



# SMALL BUSINESS PRESS

Empowering Small Businesses to Help Keep California Moving

2025, Issue 2

## Civil Rights Deputy Director Welcome

Welcome to the Small Business Press. The Office of Civil Rights publishes this newsletter to share the latest information, pertinent articles, and updates to small, disadvantaged, and disabled veteran businesses. Small Businesses are vital Caltrans partners, and we cannot rebuild California's transportation system without you. We hope you find this information useful and informative as you continue through the heavy summer and fall construction season.

David DeLuz  
Deputy Director of Caltrans Office of Civil Rights



## Shifting from Outreach to Outcomes

### How Caltrans is Expanding Access in Transportation Contracting

In California and across the country, public agencies are being asked a tough but fair question: *Are you just inviting small businesses to compete—or are you truly making it possible for them to win?*

At Caltrans, that challenge has become a driver for transformation.

*continued on page 2*

## From Bids to Bulldozers

### Growing Businesses and Careers

Caltrans is taking bold steps to support small businesses and strengthen the state's future construction workforce. This summer, the Caltrans Office of Civil Rights' Small Business and Workforce Development Center will officially launch the [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise \(DBE\) Supportive Services](#).

*continued on page 4*

## In this issue

Civil Rights Deputy Director Welcome

Shifting from Outreach to Outcomes

From Bids to Bulldozers

Upcoming Contractor Training

Contractor Portal

Current Construction Projects Advertised

Pull out Facts

Business Spotlight Introduction

From Startup to Statewide Impact

From Humble Beginnings to Highway Projects

South American Engineering Family Thrives Upgrading California's Infrastructure

Veteran Soars in Civilian Life

Caltrans Inside Features

From Teenage Mother to Trailblazer

From Boat Refugee to Bridge Builder

Resources

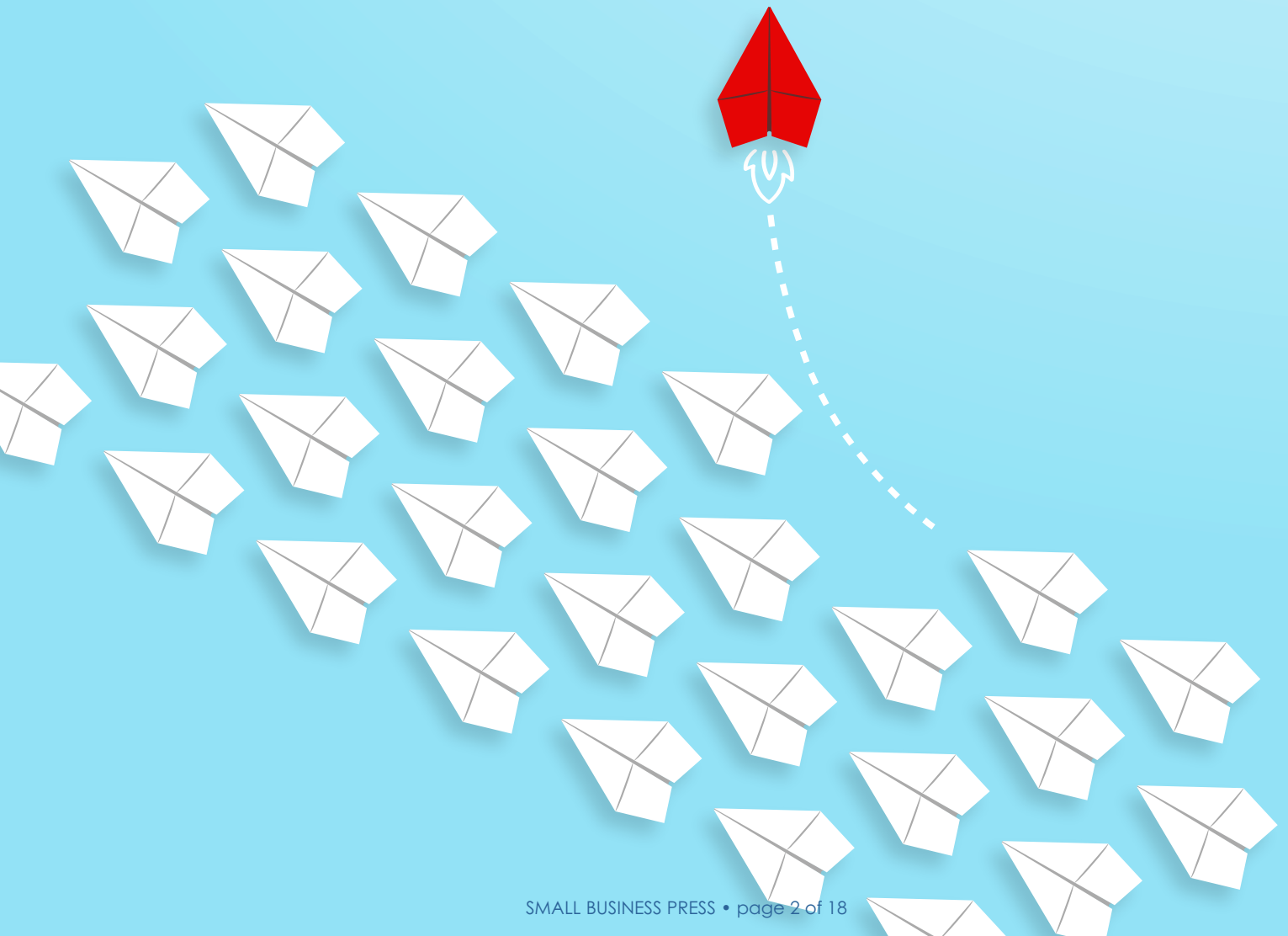
# Shifting from Outreach to Outcomes

## How Caltrans is Expanding Access in Transportation Contracting

For decades, the department has worked to improve access for Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (DBEs), Disabled Veteran Business Enterprises (DVBs), and other small businesses. But in today's environment, where traditional outreach is no longer enough, Caltrans is taking deliberate steps to shift the focus from invitations to outcomes—from “contact” to contract.

“We are not satisfied with participation on paper,” says Mike Keever, Chief Deputy Director at Caltrans. “Our focus is on providing real access to opportunities for small businesses—especially for businesses with a history of limited contracting experience.”

This shift is rooted in California's broader commitment to small business inclusion under [SB 103 \(Statutes of 2017\)](#), which recognizes that creating pathways for limited contracting businesses isn't just good policy—it's critical to building a resilient, competitive economy.



**Caltrans is putting that commitment into action through key initiatives:**

**Small Business-Only Minor-B Contracts:** Since, 2021, Caltrans has identified public works contracts valued under \$461,000 (minor-b) as small business only opportunities (with limited exceptions). This has led to increased opportunities for small firms to serve as prime contractors on more Caltrans projects, increasing capacity and experience. See Humble Beginnings [Business Spotlight on Miguel Quiroz](#), who has found his niche in [Caltrans Minor B projects](#).

**The 25% Small Business Mandate:** Piloted in four districts, this contract-specific goal strategy is already showing promise in boosting the number and value of select contracts awarded to small businesses. In FY 2024, it contributed to Caltrans far exceeding the 25% goal for small business participation mandated by the legislature and average almost \$1 billion in contract awards for small businesses in the last three fiscal years.

