

March 11, 2018

Testimony of

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**Before the United States House of Representatives
Small Business Committee**

**Hearing on
Disparities in Access to Capital: What the Federal Government is Doing to Increase Support for
Minority Owned Firms**

Chairman Chabot, Congressman Lawson and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Hillary Almond and I am the majority owner and President of Almond Engineering, PA, a consulting civil engineering firm located in Jacksonville, FL.

Our journey began 14 years ago. I was employed as an engineer for JEA, the local utility company here in Jacksonville. I started out as most college graduates, working under a seasoned professional engineer learning the trade of utility engineering. I eventually was promoted to Manager of Wastewater/Reuse to manage the operations and maintenance of the largest area in Jacksonville which included overseeing all daily operations, maintenance personnel for the area and also assisting with union contract negotiations. In September of 2003 I gave birth to our first child and resigned to be a stay at home mother.

It was a wonderful time, but financially difficult as my leaving the workforce meant a 60% cut in our household income, but we made it work. After a year I started to get restless and at my husband's urging reached out to some old contacts and started doing small engineering jobs from the house. It was what we called my "naptime job". I would work while our son napped. This was a wonderful opportunity to make a little money and "use my brain" as I would say to keep from going stir crazy.

Eventually one job led to two which led to many. It was getting difficult to keep up with the demand while another child was added to our happy little family. My husband is also a civil engineer and was working for a larger firm in Jacksonville at this time. We had always dreamed about owning our own company one day but never really thought much about how to make this happen. When I finally reached the point I could not sustain the workload coming in, we made the hasty decision for Eric (my husband) to resign from his job, and take the leap to go out on our own. Three weeks later, we were officially Almond Engineering and were working out of a small, dilapidated office in San Marco.

Fast forward 12 years, three kids and 8 employees we are now one of the most reputable small civil engineering firms in Jacksonville.

At the time when we opened Almond Engineering, we did not know about any government backed financial programs to assist us. But we managed with hard work and many prayers to stay in business. Two years after we opened, the recession hit, and hit us hard. The only opportunity we knew of was to obtain a business line of credit. \$50,000 was all we could manage. This went quickly though due to the recession but we managed to keep our employees employed and our doors opened.

We have had very good years and some harder ones but we still maintain a healthy company. That being said, there is nothing easy about owning and running a small business. Cash flow is our biggest nemesis.

Banks are very difficult to deal with and obtaining additional lines of credit are almost impossible. We have looked into SBA loans, but bankers are extremely adverse to these and always try to lead us down the path of credit lines which puts us in an eternal hamster wheel with no end in sight. These experiences have caused us to abandon all SBA considerations. At this time, we are on our own.

We have obtained our Jacksonville Small Emerging Business (JSEB) certification and our Florida Department of Transportation Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) certification with the hopes of getting government work, but these opportunities have been disappointing. Jacksonville is a unique environment when it comes to awarding government contracts. I would like to see more “set aside” engineering opportunities for small, minority businesses. At this point, the only way to get government work is to team with a larger firm on bigger jobs, but these are extremely difficult to do as a civil engineering firm. When larger engineering firms want to bid on government work, they are required to have certain JSEB credits. But to do so, they will pick up JSEB firms that do not compete with their work (engineering) so select surveying and geotechnical firms to satisfy the JSEB credits.

We attempted to get our 8(a) certification many years ago, but halfway through the process I was informed that because I was white, I would not even be considered for this classification because being a woman owned business was not minority enough. I was extremely disappointed with this revelation because I saw what 8(a) did for a colleague of mine which took her from 2 employees to 40 in less than 4 years. Her company is still growing strong today because of this opportunity. What we were told by our 8(a) ambassador was that she received her certification only months before they began denying white women the opportunity. I am hesitant to even try this again as it is not an inexpensive or quick process.

Eric and I will continue to strive to be a bigger and stronger company while maintaining our reputation and integrity. We still look forward to hopefully one day qualifying for small business or minority assistance with the federal government for future work.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.