

The Layers of Blacks In Government

by Shirley A. Jones, Esq., BIG Region XI Council President 2012-2015



A BIG member introduced himself to me recently and when I asked what chapter he belonged to he said Chapter 11. I then asked him what agency he works for since most of our chapters have the agency name included within the chapter's name. Having received that response from members before, I have come to believe that perhaps as leaders we haven't done enough to ensure that our new members and prospective members firmly understand our organizational structure such that they don't confuse the chapter with the Region, both of which serve very distinct roles. And, while reading the BIG National Constitution is always my first recommendation as a starting point, I will use my remarks here today to peel back the layers of our organization: members, chapters, Regional Councils, and the National Organization of BIG.

As human capital, we as government employees are our agencies' greatest assets. So, too are BIG's members its greatest assets as our volunteer organization seeks to provide a mutually beneficial relationship in which our members gain valuable benefits while volunteering for the various committees and leadership positions that move forward the BIG mission. And, according to our National Constitution, any person may become a member by paying the annual membership fee if they are in accord with the philosophy, principles, policies, and objectives of BIG (e.g. advocating for equal opportunity, enhancing professionalism, and developing educational opportunities). It is important to note that "any person" means anyone of any race, gender, age, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or otherwise. All are welcome. There are in turn three categories of individual membership: regular, associate, and life. Regular membership is open to any employee or retiree of the Federal, state, or local government. Only regular members are allowed to vote or hold office. Associate memberships are available to individuals not employed directly by the government (e.g. government contractors and students not currently employed by the government). Life membership is available to regular and associate members for a one time additional fee. Regular, associate, and life members who choose not to affiliate with a chapter (e.g. government employees located at agencies without a BIG chapter and some retirees) are referred to as at-large members. We encourage all of our members to affiliate with a chapter for the networking opportunities, become active with Regional Council committees by serving as Regional Representatives (described below), stay abreast of current information by joining the Regional and National email distribution lists, and to serve as delegates at our annual business meeting (also described more fully below).

The chapters are our boots on the ground within our government agencies. According to our National Constitution, chapters may be established in a city or community or other geographical entity and may include one or more Federal, state, county, or local agencies. The active chapters in the metropolitan DC, MD, and VA area, known as Region XI, are all currently within Federal agencies. (For a complete listing of the 57 chapters, visit www.bigrx.org.) We do, of course, hope to establish chapters at state and local agencies as well. In order to carry out their responsibilities, chapter officers include, but are not limited to, a President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer. Chapters also have various standing and special committees to implement their specific programs. Chapters are encouraged to offer career development training sessions in house, establish mentoring and networking programs, participate in our National Training In Communications, STEM, and Future Leaders in America's Government (FLAG) programs for youth, and meet with agency officials to partner on issues related to diversity in recruitment, hiring, promotions, advancement, and retention.



The Layers of Blacks In Government continued...

Our Region XI Council provides leadership, guidance, and support to the chapters and members in our area. According to the National Constitution, the eleven separate Regional Councils (all covering separate geographical areas) are to act as advisors to the National Organization, identify and develop strategies to resolve Regional problems, and develop mechanisms to share ideas, concerns, problems, information and innovations across chapters, among other things. Our Region XI Council shares information through our RXIC Weekly announcements, monthly information sharing Council meetings that include a “chapter successes” segment, email updates to the chapter presidents, and our website. The Council is comprised of three members, called Regional Representatives, elected by each chapter.

Chapters may elect alternate Regional Representatives to serve in the absence of primary regional representatives. These chapter Regional Representatives in turn become the elected officers and committee chairs for the regional positions. I (Shirley Jones, GAO-USACE Chapter, Region XI) am currently closing out my 4 year term as Council President serving alongside 1st Vice President Marion Allen, Washington DC, College Park HHS Chapter, Region XI, who chairs our Programs and Education Committee, and 2nd Vice President Jesse Sharpe, Education Department Chapter, Region XI who chairs our Membership Committee. There are additional officers who serve equally important roles including our Treasurer Rochelle Bryant, GAO-USACE Chapter, Region XI, Finance Secretary April Powers-Matthews, DIA Chapter, Region XI, Recording Secretary, Marie Perry, Robert C. Weaver HUD Chapter, Region XI, and Corresponding Secretary Dr. Contress Braxton, Parklawn Chapter, Region XI. Through the leadership of the Council’s elected officers and appointed chairs along with the very important efforts of committee members, the Council separately hosts various training initiatives (e.g. Regional Training Conference in May and Pathways to the SES in July) and networking events (e.g. upcoming Harlem Cultural Tour on Saturday, October 17, 2015, and James E. Wood Night of Elegance Holiday Awards Gala on Saturday, December 5, 2015) that allow members from across all chapters to interact with one another. Members who are not Regional Representatives are also welcome to attend meetings and join committees but cannot become officers or committee chairs.

Our National Board (Board) and National Executive Committee (NEC) make up our National Organization. The Board determines the policy of our organization and has authority to undertake all appropriate actions requiring national attention. Each Regional Council elects two Regional Directors to serve on the Board along with the National President, National Treasurer, and National Secretary. The Chairperson of our Board is currently the Honorable Faye Stewart, Houston Area Chapter, Region VI. Our Region XI Directors are Dr. Hezekiah Braxton, Pentagon Chapter, Region XI, and Wesley Jarmon, FCC Benjamin Hooks Chapter, Region XI. The NEC, led by the National President, implements the policies established by the Board through programs established expressly for such purposes. For example, our NEC, along with BIG member volunteers from across the country, implements our National Training Institute (NTI) each year. The NEC is led by the National President, currently the Honorable Darlene Young, Carl T. Rowan State Department Chapter, Region XI, who serves along with an Executive Vice President, three Vice Presidents, and other national officers. The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Vice Presidents serve as primary focal points for coordinating programs and developing initiatives to benefit federal, state, and local employees, respectively.

In conjunction with our annual NTI, we convene our annual Delegates Assembly business meeting. This meeting gives our national leaders an opportunity to address delegates sent from each chapter and to provide valuable information about the state of our organization’s progress on various initiatives as well as an audit of our organization’s financial position. The meeting also gives chapter delegates an opportunity to question their leaders, provide input on important decisions, and to elect new officers. Only regular members in good financial standing with their chapter which must in turn be in good financial standing with the Regional Council and National Organization may serve as delegates.

I hope you have found this overview useful but I also hope you will take a few minutes to read through our National Constitution. I have always been impressed by the work the BIG founders put into thinking through the creation of such a meaningful organization as reflected in this very important document. By reading our National Constitution and considering what the founders truly intended, I hope it will encourage more and more government employees to join this noble effort to provide win-win opportunities for employees and agencies alike.