also a whopping total of five people, including its manager and supervisor. We also maintain outside partnerships with other agencies that accept our certifications. Throw all that in with the fact that processes were not streamlined, and it's easy to see how we got here.

"Each application that came through this office required a desk audit, which was a reference check, a field audit," Certification & Designations Division Manager Vanessa Aplon said. "That meant that I got in the car, I drove to you, and I did an on-site audit and then a financial audit. Over time, some of those steps have been changed to help us process applications faster."

When Mayor John Whitmire and a new administration stepped in, crucial changes were

made. First, your application doesn't move past screening unless it's 100% complete — previously it was 80% — and it must be completed in the allotted amount of time. This greatly tamped down the number of applications we were getting. Also removed was the ability to come back within 30 days of an application rejection. Companies would come back multiple times after their subsequent rejections, thus clogging up the works. After months of this updated process, the department decided to take one last measure — pausing applications. While this might have been frustrating for potential incoming applicants, ultimately this was the right decision to make. Even if applications were still accepted, they would have been in the backlog, with applicants not knowing when they'd reach the next step of the process. From July 1 to Dec. 12, the certification team processed 273 approved applications, bringing down the backlog to zero. That was also just approved applications. There were plenty more that were processed.

Today, the team is operating at a fully restaffed 15-person team, they have a clear backlog, and they're ready to take what they've learned through this experience and expand on it.

"We are feeling very, very good," Aplon said.

"Applications are coming in, and we are getting those processed in a really good time frame. While we were processing the backlog, we were also tasked with coming up with ways to keep the applications processed in an acceptable amount of time."

Beyond certification processes, the department is in the process of revamping the FAQs for both certifications and Hire Houston First on the OBO website to provide helpful information. They are also adding an on-demand pre-certification workshop soon in addition to the trainings that are already taking place every first and third Tuesday of each month.

To learn more about certifications, or how to get in touch, visit houstontx.gov/obo/certification_overview.html

Understanding the Chapter 15 Rollout

A Q&A with OBO Procurement Specialists Tifney Scott & Jamie Childress



As the City of Houston's Office of Business Opportunity (OBO) prepares to implement key updates to Chapter 15, we sat down with Procurement Specialists Tifney Scott and Jamie Childress, who are helping lead the rollout within OBO's Department Services Division. Department Services plays a critical role in translating policy into practice — ensuring departments, vendors, and small businesses understand how the changes will work operationally. Tifney and Jamie Childress work alongside the broader team to guide the implementation process and provide clarity during this transition. In this Q&A, they break down what Chapter 15 is, why changes were necessary, and what small business owners should expect as the rollout moves forward.

What is Chapter 15, and what does it mean for small business owners?

Chapter 15 governs the City of Houston's small business participation programs. It outlines how certifications are administered and how small businesses can participate in City contracts. For small business owners, Chapter 15 determines how participation goals are set, how certifications are recognized, and how firms can compete for opportunities. The updates ensure the program remains legally sound while continuing to expand access to opportunity.

What caused the rollout of Chapter 15?

In May 2025, following the release of OBO's Disparity Study, and amid national efforts challenging diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, the constitutionality of similar programs across the country came into question. After reviewing the disparity study findings, OBO made necessary adjustments to ensure the long-term sustainability and legal integrity of its small business programs. The goal was clear: protect the future of opportunity programs while remaining compliant with the law.

What changes were made?

- Removal of the 4% Small Business (SBE) cap on construction contracts. Previously, small business participation on construction contracts was capped at 4%. That cap has now been removed.
- Expanded SBE utilization across all spending categories. Small Business participation can now be utilized across all spending categories — including construction, professional services, goods, and other non-professional services — increasing flexibility and opportunity.
- Implementation of a Personal Net Worth (PNW) requirement. A personal net worth standard will now apply to all certifications and will follow Small Business Administration (SBA) guidelines.
- Addition of new certifications. OBO now maintains the following additional certifications: Persons with Disabilities Business Enterprise (PDBE), Veteran-Owned Small Business (VOSB), Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Business (SDVOSB), and LGBTQ+-Owned Business. These certifications may be utilized for gold credit for up to 4% in lieu of MWBE participation, or in combination with MWBE participation.

