

TESTIMONY

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF SMALL BUSINESS AND SUPPLIER DIVERSITY (SBSD)

BBC RESEARCH & CONSULTING

DISPARITY STUDY

October 19, 2020

Phillip “Ace” Jones

GMI Masks

Dear Stephanie Ayers and Jennifer Mayton:

My name is Phillip “Ace” Jones and I am the Founder and CEO of GMI Masks in Virginia Beach. As an African American small business owner, I support the Agency’s disparity study that would illuminate the barriers women- and minority-owned small businesses face in the Commonwealth.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I was working as a consultant providing IT, social media and event planning support for other businesses. Once the pandemic struck, I was worried about the health of my father and my neighbors so I decided to circulate masks around my community in Tidewater, Virginia. Increasingly, I was approached with bulk order requests from friends and family. They eventually encouraged me to make a business out of it and that’s how GMI Masks was born. I’ve been able to donate more than 11,000 masks to Virginia’s communities.

Though I’ve had the support of my community, I know from first-hand experience that contracts and procurement opportunities are less available to me and businesses like mine. I have experienced blatant discrimination as an entrepreneur of color and that decreases my business’s success, and ultimately, the success of our local economy. These obstacles are heightened because there’s not enough encouragement from the state for other businesses and government agencies to procure with companies like mine even though we face enormous obstacles.

Furthermore, it’s taken years for the Virginia legislature to approve another disparity study to recognize the issues that businesses like mine face every day. This delay has only put women- and minority-businesses at an even greater disadvantage in the state because their needs are not being addressed.

That’s why I commend the Agency for conducting this study so we can begin to tear down the obstacles businesses like mine face and level the playing field for all Virginia businesses. Virginia currently offers opportunities on a neutral basis and does not account for the systemic factors that women and minority businesses face. This is not a responsible approach to supporting the state’s small business community. I encourage the Virginia legislature to address the barriers this study will reveal so we can all succeed.

Thank you,

Phillip “Ace” Jones

GMI Masks