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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – U. S. Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus, is pressing the White House and the president's cabinet on the apparent void in federal government advertising in Black-owned newspapers and radio.

CBC spokesman Jioni Palmer this week says the CBC anticipates more exchange on the issue in coming weeks as all White House cabinet secretaries have been sent copies of CBC letters on the issue.

The dialog started April 23 when National Newspaper Publishers Association Chairman John B. Smith, Sr. sent a letter to White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel; President Obama's Special Advisor Valerie Jarrett, and Lee. Smith's letter asked why the Black Press is not benefitting from economic stimulus dollars to help disseminate information to the Black community on how to apply for and use the $787 billion in economic stimulus money.

A story, partially prompted by the letter, was written by Wilmington Journal reporter Cash Michaels and syndicated by the NNPA News Service on April 27.

Lee then followed up with a May 13 letter to Vice President Joseph Biden, who oversees the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the formal name for the President's stimulus activity. Lee followed up with another letter to Timothy Geithner, secretary of the U. S. Treasury. Both letters were released to the NNPA News Service this week.

"We write to bring to your attention the general concern among African American newspapers and radio station owners that they are not being given a fair opportunity to compete for federal advertising dollars," Lee and CBC leaders wrote to Biden. "Specifically, we seek your commitment that Black-owned media outlets are receiving their fair share of advertising dollars in conjunction with the various activities associated with the disbursement of federal dollars."

The letter further states, "We seek your additional commitment that Black-owned media are being utilized by the federal government as it distributes the $787 billion recovery package. Additionally, we seek the same assurance when it comes to entities receiving money from the federal government…We request a meeting with you at your earliest convenience to discuss this matter in detail."

A separate letter to Geithner, requests specific information on dollar amounts spent so far:

"Please advise me as to the total amounts your department and financial institutions receiving TARP and TALF funds have spent on African-American, Latino and Asian American owned newspapers and radio stations," Lee wrote. "Also please advise me on the measures your department has taken to insure that the minority-owned media outlets participate equitably in your department's advertising, marketing and outreach activities."

TARP, which stands for Troubled Asset Relief Program; and TALF, which stands for Term Asset-Backed Securities Loan Facility, are both financial relief programs for businesses and corporations needing help.

Palmer, CBC communications director, says the letter to Treasury Secretary Geithner was specifically a follow up to questions that Lee posed to him as he testified May 21 before the House Financial Services and General Government Operations Subcommittee of which she is a member.

“This is an issue that has great importance to the chairwoman of the CBC and its members,” Palmer said in an interview on Monday. He says the conversations are ongoing as the CBC presses for results.

“We have received acknowledgements of our concerns,” he said. “While we have not settled on a specific course of action, a working conversation is ongoing.”

In the April 27 story on Smith’s letter, which was widely circulated by NNPA Newspapers, NNPA Foundation Chairwoman Dorothy Leavell said it was "unclear in the Black community where to go and what is available to help Black families and Black businesses, the very communities that we serve.” She added, 'The Black Press has participated in teleconferences and have sought information locally, yet there are no clear answers to these two queries."

Leavell vowed that the quest for information would continue.

"We will continue to vigorously reach out to the Obama Administration to make sure that our community and our industry is a part of this stimulus and avoid what has been the norm - that we are outside looking in and devoid of stimuli," she said.
Palmer credits Smith’s letter, the article and the conversations that followed with stirring up interest and movement on the issue.

“I think it’s fair to say that Mr. Smith’s letter, as well as the ongoing efforts of NNPA to bring attention to this economic justice, economic fairness, economic parity issue are very important and very helpful,” Palmer said. “We encourage this type of civic engagement and participation. I think it’s clear in our letters that yes, these are commercial enterprises, but they also serve a very important civic function.”

Both of Lee’s letters, also signed by CBC officers Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.) and Keith Ellison (D-Minn.), pointed out the dual purposes of the Black Press.

“African American owned newspapers and radio stations have historically captured and chronicled the hopes and history of the African American community when no one else cared. They remain uniquely positioned to communicate directly with segments of the population that the federal government must reach to achieve its mission,” they wrote Biden. “As implementation of the economic recovery package continues, I strongly encourage you to include a review of African American-owned news outlets and their struggle to receive an equitable distribution of taxpayer funded advertising dollars.”