



The Vermont Professionals of Color Network

March 10, 2022

House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Good afternoon. My name is Tinotenda Charles Rutanhira and I am a co-founder and Chair of the Vermont Professionals of Color Network; and my name is Weiwei Wang and I am also a co-founder and the Director of Operations and Development for the Vermont Professionals of Color Network.

On behalf of the Vermont Professionals of Color Network (VT PoC), we have read through H.703 and are grateful to be in consideration for funding in the amount of \$500,000 for statewide delivery of business coaching and other forms of training and support for BIPOC business owners and workers across the State. We also appreciate the opportunity to speak with you all today on how this funding will benefit our organization and our members.

Founded in January 2019, the goal of the VT PoC is to build opportunities to improve the experience, representation and success of BIPOC professionals and businesses in the state of Vermont and to usher in a new era of BIPOC economic and professional mobility.

We are an apolitical organization but we know that racism is deeply ingrained in our society – and as a result, it’s deeply ingrained in our workplaces, too. We believe that systems that are failing communities of color fail all of us alike, Black, Brown and White. As a predominantly white community, the State cannot advocate for equity and inclusion when the median net worth of a Black family is \$30,000 and that of a white family is \$190,000! And on the business side, Hispanic- and Black-owned businesses continue to struggle for a piece of the pie, and are more likely to be considered "at-risk" for opportunities than white-owned businesses. Something has to change. Hence the goal of our organization is to work toward the elimination of the economic and professional gaps between white people and people of color, because we believe that prosperity starts with opportunities to climb the economic ladder, and a prosperous BIPOC community is a good thing for ALL of Vermont!

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Our organization is currently in the process of building something new, exciting and effective for BIPOC Vermonters. We are building a first of its kind organization with full-time staff for execution and a Board of Directors for strategy and oversight, and the following is the core of what our organization is built on:

Our foundation is built on advancing networking, and career and business development opportunities for our members. This foundation supports three pillars:

1. **Promoting BIPOC professional development:** with the goal of driving in a new era of professional mobility.

In 1940, less than 5% of all adults and only 1% of Blacks had completed four years of college. Today, both groups have much higher college attainment rates overall, with the national average at 36%. These numbers are however not reflected in the corporate world - Hiring discrimination for Black employment hasn't declined in over 25 years. While Black individuals make up 15% of the U.S. population, they account for only 8% of employees in professional roles. Black professionals hold only 3.2% of all executive or senior leadership roles and less than 1% of all Fortune 500 CEO positions.

2. **Supporting BIPOC entrepreneurship:** with the goal of empowering BIPOC organizations, businesses and entrepreneurs with the resources, community and talent to stimulate and sustain economic growth.

Even when demonstrating profitability and long term performance, BIPOC-owned businesses are 20% less likely than white-owned businesses to obtain a loan from a large bank.

3. **Empowering BIPOC youth:** with the goal of building capacity for youth of color (16-22) to access early career experiential opportunities, menteeship opportunities, and critical life-changing moments to ensure that young BIPOC people can reach their full potential.

A declining and aging population, and a lack of skilled talent are by far three of the biggest issues Vermont employers face, and yet, Vermont's BIPOC population is the fastest growing demographic in the state; in the last 10 years, this community has grown by 112% but there is no strategy to connect them and employers.

Our apolitical **advocacy and public policy** encompasses a wide range of activities that influence decision makers (policy makers, legislators, corporate execs, etc.) in any discussions involving BIPOC. We want to be at the heart of these conversations and advance the cause of BIPOC

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professionals, businesses, and young people, while also increasing the civic engagement of these groups in the community.

VT PoC is a young organization, yet over the last year, we have made incredible progress. To date we have spent north of \$300,000 in grants, in-kind donations and out of our own pockets in activities that promote our mission and support the pillars of our organization. These include:

1. Successfully achieved 501c3 status.
2. Networking & Career Development:
 - virtual and in-person networking events.
3. Promoting BIPOC professional development:
 - Creation of the only BIPOC-specific career website in the state;
 - Hosting career fairs & workshops, internships, recruitment drives; and
 - Developing a needs assessment with a focus on BIPOC workforce acquisition and retention
4. Supporting BIPOC entrepreneurship:
 - Publication of the first and most comprehensive web-based VT BIPOC business directory;
 - Developing a needs assessment with a focus on BIPOC small business development;
 - Working with governmental entities to provide access to contracts, corporate resources, and promote active investment.
5. Empowering BIPOC youth:
 - Providing access educational and experiential opportunities, college, and early career opportunities;
 - Facilitating mentorship;
 - Working with the Vermont colleges and universities to ensure young BIPOC students feel connected to VT and stay after graduating.
6. Supporting COVID-19 response:
 - Operation and management of the Burlington BIPOC COVID-19 vaccination clinic that serviced BIPOC individuals and household members across the state in collaboration with Vermont Department of Health, VT National Guard, UVM Medical Center, and other Burlington-based community organizations, administration of over 3,600 vaccines over four months of operation.

One of our current efforts is as a spoke of the US SBA Community Navigator Pilot Program, led by VtSBDC. The goal of VT PoC in this effort is two-pronged:

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The first is to better understand the current concerns and challenges faced by BIPOC micro- and small-businesses via a state-wide survey and regional community dialogues. At present, there are many channels of services and resources available to the business community; yet we don't see the BIPOC business community using these services despite the more than 2,000 BIPOC businesses registered with the Secretary of State office. Anecdotally, VT PoC has learned from our members that these services are not providing the supportive ecosystems, lack the awareness of cultural differences, and the understanding of generational knowledge gaps that exist within the BIPOC business community. Additionally, there is a general distrust of predominantly white-led organizations where there is no Black and Brown representation on staff. In other words, our members do not feel like they belong in these spaces, nor do they feel seen by the individuals offering the services. From this survey, we aim to understand what it is that the BIPOC business community actually needs.

The second part of this project is to use that information to help connect BIPOC micro- and small businesses to currently available resources from other spokes within the CNPP project. This includes resources from the VSJF, CWE, Vermont Law School, CVOEO and RDCs.

Our work as part of the CNPP will set the stage for future efforts supporting BIPOC businesses, but this project is only one piece of a larger puzzle we need to build a healthy environment for the BIPOC community to thrive. While the products of this funding will help shed light on the business environment from a BIPOC point of view and can connect some of these businesses to the resources that they need, the scope of this funding is limited relative to the efforts of VT PoC as a whole. This is where the funding from H.703 is critical.

In conclusion, VT PoC is an organization built for BIPOC, by BIPOC: we understand the challenges and barriers for People of Color better than most Vermont organizations; we know what it's like to be BIPOC in Vermont and to feel "alone", isolated and under-valued; but we also appreciate the benefits of living in Vermont and are committed to support the professional and economic prosperity of those BIPOC professionals and business owners who have chosen to call Vermont home. We want this organization to become a fixture in Vermont and so this Bill is timely, and we believe that **two payments of \$250,000 a year for the next two years** will unlock the potential and vision that we have to provide current and future BIPOC Vermonters



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who have chosen to call Vermont home, unobstructed access to be the highest versions of themselves that they can be.

Thank you so much for your time and attention. We are available to answer any questions that you may have.

Sincerely,

Tinotenda Charles Rutanhira and Weiwei Wang
Vermont Professionals of Color Network