**Local Hire & Community Workforce Pilots:** By integrating local hiring into large-scale infrastructure projects, Caltrans is developing strategies to help communities share in the economic benefits of public investment.

**Capacity-Building Programs:** Through mentorship, bonding education, and targeted technical assistance, Caltrans is helping new, limited-experience, and small firms grow into confident and competitive contractors.

**Performance Monitoring and Transparency:** With new tools intended to track actual participation—not just bids—Caltrans is holding itself accountable to results, not just intentions.

These steps are not about meeting quotas—they're about opening doors and **laying a foundation for broader economic power** across the state.

"Access is more than compliance—it's a strategy for long-term prosperity," said David DeLuz, Civil Rights Deputy Director for Caltrans. "When more firms have the chance to compete and grow, California becomes stronger, more resilient, and better positioned to meet future infrastructure demands."

Caltrans executives know that building the transportation network of tomorrow will take more than concrete and steel. It will take a marketplace where small businesses, including those historically limited in contracting opportunities, are given the tools and the trust to lead.

**Because building the future means including the future.**

# From Bids to Bulldozers

## Growing Businesses and Careers

[Business Development Program \(BDP\)](#), aimed at boosting the long-term success and capacity of small businesses, DBEs, and Disabled Veteran Business Enterprises (DVBEs).

The program offers free expert-led training, workshops, resources, and tips on how to successfully bid and contract with Caltrans. Participants also receive upcoming Caltrans project alerts, networking opportunities, and guidance on developing business plans and navigating certification.

Businesses can enroll through the [BDP Enrollment Interest Form](#) and sign up to receive event notifications and contract opportunities through the [mass notification system](#).

Since October 2024, the Small Business and Workforce Development Center has already supported 56 certified DBEs and 87 small businesses, offering assistance on certification, contract procurement, mentor-protégé opportunities, and more.

One of the program's key innovations is a targeted bid-matching system that aligns DBE capabilities with upcoming Caltrans construction projects. Between November 2024 and May 30, 2025, the office sent nearly 57,900 customized notifications promoting 217 Caltrans construction opportunities—each tailored to the recipient's specific service area and business profile. This proactive communication strategy helps DBEs pursue bids that align with their expertise.



*The first HEO Academy graduates smile after receiving multiple certifications from the free program.*



Recognizing the need for direct, timely access to project information, the Small Business Development Branch conducted an in-depth analysis of Caltrans' most-used North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes. From this, they created a comprehensive heavy construction NAICS code list. This tool allows Caltrans to connect businesses with relevant contracts, ensuring more accurate and impactful matches.

But the initiative goes beyond business development—Caltrans is also investing in the next generation of California's construction workforce.

As of May 20, 2025, fifty-nine out of 60 disadvantaged participants have graduated from the [Heavy Equipment Operator \(HEO\) Academy](#). This figure includes two pilot HEO programs and one session of the newly launched statewide academy, which officially began in January 2025. The program delivers a rigorous seven-week, hands-on training designed to prepare individuals for high-demand construction jobs. The curriculum includes training on heavy equipment simulators, the union-endorsed Multi-Craft Core Curriculum (MC3), and practical experience operating bulldozers, loaders, excavators, rollers, skid steers, and backhoes.

