

Monday, June 15, 2020

WORDS ARE NOT ENOUGH

The National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters shares the anguish, frustration, and anger in our Black communities across the country. The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic creating sickness and death in our community has been a heavy burden. The massive unemployment caused by the pandemic shutdown added another burden. The senseless murder of George Floyd proved to be the last straw, and Black people took to the streets across this country to say, “Enough is enough – Black Lives Matter!”

Fortunately, the murder of George Floyd grabbed the attention and touched the hearts of many white Americans. Seeing the video of this brutal murder at the hands of a police officer made many white Americans recognize that the discrimination and mistreatment of Black Americans continues today in many ways as it did a hundred years ago. As a result, we have seen expressions of support for the Black Lives Matter movement from government leaders and corporate CEOs. And we have seen and heard statements that these government leaders and corporate CEOs will work to promote diversity and inclusion within the government and corporate America.

What is lacking from many of these statements is concrete actions that these government leaders and corporate CEOs plan to implement. As broadcasters serving the Black community, the members of NABOB are directly impacted by the social and economic disadvantages experienced by our communities. Our communities look to us as the trusted voices that they depend upon to give them news and information unfiltered by those with agendas that are not in the best interest of our communities. And they look to us to share our stories with each other and the broader community. In 1968, after the civil unrest in many Black communities, the Kerner Commission Report said that one of the underlying causes of the unrest was a sense of a lack of control of the media and that their voices could not be heard. That sentiment has been heard again in the streets today.

That sense of lack of control is heightened by the small number of broadcast stations that remain Black owned today. The number of Black owned stations is vastly below an acceptable level. Blacks make up 13% of the American population, yet we own fewer than 180 of the more than 11,000 commercial radio stations in the U.S., 1.6%, and we own only 25 of the 1,374 full power television stations, 1.8%. This low ownership level of broadcast stations by Blacks means that we cannot have the voice we need to make our concerns adequately heard or addressed by our leaders. Given the small number of Black owned broadcast stations today, 52 years after 1968, it is understandable that many Black people continue to feel that they are not being heard.

To address the small number of broadcast stations owned by Black people and other minorities and women, Congressman G.K. Butterfield has introduced H.R. 3957, “Expanding Broadcast Ownership Opportunities Act of 2019,” which would reinstate the tax certificate as a means of increasing ownership of broadcast stations by minorities and women. During the years that it was in effect, 1978 to 1995, the tax certificate was by far the most effective policy for promoting minority broadcast station ownership. Since its repeal Black radio station ownership has steadily declined.

In addition to the fact that there are too few of us, many NABOB members are hampered in our efforts to serve our communities by unfair and discriminatory government and corporate policies that prevent us from achieving the business success we need to fully serve our communities. These unfair and discriminatory policies include: (1) advertisers and advertising agencies that refuse to advertise on Black owned stations, (2) federal, state and local government advertising practices that spend billions of dollars, but almost none with Black owned broadcasters, (3) financial institutions that refuse to invest in or loan money to Black owned broadcasters, (4) Federal Communications Commission policies that promote consolidation of the broadcast industry into the hands of a few large companies, squeezing many small, Black owned broadcasters out of business, and (5) the failure of the largest media companies to include adequate levels of Black participation on their boards of directors.

ACTIONS, MORE THAN WORDS

The nation's leading Black civil rights, business, and government organizations, such as: the NAACP, National Urban League, National Action Network, U.S. Black Chambers and Congressional Black Caucus have laid out excellent proposals for broad reforms to address the many aspects of income and wealth inequality, widespread poverty, lack of capital going to Black owned businesses, inadequate educational opportunities, mass incarceration and police brutality that sent people into the streets. NABOB supports all of these efforts.

What needs to be added to these proposals are proposals for securing the broadcast voices of our communities. NABOB submits that, if our corporate and government leaders are serious about effecting change, they should include plans to strengthen the voices of the Black community over the nation's airwaves. We propose these specific concrete steps that can be taken to enhance the voices of Black communities across the country:

1. Invest advertising dollars in Black owned broadcast stations. If a corporation has a message it wishes to share with our communities, it should share it on our communities' stations.
2. Our federal, state and local governments spend billions of dollars a year on paid advertising. Each level of government should reach out to Black owned broadcast stations to make sure that their messages reach neglected parts of our communities.
3. Access to capital is an ongoing problem for all Black entrepreneurs. Investment firms and lending institutions should examine investment proposals and loan applications from Black owned broadcasters with a view toward strengthening the entire community by expanding the ability of our stations to tell our stories.
4. The Federal Communications Commission should restrict industry consolidation, not promote it. Industry consolidation squeezes out small, Black owned broadcasters.
5. Congress should pass Congressman Butterfield's H.R. 3957 and bring back the tax certificate to promote minority and women owned broadcast stations.
6. The boards of directors of the largest media companies fail to reflect the racial diversity of America. Many members of NABOB have the knowledge, experience and standing in the industry that justifies being considered for board positions. The largest media companies should look to the NABOB membership to add much needed diversity to their boards.

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