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## Business

### MCCA found to fall short on diversity, inclusion efforts

By Dana Gerber

**T**he Massachusetts Convention Center Authority has fallen short in key elements of its diversity and inclusion efforts, leading to issues hiring, retaining, and responding to employees of color, according to a recent report.

The 112-page report, completed by the Boston law firm Prince Lobel Tye and commissioned by the MCCA, comes after allegations earlier this year from employees the agency has fostered an environment rife with racial discrimination.

“The Authority’s record of excellence in events and in its recent financial performance has not been matched by a sustained focus or commitment to diversity and inclusion for employees and vendors,” said the report, dated Oct. 13.

The report found the MCCA has lagged in bringing Black and Hispanic people into leadership positions within its 400-person staff. This is due to both uneven development and promotion opportunities, and a failure to actively recruit in ways that would attract employees from underrepresented groups, the report said.

The report also found the agency “does not have effective processes for addressing employee complaints” and suffers from a general distrust of the human resources department, which can exacerbate worker frustrations.

The agency is also underperforming when it comes to supplier diversity, according to the report. “At best, the Authority is stuck in the ‘compliance’ stage,” the report says, meaning it meets state requirements but nothing more, and “even there, the Authority’s performance has lagged.”

Though the agency has publicly embraced the oft-touted “Massport Model,” which considers diversity and inclusion plans in the selection process for bidders on large development projects, the report said the MCCA lacks any “written policies or guidelines governing its supplier diversity efforts or establishing procedures for enhancing supplier diversity.”

On Oct. 19, the agency’s board of directors voted to assemble a task force to oversee the enforcement of the report’s recommendations, saying in a statement that it aims to “build an intentionally equitable and inclusive environment for the MCCA team, vendors and all who walk through its doors.”

The administration of MCCA executive director David Gibbons has been “much more focused on the financial bottom line” than broader civic efforts, according to the report. In an written statement, Gibbons said the firm’s recommendations are “truly worthy and provide instructive guidance.”

“I look forward to working closely with [the task force] to implement forward-looking policies that promote the goals of the MCCA to open the many participatory opportunities to diverse communities and businesses,” said Gibbons, who took the helm of the agency in 2016.

The MCCA, which oversees the state’s three convention centers, including the 1.7-million-square-foot Boston Convention & Exhibition Center in the Seaport, came under fire earlier this year following a Boston Globe report, which was an impetus for the investigation.

The Globe’s report came after five employees — four of them Black — filed formal complaints with the state’s Office of the Attorney General alleging racial discrimination in hiring, promotion, and the working environment.

One major theme of the Globe report was concerns over enhanced policing at events where there were a large number of Black guests. These allegations “have found to be entirely without merit,” according to the Prince Lobel Tye report. However, the report did recommend the authority’s public safety department consider implementing implicit bias training courses.

The report recommends a variety of changes at the MCCA to begin to tackle these shortcomings, including recruitment through channels more likely to reach candidates from underrepresented groups, an overhaul of the way human resources fields and responds to complaints, and further consideration of diverse businesses when seeking suppliers.

The report’s release follows a tumultuous year for the MCCA, which hired Herschel Herndon as its chief diversity officer in July. Herndon was the first Black employee in a senior leadership role at the organization since 2019.

Herndon’s hire came shortly after Governor Maura Healey installed seven new members to the agency’s board, improving racial diversity within the body. In January, prior to the Globe report, the governor received an anonymous letter from several employees of the agency describing “an unwelcoming environment and culture for employees of color” and requesting that Gibbons and his leadership team be replaced.

Shortly after the initial Globe report, state Auditor Diana DiZogio said her office would undertake its own investigation into the agency. The results of that audit have yet to be published.

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