Why were these changes necessary?

The disparity study evaluated all aspects of the program — including spending patterns — to determine whether true disparities existed among different classifications and demographic groups. While OBO remains committed to ensuring every group has equal opportunity to succeed, it must also operate within constitutional parameters. These updates strike that balance — preserving opportunity while strengthening legal defensibility.

What's next?

The Department Services Division has already conducted trainings outlining what the Chapter 15 rollout will look like, equipping departments and stakeholders with the knowledge needed to navigate the changes. In the coming weeks, Chapter 15 will officially roll out. The rollout will be closely monitored. Additional process updates, trainings, and information sessions will be provided to ensure a smooth transition and continued success for Houston's small business community.

Closing

At its core, the Chapter 15 rollout reinforces what OBO has always stood for — expanding opportunity while protecting the integrity of the program. With clearer guidelines, broader certifications, and increased flexibility, Houston's small business community is positioned not just to adapt, but to compete and grow.

MTB BY THE NUMBERS

➔ New Proclamation



Dec. 11, 2025, was officially declared Small Business Day in the city of Houston. Mayor John Whitmire and his

team joined the Office of Business Opportunity during our event to present the proclamation with Director Cylenthia Hoyrd and our office's partner Milton Thibodeaux. (Photo to the right.)



➔ Raising Funds

15

For the first time ever, OBO used its premier event to raise money, but we still managed to keep it free for the

public. We raised over \$15K thanks to our partners and exhibitors. This money will be used to create vital programs and workshops that will further expand our reach to the public.

➔ Numbers Don't Lie

97

According to the survey we conducted on our attendees, 97% of them said that they would attend again this

year. 93% of respondents said that they found the event to be informational. 41% of those respondents said that this was their first time attending MTB. Any way you spin it, if you're in Houston and a small business owner, procurement agent, contractor, or supplier, this event was created with you in mind.

MEET THE BUYER SETS NEW HIGHS FOR OBO

2025's Meet the Buyer was held on Dec. 11 at the George R. Brown Convention Center downtown. This marked the 11th anniversary of OBO's flagship event.

63 total vendors and exhibitors graced GRB's halls for the event, giving the 741 total attendees plenty of opportunity to make connections and potentially expand their business.

"Meet the Buyer is really about connection—putting small businesses face to face with the decision-makers who can open doors," EA Division Manager Brandon Jones said. "When you leave the room with real contacts, clear next steps, and new momentum, that's when opportunity starts to feel real."

This year's event was defined by news milestones and triumphs. The department generated revenue for the first time after being free for a decade (though, it remains free to the public). To top it off, turnout was exceptionally strong, surpassing 2024's attendance by nearly 200 guests.

This was an excellent way for this department to close out its 40 years of existence after having its 41st year in question almost all of 2025 — talk about success in the face of adversity.

To learn more about this upcoming Meet the Buyer event, visit HoustonTX.gov/OBO and follow us on social media!





Rooted in Community: OBO Contract Compliance Manager Lee Brown's Church Marks 160 Years

What do you think of when you think back to 160 years ago? You probably think of the U.S. right after the Civil War. If you're a Houstonian, you probably think of how the city was founded just 30 years before that. And if you know that fact, you probably know that Texas declared its independence just a few months earlier that year.

But 160 years ago in January of 1866, Antioch Missionary Baptist Church (Antioch Downtown) was founded in a part of Houston formerly known (and still referred to by many) as Freedmen's Town. Today it's Houston's modern-day Fourth Ward. As the name suggests, this town was settled by former slaves who were now free men and women.

Antioch Downtown, the oldest Black church in Houston, was founded and built by these former slaves — a group known as The Old Land Mark Baptist District Association. In 1868, the association would name Jack Yates as its preacher. From there, Yates would establish the legacy of Antioch Downtown as it is known to many today, a beacon of community and prosperity for the local Black community. While it once stood as the cornerstone of town surrounded by

homes, apartments, and businesses founded by this community, it is now surrounded by massive buildings and skyscrapers housing billion-dollar corporations.



