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NEWS



ANDREW HOIR

Two-Minute Drill

A MISSED DEADLINE PLACES MULTNOMAH COUNTY IN A POLITICAL BIND AMID ALLEGATIONS OF RACISM.

BY KATIE SHEPHERD kshepherd@ww.com

Multnomah County is in a difficult position.

The controversial firing of Tricia Tilliman, until recently the county's director of public health, prompted employees last month to step forward with accusations of institutional racism targeted at black workers. County Chairwoman Deborah Kafoury committed to countywide reforms and implored voters to hold county officials accountable for treating everyone equally.

At the same time, the contractor that provides the bulk of county services for black seniors living in Portland failed to turn in a proposal to continue providing those services, leaving Multnomah County without any applicants to carry on programs the county says it wants to expand.

The county says its longtime partner, the Urban League of Portland, missed a deadline for proposals by two minutes on June 28.

In bold type at the top of the first page, the instructions for bidders declared: "Proposals Due: June 28, 2017 not later than 4:00 pm." In all capital letters, it emphasized, "LATE PROPOSALS SHALL NOT BE CONSIDERED."

A county official says it's rare for bidders to show up late.

"It's pretty unusual," says Erin Grahek, community services manager for the Aging, Disabilities and Veterans Services Division of the Department of County Human Services. "We tell proposers: 'This is the deadline. It must be in by this date. Please pay attention to day of week. Allow for traffic. Don't forget.' Nobody [else] that I'm aware of missed the deadline."

No one else applied to provide the culturally specific services to African-American seniors—including transportation assistance, community activities and case management—that the Urban League has provided for years.

"They've been a valuable partnership to us and make sure we're providing equitable services," Grahek says. "We want to maintain those things."

The missed deadline also raises questions because the Urban League's record with county funds is uneven. The county promised in late 2011 to keep a closer eye on the organization after a financial scandal revealed that the non-profit's then-president, Marcus Mundy, could not account for more than \$44,000 spent using the organization's credit cards ("Maxed Out at the Urban League," *WW*, Dec. 7, 2011).

The county also found serious shortcomings in the Urban League's senior services program back then, including inadequate record keeping and a failure to live up to promises to provide transportation assistance to clients.

Under new leadership, things have improved, although over the past year, the Urban League earned mixed performance reviews from the county.

The missed deadline placed Multnomah County in an awkward position. As complaints about racism were heating up, the county was left without a contractor to provide services to black seniors.

Nkenge Harmon Johnson, president and CEO of the Urban League, denies the proposal was late. She says an Urban League representative showed up just before the deadline to turn in the application but found no county worker available to accept the proposal.

A time-stamped form and a memo written June 28, however, shows that a county employee was at the desk at 4:01 pm when the procurement window closed. Moments later, the memo says, an Urban League representative walked in and the county employee at the front desk time-stamped the proposal at 4:02 pm.

But the county forgave the tardiness earlier this month. County officials decided to move forward with the Urban League, offering the organization a one-year contract of \$121,000 to provide culturally specific services to black seniors in 2018. That's more than five times the organization's previous contract of about \$23,482 in fiscal year 2016.

County documents say officials awarded the Urban League more money because "the Department of County Human Services has examined its allocation practices to find ways to better align funding with the needs of communities most negatively impacted by systemic racism, health inequity and barriers to opportunity."

Multnomah County will reopen the procurement process for senior services in January, giving the Urban League a second chance.

If the organization turns in an application by the April 30 deadline, it will probably be awarded the four-year contract it would have received this year if it had met the deadline.

"It's great news," Harmon Johnson says. "Running the Urban League means a number of things, including learning to roll with the punches. The Urban League's intent is to continue running the seniors program that we've run for decades." **WW**