Graduates earn up to 17 industry-recognized certifications, including Blueprint Reading and Construction Math. As of May 2025, 43 of the 59 graduates have secured employment, and 34 work in heavy construction. A new academy class of 20 disadvantaged individuals began training on July 14, 2025, and graduate on August 28 in Humboldt County.

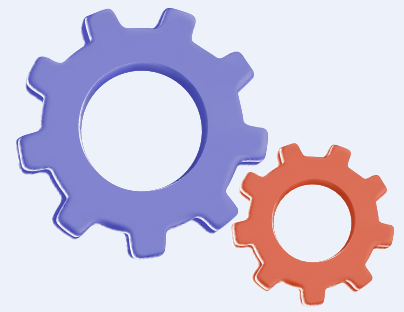
Caltrans has expanded the Heavy Equipment Operator (HEO) Program by offering three academies annually across Northern, Central, and Southern California—to totaling nine academies by December 2027, with three in each Caltrans region. The next session will be in Fresno County (Central Region) from October 27 to December 18, 2025.

With construction equipment operator roles projected to grow at a rate of 5% through 2031, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), the Caltrans HEO Academy aims to help meet the demand for more than 50,000 equipment operators needed each year.

For more information on the DBE Supportive Services Program or the HEO Academy, email [OJT.SS@dot.ca.gov](mailto:OJT.SS@dot.ca.gov) or [DBE.SS@dot.ca.gov](mailto:DBE.SS@dot.ca.gov).



*Students operate bulldozers, loaders, excavators, backhoes, and more during the HEO Academy.*



## Upcoming Contractor Training

Caltrans hosts free educational [outreach events](#) throughout the state. Upcoming events include:

- A Procurement and Resource Fair at the 4050 Taylor Street courtyard in San Diego, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. on **August 6**. [Register here](#).
- A free “Understanding Small Business Program Codes” Webex workshop from 1 to 2 p.m. on **August 12**. Register [here](#).
- A free “Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) Certification Overview” virtual workshop from 12 to 1 p.m. on **August 27**. Register [here](#).
- A free “Selling Goods and Services to Caltrans” Webex workshop from 1 to 2 p.m. on **September 9**. Register [here](#).
- A free “Overview of the Caltrans Minor Program (Small Construction Contracts)” virtual workshop from 12 to 1 p.m. on **September 24**. Register [here](#).
- Understanding Caltrans Procurement and Service Contracts virtual training from 1 to 2 p.m. **October 14**. Register [here](#).
- A virtual training on “How to Market Your Firm to Construction Primes” from 12 to 1 p.m. **October 22**. Register [here](#).

### Also:

- Caltrans’ Small Business Council will host its regular meeting virtually and at 1120 N Street in Sacramento from 8:30 a.m. to noon, Friday, **September 12, 2025**, and again virtually only from 8:30 a.m. to noon, Friday, **November 14, 2025**. For more information, contact [small.business.council@dot.ca.gov](mailto:small.business.council@dot.ca.gov)

For the latest information, visit the Caltrans Office of Civil Rights [Calendar of Events](#).



## Pull out Facts

The Caltrans Office of Civil Rights (OCR) sets small, disadvantaged, and disabled veteran business project goals, certifies Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (DBEs), oversees the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Infrastructure Program, analyzes data, develops the workforce, provides outreach and supportive services to empower small businesses to help keep California moving.

### Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) Program:

Caltrans has an office that certifies businesses that are eligible for the [DBE program](#). This certification helps small, disadvantaged businesses compete fairly on federally funded projects.

For federal fiscal year (FFY) 2024-25, Caltrans OCR's [DBE Certification](#) Office is on pace to process nearly 600 DBE applications and confirm DBE eligibility for over 6,100 firms. Demand for DBE certification increased 13% over FFY 2023-24 totals and 73% over FFY 2022-23.

In 2025, Caltrans concluded its triennial Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)-sponsored **Disparity Studies** to measure the availability of minority contractors available to participate in Caltrans' federally assisted contracts and procurements. In July 2025, Caltrans announced its new FTA DBE overall participation goal of 6.7% for Federal Fiscal Years 2026-2028. The FTA study analyzed contracts awarded between October 1, 2020, through September 30, 2023. In December 2024, Caltrans announced its new FHWA DBE overall participation goal of 21.35% for Federal Fiscal Years 2025-2027. The FHWA study analyzed contracts awarded between January 1, 2020, through December 31, 2023. Disparity Studies are in-depth, year-long examinations that determine the overall federal FTA and FHWA DBE goals on construction, procurement, and services for the next three years. Caltrans will begin the process again in 2027. For more information, visit <https://dot.ca.gov/programs/civil-rights/disparity-study>.

### Dollars Awarded:

So far, in FFY 2024-25 (October 1, 2024, through May 2025), Caltrans awarded 189 Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) assisted contracts, valued at over \$2.7 billion. Of that, Caltrans committed nearly \$630.6 million, or 22.96% of its contracts to DBEs.