Though the surrounding area outside has changed, the inside and what it means to be a member of Antioch Downtown remains the same.

The City Proclamation

On Feb. 3, 2026, for its 160th anniversary, Mayor John Whitmire and the city of Houston officially declared it Antioch Missionary Baptist Church. The proclamation was presented by the Office of Council Member Abbie Kamin, District C. In attendance was the current and 14th pastor in the church's history, Pastor Lou McElroy, his wife, 1st Lady, and Reverend Yates' great-great-granddaughter, Jackie McElroy, her mother, church leadership, and many members of the congregation.

One of those members proudly in attendance was OBO's very own Lee Brown, our Contract Compliance Division Manager, and her husband. Brown has been a dedicated member of the church since 2019, and like many others there, she felt it was an honor to see this proclamation in person.



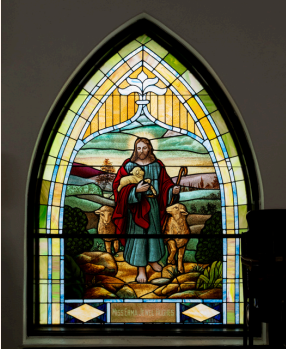
Lee Brown and Pastor Lou

"For the church to celebrate 160 years and receive a proclamation means that Reverend Jack Yates fulfilled what God instructed him to do," Brown said. "To me, it signifies that God appoints those He chooses to carry on His work and legacy. I am deeply humbled and grateful to be one of the many chosen, along with my family, to be a part of that continuing journey." The proclamation is just the beginning of the celebration of this historic event (also, not really). The

celebrations have already begun, with the church hosting its 13th MLK oratory competition. In fact, they will have something at least once every month, including its official celebration of 160 years, which had to be moved from January until later this year due to the winter storm. You can follow their social media at facebook.com/antiochdowntownhouston for more information on these events and updates.

Visiting Antioch Downtown

At the Proclamation, Pastor Lou, spoke of the effort and will that these people, these former slaves, only seven months after General Gordon Grander ordered the final enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation in Texas, had to create their own church. Pews, benches, stairs, stages — brick-by-brick, everything was built by the hands of these newly freed people. Those few minutes of a history lesson were truly not enough to describe what one would see during a tour of Houston’s oldest Black church. From the outside, it’s a beautiful, white-brick gothic building, half surrounded by a park. It’s a small sanctuary in downtown’s urban landscape. Inside, it flowed with beautiful red carpet; the sun made different stained glass windows glow throughout different parts of the building; and hand carved wood laced the staircases, pews, pulpit, and everything else that could be made of wood.



One of the many stained-glass windows at the church. The name at the bottom (Miss Erma Jewel Hughes) is for the past member who donated the piece.

One room that Pastor Lou walked into was a monument to the church’s

history, but truly it represented so much of the city’s, state’s, and even the country’s history. In there laid relics to freed slaves, the civil war, Houston’s founding, reconstruction — all the way through Queen Elizabeth and modern-day articles about the church. Also, yes there is a Queen Elizabeth component that’s prominent to the Church itself.



Pastor Lou was a master orator the entirety of the two-hour tour, delivering not only historical facts but meaningful anecdotes and understanding why the history of his church is so important.

“It’s from what I have learned and adapted from my family: my wife and her mother and the entire family of Jack Yates,” Pastor Lou said. “And a lot of it is my own research too. What I’ve been able to do is take the history lesson at 500 Clay and integrate it into America’s history. I think once we did that, we understand the scope and the breadth of what this church and this community represents.” The church and Pastor Lou offer tours to individuals, large groups, schools, work outings, and anyone else who is interested.

Pastor Lou explains his favorite piece in the church — a stained glass window donated in 1936 commemorating all its pastors until that point.



