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Washington State Failed to Pay a Federal Way Nonprofit for Completed Work — Then Returned the Committed Funds to the Legislature

Because Washington State withheld funds, Mission Africa, which served 6,050 people, depleted its reserves, cashed out its personal retirement savings, and laid off its entire staff. The Washington State Auditor found that the Department of Commerce, not the grantees, failed to define standards, train staff, or provide oversight. The \$336,000 owed to Mission Africa was returned to the state legislature on December 31, 2025, without notice.

FEDERAL WAY, WA — For more than two years, Mission Africa faithfully served African immigrant and refugee families across South King County through Washington State’s Digital Navigator Program. The Program included: teaching digital literacy skills to 6,050 people, including seniors who learned to operate a mouse for the first time; and teaching young people SQL coding, cybersecurity, and robotics. The organization averaged 8.3 student interactions every single day for 730 consecutive days. That data was documented and reported through the Navigator Program’s approved tracking system.

Mission Africa performed the work as agreed. It paid its staff out of pocket when state payments stopped. Based on promises from the State, Mission Africa waited in good faith for over a year for payment. And now, even after following the specific instructions from the State, funds due for the final six months of work were withheld and returned to the legislature.

The Washington State Department of Commerce owes Mission Africa **\$336,000** for the final six months of a completed, reimbursable contract. The work was performed, and the required information was submitted. On December 31, 2025, the Department of Commerce returned those funds to the state legislature, without notifying Mission Africa, and without providing a meaningful appeal process, while at the same time

Mission Africa relied in good faith on the Department's assurance that payment can be "expected any day."

On January 15, 2026, Mission Africa received a closeout letter from Commerce stating that it would not receive payment for the final six months of completed, documented work. The Department offered no pathway for appeal.

The Work Was Real. The Documentation Was Submitted. The Payment Never Came.

Mission Africa first received a direct Digital Navigator grant from the Washington State Department of Commerce in 2022 and was paid in full using the same contractor and the same operational and reporting processes. In 2023, Commerce selected the Equity in Education Center (EEC) to manage a digital equity grant consortium that included Mission Africa. For the first 18 months, payments arrived regularly.

In January 2025, under new Commerce Director Joe Nguyen, payments stopped entirely. Commerce began rejecting EEC's invoices, citing documentation requirements that, according to a Washington State Auditor report and multiple affected organizations, were never clearly defined at the outset of the contract and continued to shift throughout the process.

A June 2025 investigative report by PubliCola documented the crisis across the EEC consortium, naming Mission Africa specifically and quoting Executive Director Ndudi Chuku: "We did good work, we did it well, with integrity and honesty. We did not cut corners in any way, and we did not make up numbers."

In September 2025, Commerce offered subcontractors the opportunity to contract directly with the department, bypassing EEC, to process outstanding invoices before the program's funding deadline. Mission Africa accepted and submitted all requested documentation directly to Commerce, including payroll records, invoices, bank statements, and supporting materials. Commerce confirmed receipt. Mission Africa was told other organizations were beginning to receive payment and that its reimbursement was "expected any day."

On December 31, 2025, Commerce returned the remaining funds to the Office of Financial Management. Mission Africa was not notified. On January 15, 2026, the organization received its zero-dollar closeout letter.

The State Auditor Found Commerce Failed — Not the Grantees.

A Washington State Auditor report on the Digital Navigator Program placed responsibility for the Program's failures squarely on the Department of Commerce. The audit's key findings:

- **No defined documentation standards:** The grant agreement contained no specifics about what documentation was required, stating only that it must be "to Commerce's satisfaction." Grantees were never told clearly what acceptable documentation looked like.

- **One untrained employee handled all payments:** A single Commerce employee was responsible for the entire review and payment process and, according to the audit, was not trained to fulfill their job duties effectively.
- **No management oversight:** The audit found no documented evidence of management oversight of the review and payment process.
- **No written policies:** Commerce did not have written policies outlining oversight expectations, documentation standards, approval responsibilities, or payment processing requirements.

The auditor’s recommended fixes were directed entirely at Commerce: create written policies, train staff, provide oversight, and establish review controls. The audit did not find that the nonprofits failed. It found the system itself was broken, and community organizations were then denied payment for failing to meet standards that were never defined.

Mission Africa and its coalition partners summarized the auditor’s findings in a formal presentation to Commerce leadership: “Commerce didn’t define expectations, didn’t train staff, didn’t train grantees, didn’t create structure, and later denied payments due to those missing standards.”

What Elected Officials and Commerce Leadership Have Said on the Record.

Mission Africa has not been silent. The organization reached out to elected officials at every level. Here is what the record shows:

“I am disheartened that you didn’t have the guidance and/or information you needed from the very beginning to make sure there was clarity around what could/could not be submitted as allowable expenses for this grant.”

— Washington State Senator Claire Wilson, in written correspondence to Ndudi Chuku, January 31, 2026

King County Councilmember Pete von Reichbauer wrote directly to Senator Wilson on January 16, 2026, on behalf of Mission Africa by name and contract number, requesting clarity on why expenses were rejected, whether corrected documentation could have addressed concerns, and what appeal options existed.