So far, in [state fiscal year](#) 2024-25 (July 1, 2024, and March 31, 2025), Caltrans awarded \$1.4 billion in state-funded contracts. Of that, Disabled Veteran Business Enterprises (DVBE)s were awarded \$33.1 million or 2.4% of state-funded contracts. Certified Small Businesses (SB)s received \$522 million and participated in 37.3% of state-funded contracts, surpassing the 25% state participation goal outlined in [SB1](#) and [AB 2019](#).



## Business Spotlight Introduction

The Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017 (**Senate Bill (SB) 1, Beall, Chapter 5, Statutes of 2017**) required Caltrans to increase outreach to increase disabled-veteran, minority, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) contractors to increase their participation on Caltrans projects.

The bill referenced the federal [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise \(DBE\) program](#), which is designed to level the playing field for African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asian-Pacific and Subcontinent Asian Americans, and women, who are presumed to be socially and economically disadvantaged, but others can qualify on a case-by-case basis.

The Caltrans [Office of Civil Rights](#) – known as OCR – strives to increase the participation of those groups through [workforce development](#), [outreach](#), [education](#), [supportive services](#), and more. As part of this effort, please read spotlight articles on Santamaria Concrete, Quimu Contracting, Inc., and Polo Engineering Inc. for September as Hispanic Heritage Month, and Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise Cardinal Aerial Photography for October, which is National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

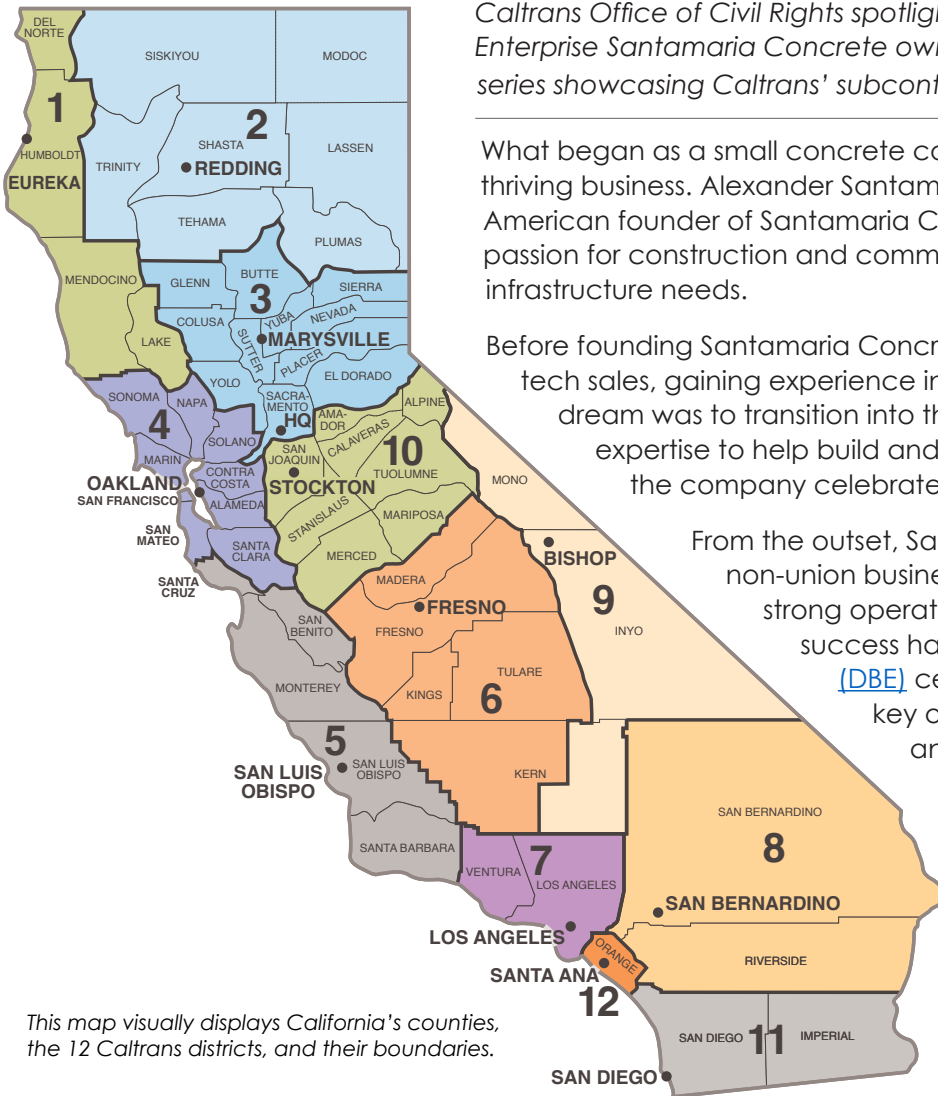
<b>Hispanic American Spotlight</b> "From Startup to Statewide Impact"	<b>9</b>
<b>Hispanic American Spotlight</b> "From Humble Beginnings to Highway Projects"	<b>11</b>
<b>Hispanic American Spotlight</b> "South American Engineering Family Thrives"	<b>13</b>
<b>Disabled Veteran Spotlight</b> "Veteran Soars in Civilian Life"	<b>14</b>





# From Startup to Statewide Impact

## How Santamaria Concrete Paved Its Way to Success in California's Infrastructure Boom



This map visually displays California's counties, the 12 Caltrans districts, and their boundaries.