The Next 160 Years

As Antioch downtown moves into the future, it’s clear that its path forward is embracing its rich history without ignoring modernity and vice versa. “We’re traditional; we sing from a

hymn book, and that’s my commitment,” Pastor Lou said. “Our legacy is that before we get to the modern praise and worship, we kick off our service with one song out of the hymnal as a congregation.” One of Pastor Lou’s favorite words to use during the tour was “purposeful.” He noted how the builders of the church were purposeful in putting in the stained glass so that there’s always one glowing no matter the time of day. Early members of the congregation were purposeful in leaving their names and the dates behind on donations as to mark their legacy or their “leave-behind.” Now, he’s purposeful in planning for a new generation.

Pastor Lou said that he likes to joke with his wife that he’s like a bridge between the past and the future. “Many churches, small churches and some megachurches, are now being affected by the onset of the pandemic and technology, and this new generation and what they’re looking for,” Pastor Lou said. “Church membership is down. Church giving is down. We’re still successful. We’re still preaching the gospel.” He’s too humble to actually admit, or even accept, that he’s the bridge to the future, but he is. He’s preaching to members over 94 years old, and he will be preaching to Gen Z and Gen Alpha well into their adulthood and middle age.

The good news for this historic landmark is that Pastor Lou is the right man for the job. Since COVID hit, he’s taken the mantle and adopted technology and a come-as-you-are mentality without forgetting his roots. He’s even reconnecting the church’s ties to the community, providing afterschool snacks to schools like Gregory Lincoln Elementary to help increase retention rates. We’ve literally just begun, but the path to another 160 years is very bright for Antioch.

Black Business:



First American Self-Made Millionaire Woman

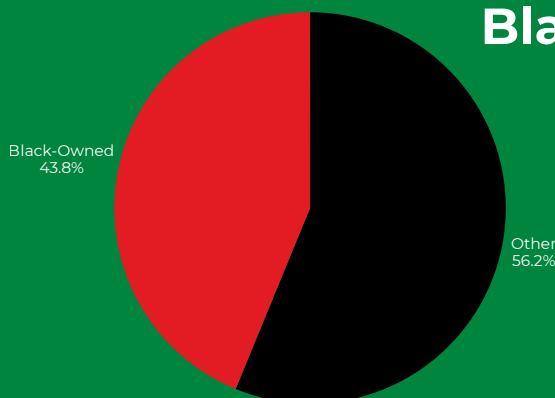
Madam C.J. Walker (born Dec. 23, 1867) is widely attributed to being the first female self-made millionaire. Despite becoming an orphan at the age of seven and having to work at the age of 10, Walker would go on to have incredible success in the beauty industry selling cosmetics and hair care products for Black women. Between 1911 and 1917, Walker and her company, Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company, claimed to have trained and employed 20,000 women.

First Black Patent Holder in the U.S.

Thomas L. Jennings (born circa 1791) was an inventor and entrepreneur who most notably became the first Black patent holder. Born a free man, Jennings originally began his career as a tailor who then patented the dry-cleaning method in 1821 (then known as “dry scouring”) after experimenting with different chemicals to remove stains. A staunch abolitionist and activist for Black civil rights, Jennings used his wealth to fund political causes.



Black-Owned Certified Firms in Houston

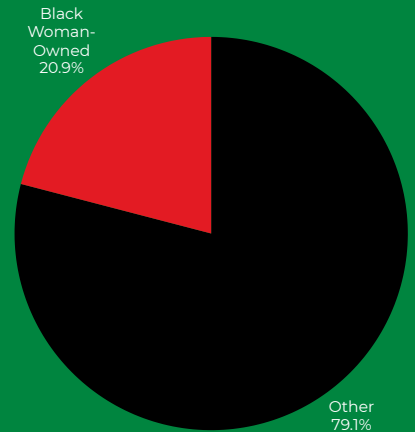


Of the 5,357 total certified firms in Houston, Black-owned firms make up our highest ethnic group at 2,346 total firms. That means nearly 44% of those businesses are Black-owned.

History, Facts, & Stats

Black Woman-Owned Certified Firms In Houston

Of the 5,357 total certified firms in Houston, Black women own the most firms of the female demographic with 1,122. In fact, they are the second highest group of firm owners of any gender, behind only Black men.



First Black-Owned Hostel in the U.S.

