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MARKETPLACE conference to recognize Wisconsin leaders in minority business development

Awards to be given to six individuals to recognize leadership and distinguished service in business and community development

MADISON, WI. DEC. 5, 2018 – Six individuals will be recognized for their leadership and distinguished service in business and community development to support minority, woman and veteran-owned businesses in Wisconsin next week at MARKETPLACE, the 37th Governor's Conference on Minority Business Development.

The conference, taking place Dec. 12-13 at Potawatomi Hotel and Conference Center in Milwaukee, is hosted by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), is expected to draw more than 600 attendees and is sponsored by corporations, small businesses and organizations, with U.S. Bank being this year's Keystone Sponsor.

Here are this year's Business and Community Development Recognition Award recipients:

E. Aggo Akyea – State Diversity Development and Advocacy Award

Aggo Akyea served as the director of the Office of Business Opportunity and Equity Compliance at the Wisconsin Department of Transportation central office in Madison from 2011 to 2018. In this role, Akyea promoted business opportunity, equity and compliance in the areas of the Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (DBE) program, labor and wage compliance, Title VI, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and tribal affairs.

Aina Vilumsons – Mentoring Small Business in Government Contracting Award

Aina Vilumsons is the CEO of the Wisconsin Procurement Institute (WPI), a nonprofit established in 1987 focused on helping Wisconsin businesses compete for federal defense contracts. After joining WPI, Vilumsons began expanding business mentoring and assistance services to also encompass local, state and corporate supplier contracting opportunities.

Curtiss Harris – Minority Business Community Service Award

Curtiss Harris is an advocate for equal access for minority-owned businesses in the Milwaukee area. Currently, Curtiss serves as president of Milwaukee Black Business, an online business directory to link consumers with black-owned businesses in the Milwaukee area. Previously, Harris served as economic development coordinator for the City of Milwaukee and executive director of the Milwaukee Community Development Corporation, as well as the interim executive director of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Wisconsin (AACCW).

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Gary Mejchar – Community Economic Development Award

Gary Mejchar has served as the assistant director and project manager for the First American Capital Corporation of the American Indian Chamber of Commerce of Wisconsin (AICCW-FACC) since 2008. In this role, Mejchar applies his extensive experience and relationships in community and economic development to identify new and collaborative approaches to assisting native and minority businesses. Mejchar has previously held positions with the UW-Extension Community Dynamics Institute, Small Business Development Center and has been a project management consultant.

Maria Watts – Business Community Collaboration Award

Maria Watts is a senior business and community engagement officer for the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA). In this role, she works to help hundreds of public and private entities leverage WHEDA's knowledge, resources and programs. Prior to her career with WHEDA, Watts was a housing coordinator for La Casa de Esperanza and an assistant vice president for Tri-City National Bank.

Nelson Soler – Minority Business Development Award

Nelson Soler is a chief solutions officer of the Multicultural Entrepreneurial Institute (MEI), which he founded in 2006 to help minority-owned small businesses start up, grow and become profitable. Currently, the institute serves an average of 450 individuals per year through culturally relevant training, tax services and marketing.

[MARKETPLACE](#) is the premier annual statewide business capacity-building conference for minority, woman and veteran business owners looking to do business with state, federal and local governments as well as the private sector. The conference provides opportunities for businesses to meet with dozens of potential buyers, identify funding sources, connect with business assistance resources and network with other businesses.

The conference kicks off Dec. 12 with the popular [Small Business Academy](#) for new businesses and entrepreneurs. This free half-day training academy will provide participants with practical advice from experts on topics covering small business lending, free business assistance resources, and ways to plan, start and grow a profitable business.

Additional free workshops will address construction, building sales and capacity. A Foxconn project update will be given the afternoon of Dec. 12, followed by a networking reception recognizing the impact and legacy of minority and woman-owned businesses.

On Dec. 13, the conference begins with a breakfast program followed by the opening of the Expo Hall, where attendees can meet one-on-one with potential buyers, connect with business lenders, view exhibits and network with other business owners.

The Governor's Awards Luncheon on Dec. 13, sponsored by the *Milwaukee Business Journal*, will recognize outstanding businesses owned by minorities, women and service-disabled veterans. More than 300 nominations were received this year for businesses of all sizes and from a diverse range of industries across the state.

Registration is now open. The general attendance cost is \$70 for both days, with a \$20 additional fee for the Dec. 12 evening reception. Discounts are available for minority, woman and veteran-owned businesses. Buyers and supplier diversity managers from government agencies and private corporations attending to meet potential suppliers can register at no

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charge. Exhibit booths are also available for \$500, or \$250 for minority, woman and veteran-owned businesses.

To register or for more information, visit MarketplaceWisconsin.com and SBEacademy.com

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About the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) leads economic development efforts for the state by advancing and maximizing opportunities in Wisconsin for businesses, communities and people to thrive in a globally competitive environment. Working with more than 600 regional and local partners, WEDC develops and delivers solutions representative of a highly responsive and coordinated economic development network. Visit wedc.org or follow WEDC on Twitter @WEDCNews to learn more.

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