*Caltrans Office of Civil Rights spotlights Hispanic Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Santamaria Concrete owner Alexander Santamaria as part of a series showcasing Caltrans' subcontractors' diversity.*

What began as a small concrete company in 2015 has blossomed into a thriving business. Alexander Santamaria, a second-generation Colombian American founder of Santamaria Concrete, has built a business driven by his passion for construction and commitment to supporting California's growing infrastructure needs.

Before founding Santamaria Concrete, Santamaria spent his early career in tech sales, gaining experience in business operations. However, his ultimate dream was to transition into the construction industry, leveraging his expertise to help build and enhance the state's infrastructure. Today, the company celebrates a decade of growth and success.

From the outset, Santamaria Concrete operated as a small, non-union business, but over time, it transformed into a strong operation. A pivotal factor in the company's success has been its [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise \(DBE\)](#) certification, which has provided access to key opportunities with major clients like Caltrans and utility companies involved in concrete and asphalt construction projects.

Santamaria's journey with Caltrans began with subcontracting work, but it wasn't until the company became part of Caltrans' [Construction Mentor-Protégé Program](#) that its growth accelerated. The program offered critical insights into how to effectively work with the transportation agency, ultimately allowing Santamaria Concrete to secure its first major [emergency contract](#). The landmark project on the San Rafael Bridge marked a turning point for the company, demonstrating its ability to handle large-scale, high-stakes repairs.

Today, Santamaria Concrete serves Caltrans districts 4, 5, 6, and 10, with a primary focus on the Bay Area (District 4) and Sacramento region. The company specializes in concrete flatwork, curbs, gutters, rapid set, and structural concrete, as well as asphalt paving and grading services.

Santamaria attributes his company's success to persistence, accurate project estimates, and a strong commitment to communication. He recommends that newcomers to the industry take full advantage of [Caltrans workshops](#) and the [Construction Mentor-Protégé Program](#) to build strong foundations for success.

“One of the key elements to our success has been ensuring that we understand the requirements upfront, present accurate numbers, and communicate openly with our partners before bid day,” Santamaria explains. “And sometimes, just directly asking for the job can go a long way.”

The road to success in the construction industry can be difficult and highly competitive, with Santamaria Concrete winning only one out of every eleven bids it submits.

Santamaria emphasizes the importance of not becoming discouraged, advising new firms to avoid scaling up too quickly without a solid foundation in place. He said the [DBE program](#) has supported his company's growth by allowing small businesses to get in on larger projects and demonstrate their skills.

As Santamaria Concrete looks to the future, the company is focused on major infrastructure projects across California, continuing to build its partnership with Caltrans and other key industry players. With a decade of experience under its belt, the firm is poised to play an even more significant role in shaping the state's infrastructure for years to come.

“We’ve come a long way, but we’re just getting started,” Santamaria says. “There are still so many exciting opportunities ahead, and we’re looking forward to collaborating with Caltrans and its partners across the state to create lasting change in California's infrastructure.”

Visit Caltrans' Civil Rights program webpage to get certified as a [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise](#), or visit the Department of General Services [Cal eProcure](#) website for information on [Small Business Certification](#).



*Alexander Santamaria sits in front of an asphalt project his company, Santamaria Concrete, built outside of Fairfield, California.*



## From Humble Beginnings to Highway Projects

### Miguel Quiroz Builds a Business with Concrete Results

Caltrans Office of Civil Rights spotlights Hispanic Disadvantaged Business Quimu Contracting, Inc. owner Miguel Quiroz as part of a series showcasing Caltrans' subcontractors' diversity.



Miguel Quiroz works on the Sacramento Interstate 80 onramp at Madison Avenue.

Miguel Quiroz always dreamed of becoming a contractor. Today, that dream has poured its foundation into something far more substantial.

Quiroz, 58, is the founder and owner of Quimu Contracting, Inc., a small, Hispanic-owned business that has grown from modest beginnings into a certified [small business](#) and [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise \(DBE\)](#) that upgrades infrastructure across Northern California. The company handles concrete work, excavations, demolitions, steel structures, and more.

"I never thought I would be where I am today," said Quiroz. "I just wanted to survive and live comfortably. The next thing I know, I got a little more than I need to live."

The federal [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise \(DBE\) program](#) outlined in the [49 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 26](#), aims to level the playing field for small businesses, whose owners have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice or cultural bias within American society because of their identities as members of groups and without regard to their individual qualities. A disadvantaged firm owner can be a woman, African American, Hispanic American, Native American, Asian-Pacific American, or Subcontinent Asian-Pacific American, and anyone who can prove individual discrimination. Caltrans 2025-2027 federal fiscal year goals are to spend at least 21.35 percent of all federal highway program dollars with DBEs.

According to Caltrans' October 2024 to January 2025 Commitment at Award report, Quimu Contracting was awarded \$695,308 as a DBE Prime contractor.

In May 2025, Quiroz removed concrete, added asphalt, and redesigned the Interstate 80 onramp at Madison Avenue in Sacramento. It's one of many recent projects marking his firm's growing footprint on California's transportation network.

"Ninety percent of my work is with Caltrans," he said. "My brother and I went in on my first Caltrans **Minor B project** in 1995. We made \$2,800. At the time, we were bondable up to \$30,000. Now I'm bondable up to \$5 million."