Diedre Mathis made history in 2018 when she opened the U.S.'s first Black-owned hostel in Houston, accomplishing this feat at just 32 years old. Since then, Wanderstay Houston Hostel has now expanded to a Hospitality group, opening a 10-room Wanderstay Boutique Hotel in EaDo.

Houston Robotics Company Signs Major Deal

Persona AI, located in Houston's Ion District, was founded by former NASA roboticists Nicolaus Radford and Jide Akinyode. Just last year, the robotics startup company signed an agreement with the world's largest shipbuilder, HD Korea Shipbuilding and Offshore Engineering, to deliver a prototype for humanoid welding robots.



CALENDAR OF

****Follow us on social media (see the back page) for more information and potential updates****

**MAR
5**

I'm Certified, What's Next?

- Now that you're an official certified firm, what are the next steps to ensure you're having success?
- More information to come soon.

MAR

Interagency Mentor- Protégé Program

- IMPP exists to strengthen effective working relationships and foster long term stability between established companies and local agencies with emerging historically underutilized businesses. The goals of IMPP are to enhance the business skills and broaden the base of historically underutilized businesses by providing the knowledge and experience of established firms.
- This program is slated to begin near the end of March.
- Find more info at https://www.houstontx.gov/obo/mentor_protege.html

APR

Bonding Program

- If you're a certified firm and you're looking to understand bonding or how to increase your bonding capacity, this is for you.
- This program is slated to begin near the end of March.
- There is a \$50 fee to participate.
- Learn more at <https://www.houstontx.gov/obo/bonding-and-business.html>

APR

Turnaround Entrepreneurship Program (TEP)

- Location and date to be determined
- TEP is the City of Houston Office of Business Opportunity's intensive small business development initiative designed to help aspiring and early-stage entrepreneurs build strong, sustainable companies. TEP provides structured business education, mentorship, and practical tools that guide participants through foundational elements such as business planning, financial management, marketing, certification pathways, and access to capital. The program focuses on equipping entrepreneurs—particularly those from historically underutilized communities—with the knowledge, confidence, and connections needed to compete, grow, and contract successfully in Houston's economy.

OBO EVENTS

****Follow us on social media (see the back page) for more information and potential updates****

APR

Turnaround Houston Job Fair

- A community-driven program that combines a job fair with a resource center. We look to enhance the lives of residents by tackling the job training, educational, and employment challenges faced by individuals who find it difficult to secure work, including the unemployed, underemployed, and formerly incarcerated individuals.
- This program is slated for the end of April.
- Find more information at <https://www.houstontx.gov/turnaround/index.html>

APR

LGBTQ+ Certified Business Mixer

- A targeted networking event hosted by the City of Houston Office of Business Opportunity to connect LGBTQ+-certified firms, aspiring certified businesses, and key stakeholders across the public and private sectors.
- The mixer creates an intentional space for relationship building, certification education, and business-to-business connections. Attendees will have the opportunity to learn more about the LGBTBE certification process, meet city representatives, engage with prime contractors, and strengthen partnerships within Houston's inclusive business ecosystem.

JUL

Future Founders

- OBO's youth entrepreneurship initiative, developed in collaboration with District F Councilmember Tiffany Thomas. The program creates direct access and opportunity for students in the community.
- Through hands-on workshops, mentorship, and real-world business exposure, middle and high school students learn how to develop business ideas, strengthen financial literacy, build marketing strategies, and confidently pitch their concepts.

DEC

Meet The Buyer

- The ultimate opportunity for small businesses to connect and network with City procurement agents as well as other governmental agencies and prime contractors.
- Hosted at the George R. Brown Convention Center.
- Slated to take place the first half of December.
- Learn more at <https://www.houstontx.gov/obo/meet-the-buyer.html>

DEC

Champions of Diversity Awards Luncheon

- The Champions of Diversity Awards Ceremony honors Minority, Women, and Small Business Enterprises (MWSBE) and non-MWSBE prime contractors for outstanding performance on City of Houston contracts.
- This is slated for the month of December. | Location is to be determined.

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