Three years ago, the Illinois General Assembly passed a law (Public Act 100-0451) requiring businesses that get certain state tax breaks to report how much work they did with minority- and women-owned companies. The goal was to encourage economic diversity and take the pulse of the state’s business community.

Well, the Black community is still waiting.

We — Illinois state government — have to look in the mirror as well and ask what we can do.

Every year, our state pays out billions of dollars to vendors and service providers to do work on behalf of the state of Illinois. On a per capita basis, Illinois annually ranks as having among the fewest state workers in the nation.

That means we turn to outside businesses and firms to do a lot of work for us.

That gives the state immense economic power — power that can be used, if leaders so choose, to accomplish socio-economic goals, to right wrongs and to make things better for people too often on the losing end of history.

Once again, the results continue to be less than satisfactory.

Over the course of my 22-year journey from freshman senator to Senate majority leader, I’ve sat on committees where we have brought agency after agency and institution after institution before us to ask about economic diversity and inclusion. And year after year, agency after agency, institution after institution, we hear the same excuses for why they have not spent more money with Black businesses.

There aren’t enough Black-owned businesses.

There aren’t enough qualified Black-owned businesses.

Oh, it turns out there aren’t Black-owned businesses with the experience or expertise we were looking for. It is exhausting.

I’m tired of the excuses, because I know we can do better.

Look, Illinois is the state that literally reversed the flow of the Chicago River in response to public health emergencies in Chicago. It’s a feat that ranks as one of the greatest public works projects of the 20th century.

We can do amazing things — when we want to.

Complicity won’t make us better.

You get better by pushing yourself out of your comfort zone.

In the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and an unfortunately ever-growing list of others who lost their lives and were denied justice, the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus has stepped forward to say: “Enough.”

No one is going to solve this problem for us. It’s up to us to make a difference and lead our colleagues to meaningful change.

For the last few months, we have taken on the daunting task of trying to figure out a practical, policy-driven approach to address systemic racism in Illinois. On Sept. 1, the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus formally introduced our four pillars of policy:

• criminal justice, violence reduction and police accountability;
• education and workforce development;
• economic access, equity and opportunity; and
• health care and human services.

PROBLEMS WITH PROCUREMENT

Each pillar warrants a thorough review and discussion. But today I’m focused on one that, in all honesty, goes a long way toward addressing all the others: the economic pillar.

We are committed to making sure our state’s procurement process is more equitable for the Black community. In 1989, the Business Enterprise Program was created to encourage the state to use its economic power to spur growth and participation among Black, minority-, disabled- and veteran-owned businesses.

The modest goal was for 20 percent of state contracts to fall into this category.

Let’s be clear. That 20 percent goal is a minimum standard. It’s the lowest possible passing grade. It’s not success. It’s a floor, not a ceiling.

What we’ve too-often found is the waiver process, intended to be a last resort, makes it too easy to skirt the goals and requirements. And once contracts are awarded, they tend to be renewed, and the goal and vision of success are lost.

Furthermore, our licensing process allows the state to keep giving money to companies or entities that refuse to fulfill the diversity principles we outlined in our laws.

Those are only two of the glaring issues with Illinois’ procurement process.

When you mix in historic redlining, payment delays and how hard it is for Black people to attain capital, it is no secret why the process does not work.

It is time to consider a different route.

The Illinois Legislative Black Caucus is exploring the idea of developing a Commission on Equity and Inclusion that will be charged with overseeing our state’s procurement process.

It is our intention to make it clear that we expect to see results from using our state’s procurement process to uplift our neediest communities. I do not know how we expect anyone else to support our minority businesses if we, as a state, are not investing in their growth to back up our own words and commitments.

Sen. Kimberly Lightford has served as Senate majority leader since 2019. She is a Democrat from the Chicago suburb of Maywood.