Before founding Quimu Contracting in 2002, Quiroz worked for a Bay Area construction company that handled Caltrans jobs. That early exposure helped him learn the ropes and eventually launch his own firm.

Despite the company's growth, Quiroz remains grounded. He prefers to keep his crew small — no more than six employees — and credits his success to persistence, discipline, and taking advantage of federal DBE programs designed to help small businesses access public contracts.

"I found a good niche of what I do," he said. "I just go to the Caltrans [webpage](#) and see the jobs there."

Quiroz estimates he wins about one out of every ten bids he submits. Still, he's no stranger to the unpredictable nature of the industry.

"A month ago, I didn't get any bids, but then I got six out of seven jobs," he said. "That's how it is sometimes."

Originally from a large family with 15 siblings, many of whom still live in the Dixon and Sacramento area, Quiroz says he's grateful for how far he's come — and he's eager to help others along the way.

His advice to aspiring entrepreneurs? Be persistent, return all phone calls and emails, and don't give up.

"It takes years in the beginning," he said, "but eventually your efforts will pay off."

“It takes years in the beginning,” he said, “but eventually your efforts will pay off.”

Visit Caltrans' Civil Rights program webpage to get certified as a [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise](#), or visit the Department of General Services [Cal eProcure](#) website for information on [Small Business Certification](#).





## South American Engineering Family Thrives Upgrading California's Infrastructure

*Caltrans Office of Civil Rights spotlights Hispanic Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Polo Engineering as part of a series showcasing Caltrans' subcontractors' diversity.*

A three-generation South American Engineering family is now thriving as they provide traffic signals, roadway lighting, highway guardrails, or storm water drainage to repair and upgrade California's aging transportation system.



Daniel and Jennifer Polo

Daniel Polo was born in Ecuador in 1976. After moving to California in 2000, he and his wife—whose family emigrated from Cuba—began laying the foundation for what would become an American family legacy in engineering. They married in 2005 and began working on high-end residential and commercial projects, steadily building expertise in complex construction work.

In 2018, the couple officially launched [POLO Engineering, Inc.](#), bringing together their engineering knowledge and a shared passion for public infrastructure. Their breakthrough into public works came just a year later, thanks to a valuable introduction to Caltrans and their local District 5 [Small Business Liaison](#) (DSBL), Jessica Biro.

"Jessica gave me a list of things to research, and I went down a rabbit hole," said Polo Engineering President Jennifer Polo. "I watched a lot of videos and webinars that literally provided the steps small businesses need to take to get a contract. It's overwhelming at first. Now it's just up to the small business to pursue it."

That pursuit paid off. Through guidance from their DSBL and learning about the [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise \(DBE\) program](#), which helps level the playing field for historically underrepresented business owners, Polo Engineering expanded its horizons. The DBE designation allowed the firm to compete in a space often dominated by legacy contractors.

In 2020, Daniel Polo earned the company's General A contractor license, enabling the firm to transition from private to public sector work. They hit the ground running—submitting 28 Caltrans Minor B project bids, then landing four contracts.

"Minor B projects are a great place for small businesses to enter the contracting world of Caltrans and decide whether or not they can become a prime," Jennifer noted. She emphasized the importance of factoring in compliance and prevailing wage requirements when bidding.

"Without the DBE program, we wouldn't have an opportunity against these businesses who have been doing this for years, decades, or even centuries," she said. "Each of our Caltrans projects helps us grow and improve our company and meet the strict compliance and documentation standards. We welcome these challenges because we stand shoulder to shoulder with some of the largest builders in the world who work with Caltrans."

Today, Polo Engineering is a testament to grit, family values, and the opportunities that public programs can offer to those ready to take the leap. Their work not only improves California's roads—it also paves the way for the next generation of diverse contractors in public infrastructure.

Visit Caltrans' Civil Rights program webpage to get certified as a [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise](#), or visit the Department of General Services [Cal eProcure](#) website for information on [Small Business Certification](#).





# Veteran Soars in Civilian Life with Drone Business That's Changing the Game

*In honor of National Disability Employment Month, Caltrans is spotlighting Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise Cardinal Aerial Photography to showcase subcontractor diversity.*

In the photo below, Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise (DVBE) Cardinal Aerial Photography owner Tony Parker kneels by his drone on the USS Hornet deck in front of a moored World War II battleship in Oakland, California.



*Photo by San Francisco Academy of Arts Drone Instructor Roger Apolinar.*

For Tony Parker, a U.S. Army veteran and seasoned aviation professional, life after military service didn't mean grounding his passion for flight — it just meant changing the vehicle. Today, Parker is flying high as the founder of Cardinal Aerial Photography, a certified Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise (DVBE) that uses drones to provide 3D imaging of hard-to-reach infrastructure.

"I'm having the time of my life," Parker said. "Drones can be used in so many facets, but lately I have been focusing on cell tower inspections."

Traditional cell tower inspections typically require two to three technicians, multiple vehicles, and several days of work. This costs around \$5,000. But Parker says he can do the job in 20 minutes with one drone — for half the price, and with better data.

"It's a different size vehicle, but the rules are pretty much the same," said Parker, whose aviation credentials include working for NASA and a 20-year stint as a lead aircraft mechanic for a large commercial airline.