Senator Patty Murray’s office acknowledged Mission Africa’s outreach and encouraged the organization to continue raising its voice.

On March 4, 2026, Commerce Interim Director Sarah Clifthorne sent written follow-up correspondence to Mission Africa and four other affected organizations confirming three things: that she had shared the organizations’ concerns with the Governor’s Office; that Commerce’s Assistant Attorney General had again been consulted and advised that “all options with Commerce have been exhausted”; and that she acknowledged the inconsistent treatment between organizations that contracted directly with Commerce in June 2025 versus those who came forward in October 2025.

Despite these acknowledgments, Commerce has stated it cannot act further. The funds have been returned to the legislature. Mission Africa has been told the decision is final.

The Human Cost of a Year of Good Faith.

For over a year, Mission Africa absorbed the financial impact of Commerce's failure rather than abandoning the community members it served. The organization's board minutes and financial records document the full progression of that sacrifice:

- **January 2025:** Commerce stops payments. Mission Africa begins covering program costs from organizational reserves, believing in good faith that reimbursement would come.
- **June 2025:** A \$100,000 Certificate of Deposit, built over the years as a rainy-day fund, is cashed to cover payroll. A second \$50,000 CD matures mid-month, providing short-term relief.
- **August 2025:** Staff hours are formally reduced. The Executive Director and executive assistant move to a four-day-per-week schedule. The project manager and outreach coordinator move to three days per week.
- **December 31, 2025:** Commerce returns all remaining funds to the Office of Financial Management without notifying Mission Africa.
- **January 15, 2026:** Mission Africa receives a closeout letter awarding \$0 for \$336,000 in completed, documented work.
- **January 16, 2026:** Mission Africa travels to Olympia, submits a request-to-meet form at the Governor's Office, meets with State Representative Jamila Taylor, and speaks with the legislative aide of State Representative Edwin Obras (33rd Legislative District).
- **April 2026:** Mission Africa lays off its entire staff. An organization that previously operated on an annual budget of \$1.2 to \$1.3 million is now running on approximately \$12,000 in reserves.

“We founded this organization more than 20 years ago with nothing but faith and a commitment to serve. We have never walked away from a community member, and we did not walk away from this contract. We did the work. We documented everything. We followed every instruction Commerce gave us. We were told, in writing, that payment was coming. Instead, we received zero. This is not a paperwork dispute. This is a matter of justice for the people we serve, here in South King County, who are now paying the price for a system that failed them.”

— Nduki Chuku, Co-Founder & Executive Director, Mission Africa

What We Are Asking For.

Mission Africa is calling on the Washington State Legislature, the Office of the Attorney General, and the Department of Commerce to:

1. Restore the \$336,000 in reimbursements owed for work completed, documented, and submitted in compliance with contract requirements.
2. Acknowledge publicly that Mission Africa fulfilled its contractual obligations and was harmed by systemic failures on the part of the state, not by any failure of its own.
3. Establish a remediation pathway for community organizations that were not paid before the December 31, 2025, funding return deadline, through no fault of their own.

The Washington State Auditor's own findings support this ask. The audit did not recommend denying payments to grantees. It recommended fixing Commerce. Mission Africa should not bear the cost of a government agency's failure to manage its own program.

Stand With Us.

While Mission Africa pursues every available avenue to recover what it is owed, the organization's work must continue. Immigrant families in South King County are waiting. The community Mission Africa has served for over 20 years has not gone anywhere.

If you believe community organizations that serve the most vulnerable deserve to be paid for the work they have done, please stand with Mission Africa today.

- **Donate Online:** www.missionafrica.us/donate
- **Donate via PayPal:** paypal.com/fundraiser/charity/1949446
- **Donate via Zelle:** info@missionafrica.us
- **Donate by Check:** Mission Africa, 33309 1st Way South, Suite A100, Federal Way, WA 98003
- **Donor-Advised Fund (DAF):** EIN: 76-0843150, Federal Way, WA 98003
- **Spread the Word:** Share this press release with journalists, community leaders, and anyone who believes in accountability and equity.
- **Contact Your Legislators:** Tell them you want to see Washington State make this right. The money exists. It was returned to the legislature. It can be appropriated back.

About Mission Africa

Mission Africa is a nonprofit organization founded over 20 years ago by Ndudi Chuku and her husband, George, based in Federal Way, Washington. The organization serves African immigrant and refugee communities in South King County, including Auburn, Federal Way, Kent, Algona, Pacific, and surrounding areas. Programs include free digital literacy and computer classes, youth technology programs, leadership development training, an annual Back to School Community Event providing backpacks filled with school supplies, a community food pantry and household supplies

distribution, free health screenings, and Smiles at Christmas, serving hundreds of families annually, changing lives one village at a time.

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PubliCola Reference: publicola.com/2025/06/23/dozens-of-digital-literacy-groups-funded-through-a-statewide-grant-havent-been-paid-since-january-the-state-says-it-isnt-to-blame/

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