

□ "My Brother's Keeper" from a single father and business owner's perspective

Written by Ron Busby
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I must admit, being a single father of two Black boys isn't easy, especially since my wife passed away 12 years ago. From breaking up fights, to discussing college and career choices, I've learned that being a good father means more than just "being there."

Decisions are made, things happen, but despite the inevitable bumps in the road of parenthood, I am always proud to see how my two sons have grown into bright young men. Recently, you have heard lots about President Obama's laudable effort to ensure bright futures for America's young men "of color."

We agree it makes sense to use his bully pulpit to highlight the challenges faced by Black and Latino males and to galvanize solution providers around a common work plan.

What makes a lot less sense to us is how - in the face of dwindling contract awards to Black-owned businesses - we are to remain hopeful that equitable opportunity is within the grasp of Black businesses.

For sure, there is lots of happy talk in the President's proposed budget about commitments to SBA loan guarantees, certified development companies (CDCs) and small business investment companies (SBICs)... billions to infrastructure rehab and surface transportation projects... millions to the Minority Business Development Agency for technical assistance and money for expansion of Promise Zones designed to focus federal resources in targeted areas, both urban and rural.

Against the backdrop of these huge outlays across education, healthcare/social services, infrastructure and transportation, let's suppose that the targeted young Black and Latino males successfully scale all the hurdles facing them...that they graduate from high school, matriculate to a community college, four-year institution or trade school and set out to pursue their career aspirations. What awaits them?

Shrinking federal contract awards to Black and Hispanic-owned businesses seem to preclude any opportunity at supplying their goods/services to government agencies. Kauffman Foundation researcher Alicia Robb, said in her study of SBA lending that minority borrowers are "turning to mainstream lenders less because they have a fear of denial, which is warranted."

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So, it appears that even commitments of loan guarantees won't be enough to open access to capital. Tuition costs are skyrocketing while low-income students face cuts in the availability of tuition assistance. Therefore, repayment without improved employment/entrepreneurial prospects will exacerbate the challenge.

To complicate matters, within minutes of President Obama's announcement, his political opponents cranked up their "anti-anything-Obama" screed and pronounced My Brother's Keeper not only socialist, but racist, as well. While the program is decidedly neither, it may serve to distract from more immediate, short term fixes.

Growing businesses need employees. Black (and Brown) businesses, given access to the tools that fuel expansion, are far more likely to extend job opportunities to young minority males. Hence, it makes at least as much sense to expend effort to ensure that federal, state and local contracts are awarded fairly. And, as always, we will contend that healthy, growing, vibrant Black-owned businesses are the best cure for Black unemployment.

Among the more hopeful signs of support for My Brother's Keeper is the announcement from The Opportunity Finance Network (OFN). OFN, which represents more than 225 community development financial institutions, will pledge \$1 billion to expand financing for organizations and initiatives working to help young minority men. While Opportunity Finance Network CEO Mark Pinsky has yet to define how his organization will allocate dollars raised from network members, we will engage his organization to encourage more business lending, rather than program development.

There absolutely is room in the national marketplace for a program such as My Brother's Keeper. The challenges faced by young, ethnic minority males are well documented. The futures of these young men - and the future well being of the nation - deserve the kind of focused solution-searching described in the blueprint for the effort.

In the meantime, though, Black business owners - males AND females - face the daunting task of building and sustaining enterprises without the safety net implicit in My Brother's Keeper. If we, as a nation, continue to fall short of fostering the healthy economic environment that we know is essential to long-term prosperity for ALL Americans, then the work of "My Brother's Keeper" shall be in vain. Let's put our actions - and dollars - where our economic futures are, for James 1:22 (KJV) says, "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."

Ron Busby, Sr. is president of U.S. Black Chambers, Inc.