

Chamber chairman rallies minority business owners

By Lou Ransom

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Robert Agbede is on a crusade.

Agbede, chairman of the board of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania, wants every minority-owned business to be a member, and he wants all of the members to have access to business opportunity.

"The battle for inclusion and access to opportunity is ongoing," Agbede, president of Advanced Technology Systems Inc., told members at the chamber's second annual meeting Tuesday at the Rivers Club, Downton. "And the battle is not yet won."

Still, the chamber has enlisted more soldiers to the battle, as the membership of the organization has swollen to more than 300, a tenfold increase since 1998, when Doris Carson Williams came aboard as president and CEO. And the strength of the chamber is reflected in the corporate leaders it is able to attract as

partners in the battle.

Luncheon speaker Murry S. Gerber, chairman, president and chief executive officer of Equitable Resources Inc., told more than 100 attendees, most of whom were small-business owners, that his \$2.5 billion company was still a small business, but that didn't hinder its success.

"You don't have to be large to be successful," said Gerber, who said Equitable ranks 96th among the world's energy companies.

Agbede borrowed Gerber's theme in discussing the growth of the chamber, noting that despite the size of the organization — with an estimated 2,500 minority-owned businesses in western Pennsylvania — it should move forward and fulfill its mission "to promote business and professional opportunities for African-American business owners and professionals."

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