Parker's path to entrepreneurship began in St. Louis, Missouri, where he was born and raised. After initially pursuing a career in education, he joined the Army at age 26, serving as a helicopter crew chief. After a foot injury, his enlistment ended, but he continued his aviation career in the civilian sector.

In August 2019, Parker launched Cardinal Aerial Photography in Sacramento, leveraging both his mechanical expertise and his military training. The business also provides real estate photography and live streaming of 3D infrastructure models. Drones are also used to provide aerial mapping and disaster relief.

"Drones can give a real-time 3D model of a structure or accident scene," Parker said. "It's information delivered instantly via live stream, when seconds count."

As a veteran and small business owner, Parker's advice to other disabled veterans interested in entrepreneurship is simple but heartfelt: "Follow your dreams and don't quit. Eventually, it will come around."

For Parker, that dream is now reality — one drone flight at a time.

Visit Caltrans' Civil Rights program webpage to get certified as a [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise](#), or visit the Department of General Services [Cal eProcure](#) website for information on [Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise](#) or [Small Business Certification](#).

## From Teenage Mother to Trailblazer

When Marjani Rollins started working at Caltrans' Division of Engineering Services (DES) in 2006, she had no idea that her most transformative work would begin 14 years later – not with a promotion alone, but with a calling.

"Once I got into the [Office of Civil Rights \(OCR\)](#), everything shifted," Rollins said. "It was the first time my skills, my lived experience, and my passion for helping people came together in one space. I didn't just step into a new role—I stepped into alignment with who I've always been becoming."

Rollins, who now serves as Chief of the Small Business and Workforce Development Office, is leading a revolution—one built on equity, opportunity, and second chances.



*Caltrans Small Business and Workforce Development Center Chief Marjani Rollins has transformed her own life and is establishing programs to help others do the same.*

Born on a military base in Korea, and raised in Richmond, California, Rollins' journey is marked by resilience. She was often the only Black student in her honors classes, and experienced racism firsthand.

Then, life shifted dramatically again. A teenage mother during her senior year of high school, Rollins had three children by the age of 22.

"I wanted them to be good, to feel safe, to see what it looked like to rise above circumstances and keep going," she said. "That hunger to break cycles, to be the one who shifts the narrative, and to walk in purpose even when it was hard – that's what shaped me more than anything else."

Rollins continued working in DES for over a decade, honing her skills and becoming a "super analyst," but it wasn't until she saw the OCR Staff Services Manager 1 position posted three times that she took it as more than coincidence. She applied—and everything changed.

In her new role, Rollins not only found professional growth, she found her mission. In 2023, she promoted again – this time to Chief over the Small Business and Workforce Development Office, which she started from scratch. She now leads the On-the-Job Training Supportive Services and National Summer Transportation Institute, which create access and opportunity for underserved businesses and individuals. But she didn't stop there.

She also pitched the idea to develop and bring the [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Supportive Services](#) branch in-house for the first time in 20 years. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) approved her plan, and in just 18 months, the branch has supported 94 certified DBEs and 88 certified small businesses with certification help, training events, workshops, and networking opportunities.

"I work with incredible teams and partners across the state to make sure small businesses are equipped to compete for [Caltrans projects](#), that individuals can access [skilled trades training](#), and that young people are

introduced to careers in transportation early on," she said. "Whether it's helping a small business build capacity, launching a training [academy for equipment operators](#), or inspiring the next generation, the work is always rooted in impact. It's not just about programs—it's about people."

She said the hardest part of the job is knowing how urgent the needs are—and then having to wait on process, paperwork, or approvals. She said it takes a lot of coordination and collaboration to put programs together.

"From securing the right training sites to building strong partnerships with community organizations and contractors, there are a lot of moving parts," she explained. "And of course, none of it happens without securing the funding to sustain it all. That means writing proposals, making the case, and staying on top of every detail to make sure the vision gets the support it needs. I've learned how to stay persistent, creative, and focused so that the mission keeps moving forward. I've become really good at finding a way—especially when it seems like there isn't one."

OCR Deputy Director David DeLuz said Rollins is exceptional because she is willing to take on tough challenges – even when the outcome isn't guaranteed or likely.

"Marjani has an energy that gives you confidence," he said. "She's willing to take risks and bet on herself."

Despite her demanding workload, Rollins has returned to college and is pursuing a bachelor's degree in industrial-organizational psychology—a field focused on understanding people, strengthening teams, and building better systems. These are things she does every day at Caltrans.

"My life is proof that where you start doesn't have to define where you finish," she said.

Whether it's helping a small business win their first state contract or watching a young adult operate heavy equipment for the first time, Rollins never forgets why she started.

"There's nothing like watching someone go from unsure to unstoppable," she said. "Those moments are everything."

Marjani Rollins didn't just rise above the circumstances life handed her—she turned them into the blueprint for transformation. Now, she's helping others do the same.

“

"I wanted them to be good, to feel safe, to see what it looked like to rise above circumstances and keep going," she said.

"That hunger to break cycles, to be the one who shifts the narrative, and to walk in purpose even when it was hard – that's what shaped me more than anything else."

