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# BUSINESS

## Dickerson: Chamber pivotal to 'one economy'

### United Way chief shares 'prescriptions for success'

by Sonya M. Toler

Courier Staff Writer

If the Pittsburgh region is to develop on "mommy" the African American Chamber of Commerce must play a pivotal role, according to Ralph Dickerson Jr.

Dickerson, the former executive director of the United Way of Allegheny County, delivered the keynote address May 19 at the Black chamber's annual meeting.

The meeting was a celebration of progress the chamber has made under the leadership of Chairman Robert O. Agbade, and President Doris Carson Williams.

Dickerson used the opportunity to remind the area's business community that the fate of the region is inextricably linked to the fate of Black entrepreneurs.

When Dickerson took over the local United Way, he was the only African-American to hold such a position.

He faced several obstacles but had a success: "I reigned until he left in 1988 to become president and chief professional officer of the United Way of New York City."

Under his leadership, the United Way became the largest private funder of human services in the region. In the 10 years since 1989, to 1999, New York's United Way programs grew from 76 million to \$114 million, said Williams, who introduced Dickerson.



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**MORE TO DO**—Although the first year under the leadership of Chairman Robert Agbade, left, and President Doris Carson Williams, right, was successful, guest speaker Ralph Dickerson explained that the chamber has more work to do.

burgh's leaders and gave access to a network reserved for a few," she said.

Dickerson, who Williams called "a leader by example," discussed three trends he said will affect the chamber's role, and shared four "prescriptions for success" with chamber members.

The trends according to Dickerson are: "The age-old issue of the inability of people to understand the limited capital that's available to African-Americans businesses."

"The Internet provides a sense of color blindness, something Black businesses should take advantage of."

"The Internet, sees to color, which means that your product has to be something that the average person can understand. The buying power of the African-American community nationally is \$8.5 billion, and the average African-American family has a net worth of \$1,000."

form supplier diversity initiatives with other companies; and collaborate with local colleges and universities to encourage Black youths to start their own businesses.

Although approximately 100 people attended the meeting—including several white professionals—Dickerson made no bones about saying, "There are some who don't want the chamber to succeed."

"The chamber must bring together all people and make sure there is a strategy, not just for Blacks, but for all people" because "the soul of this city is its people and the way it does its business."

Toward the end of his speech, Dickerson, Williams, in his eyes, briefly mentioned the last time he visited Pittsburgh and the state's economic situation.



PHOTO BY DON PAGE

**SIGN-IN**—Crystal Ware signs in for the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pa.'s very first "Annual Meeting."

awarded \$3 million in grants to 50 partnerships, representing more than 250 organizations during its three-year pilot phase.

Williams credited Dickerson as one of the reasons she has been a fortuitous leader with the chamber.

"On many occasions (he) extended his network to support my professional development. He opened doors that were otherwise closed, he made critical phone calls and he convened Pitts-

trillion, and over the next three years, the number of minority businesses is expected to double.

His charge to the Black chamber was fourfold: increase the opportunity for Black business owners to access capital; develop a minority business roundtable made up of heads of major companies with the mission of creating financing strategies for Black-owned businesses;

Agbede said. "We're pressing on."

The Black chamber will host a trade delegation from South Africa next month. A reception will be held at the Westin William Penn, Downtown, June 8 and representatives will be guest at a June 9 power breakfast.

(For more information, call 412-392-0610 or visit the web site [www.aacc-cup.com](http://www.aacc-cup.com).)

1994, his daughter was a passenger on USAir Flight 737. The plane crashed in Hopewell, Beaver County, killing all 132 passengers and crew.

After his remarks, the chamber presented Dickerson with a painting by local artist Sarah Nite and his former colleagues from the United Way of Allegheny County gave him a gift basket filled with Pittsburgh memorabilia.

Agbede closed the meeting saying, "our souls have been fed this morning."

He said he will relay Dickerson's remarks to the chamber's Presidential Roundtable, chaired by Tom Usher, chairman of USX. "The work of the chamber has just yet begun,"

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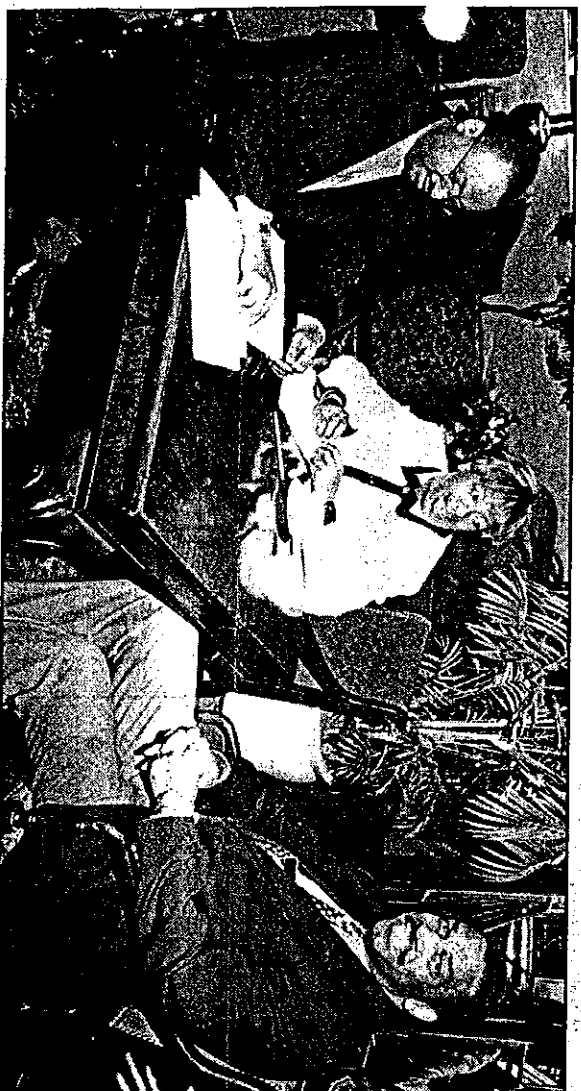


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#### ORGANIZING

—Bill Strickland, right, talks with Robert Agbede and Doris Carson Williams before the start of a meeting outlining the Black chamber's accomplishments and goals.