”



## From Boat Refugee to Bridge Builder

In 1983, Steve Lu was a ten-year-old boy huddled on a boat, surrounded by crashing waves and uncertainty. He had just fled communist Vietnam—a journey bought with sacrifice and hope. His parents paid a sum of money for him to escape, however, his older siblings had already been caught and sent to re-education camps.

"I was the lucky one," Lu said.

What followed was not ease, but survival. First, a refugee camp in Pulau Bidong Island, Malaysia, which Lu compared to the TV show [Survivor](#)—except this was real. After learning basic English, he moved to another camp in the Philippines, this time to prepare for life in the English-speaking world. In 1984, he arrived in Sacramento, California.

He was not quite 11 years old.



Steve Lu

He shared a small, low-income apartment with his uncle's family. He learned to cook, to navigate a foreign world, and focused on his education. With a sharp mind and relentless drive, Lu learned English fluently and maintained his native Vietnamese and Chinese. He even taught himself to read French.

After graduating from eighth grade, he took a job as a busboy. By high school, he was enrolled in the engineering program at Luther Burbank and excelling academically. Though he initially set his sights on a school in Australia, a counselor recognized his potential and helped him apply for financial aid and admission to UC Davis.

Five years later, Lu earned a degree in Managerial Economics. From there, his career blossomed—starting in banking, moving from Wells Fargo to First Union, eventually becoming a senior underwriter. But he found his true calling not in profit margins, but in public service.

Lu joined Caltrans as a certification analyst in the Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) program. In 2015, he transitioned to the Contract Evaluation Branch, where he still works today—meticulously ensuring that businesses vying for state contracts meet rigorous standards.

"Sometimes the prime [contractors] over-plan, don't have documentation, and try to play tricks," he said. "We ask for clarification. If they can't show it, we stick to the evidence. We cannot arbitrarily change the numbers."

For Lu, this isn't just paperwork. It's justice. It's opportunity. It's personal.

Caltrans currently oversees more than 900 ongoing construction projects, allocating \$15 billion—and Lu is there to make sure disadvantaged small businesses, including those run by disabled veterans, get a fair shot.

"I know I am helping small businesses deliver their services and take care of their families," he says. "It is so fulfilling when they graduate and are no longer considered small."

Even as he built a life of purpose in the U.S., Lu never forgot his family. In 1995, the year he turned 21, he began petitioning for their reunification. After his application was accepted, he waited through a process that can take anywhere from 3 to 12 years, depending on priority levels. His parents joined him in California in 1997, and one by one, his siblings followed—all reunited by 2006.

From a ten-year-old refugee on a crowded boat to a gatekeeper for opportunity in one of the nation's largest infrastructure programs, Lu's journey is a testament to resilience, the power of education, and the impact of one life committed to lifting others.

He was the lucky one—but now, he makes sure others get a chance to be lucky, too.

## Resources

- The Office of Civil Rights (OCR) Small Business and Workforce Development Center offers [On-the-Job Training](#), [Heavy Equipment Operator Academy](#), [business development](#), and [supportive services](#) free for all small, disadvantaged, or disabled veteran businesses. For more information, email [OJT.SS@dot.ca.gov](mailto:OJT.SS@dot.ca.gov) or [DBE.SS@dot.ca.gov](mailto:DBE.SS@dot.ca.gov)
- To enroll in Caltrans free Business Development Program (BDP) fill out the [BDP Enrollment Interest Form](#).
- To receive notifications for upcoming events, training workshops, quick tips, and contract opportunities, opt into the [mass notification system here](#).
- Caltrans also offers a [Construction Mentor Protégé Program \(CMPP\)](#), which supports the growth of small and disadvantaged construction firms, teaching them to effectively compete in Caltrans construction projects. For more information, visit [CMPP](#).



## Quick Links

- Learn How to [Contract with Caltrans](#)
- Visit [Caltrans' Contacting Portal](#)
- See Upcoming Architectural and Engineering (A&E) Work on the [A & E Look Ahead Report](#)
- Register for [Caltrans' Bidding Connect](#) Portal
- See [Current Construction Projects Advertised](#)
- Click Quick Links on [Cal eProcure](#) to find all small business solicitations and past state purchases.
- Caltrans' [Opt-In](#) Feature Allows Small Businesses to connect with Primes
- Department of General Services (DGS) [Leveraged Procurements as Resellers](#)
- Find your District Small Business Liaison at this [link](#)

## Additional Resources

- [Association of Procurement Technical Assistance Centers \(APTAC\)](#) provide free advice on all aspects of selling to the federal, state, and local governments. Find your local agency on the link to get started.
- [Small Business Development Centers](#) throughout California counsel and train business owners to start, run, and grow their firms. Find your local center for assistance today.
- The [Construction Resource Center](#) provides hands-on technical assistance, eLearning modules, educational materials, and mentorship programs to contractors, tradespeople, and future construction professionals.
- Builders Exchanges, including the [Bay Area Builders Exchange](#), [Humboldt Builders Exchange](#), [Sacramento Regional Builders Exchange](#), [Golden State Builders Exchange](#), and [Central California Builders Exchange](#) help business owners find more work.

Email questions to [erin.g.vontersch@dot.ca.gov](mailto:erin.g.vontersch@dot.ca.gov), or to sign up for the Small Business Press.