

**The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Contracts for Businesses with Characteristics that Align
with the Definition of Underserved Community
October 26, 2021, 1:00 pm- 3:00 pm ET¹**

Background

[Executive Order 13985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#) (EO 13985) directs agencies to conduct equity assessments of select programs to determine whether underserved communities face systemic barriers in accessing benefits and opportunities. Per EO 13985, underserved communities are defined as, “populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life...such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.” As part of implementing [EO 13985](#), the Department of the Interior (DOI) is assessing the equity of its programs related to three initial focus areas that support the agency's mission and have high potential for equity impact: (1) contracting, (2) recreational visitation, and (3) tribal discretionary grants. DOI contracted with Kearns and West to conduct 15 virtual listening sessions where the public were invited to provide comments and feedback on the barriers that limit access, diversity, and equity as well as recommendations of actions the Department should take to reduce barriers.

On behalf of DOI, Kearns and West facilitated a listening session on Contracts for Businesses with Characteristics that Align with the Definition of Underserved Community on October 26, 2021, from 1:00 pm- 3:00 pm ET.

Participant Data

Ahead of the virtual session, registration totaled 40 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in the session with totals around 25 participants.

Participants were invited to use Poll Everywhere to understand who was participating and as a tool for building community in a virtual space. Participants were asked whether they identified with or represented any of the categories of underserved communities as defined by Executive Order 13985. Information was also collected to better understand the size of their business, their previous experience in applying for federal contracts, and whether their business had been awarded a contract.

The polling data highlighted the diversity with 21% of participants as coming from a rural community, 21% identified as a person of a racial or ethnic minority group, 14% identified as a person impacted by persistent poverty, 14% identified as a person living with a disability, and the remaining 70% identified as either none of the above or they identified with another identification category.

Most businesses represented identified as a business with 0-5 employees, about 63%. The other 37% showed a variation with one participant representing each of the following business size categories: 26-50 employee, 101-500 employees, and more than 500 employees.

¹ This meeting summary was prepared for the U.S. Department of the Interior by Kearns & West, Inc. (K&W) pursuant to an existing IDIQ contract.

Out of the businesses represented about 75% of them have applied or submitted a proposal to the Department. Out of this percentage, 63% of businesses have been awarded a federal contract.

When participants were polled around where they learn about opportunities most participants use SAM.gov (30%). Additional sources for finding opportunities included 20% of participants using Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (PTACs), 10% using DOI forecast of contracting opportunities, 10% using industry groups, 10% using DOI's Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business utilization website, and 10% using word of mouth, 5% using other, and 5% using associated small business groups. When asked about the frequency of their use of the Department of the Interior's Forecast of Contracting Opportunities through the GSA Acquisition Gateway website, participants' responses were never (38%), rarely (25%), often (25%), and sometimes (12%).

Geographically, participants joined from the following states: Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Nebraska, New Mexico, and North Carolina.

Agenda Overview

The purpose of this listening session was to understand and address the barriers that exist in the Department's procurement process, with an emphasis on improving engagement with underserved communities. Keeping the purpose of the sessions at the forefront, Kearns & West, an independent, third-party neutral consulting firm, and DOI designed a two-hour facilitation plan to learn more about how to engage with businesses with characteristics that align with the EO 13985 definition of underserved community.

Miro, an interactive, collaborative virtual whiteboard was used to capture participants' responses to developed facilitation questions. Prior to the session, participants were sent a session reminder email with instructions on how to use Miro, which included a PDF of Miro Tips and a YouTube video tutorial. Sarah Franklin, Kearns & West, provided an additional demonstration of the Miro board, with instructions for those uncomfortable with the technology to express their ideas verbally or using the chat function. Miro provided participants the space to reflect and respond to the following guiding questions:

- Have you applied for or accessed procurement and contracting opportunities with DOI in the past? If so, please describe what you liked and did not like about the process. If not, why not?
- What would have made it easier for you to apply or access procurement and contracting opportunities with DOI?
- What are the barriers to applying for procurement and contracting opportunities with DOI? How can DOI remove or reduce barriers (e.g., update policies, practices, or programs)?
- How can DOI establish and maintain connections to a wider and more diverse set of stakeholders representing underserved communities? How can DOI better share information with underserved stakeholders about procurement and contracting opportunities?

Utilizing these questions, Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, led participants through a series of discussions. Each segment corresponded to a dedicated conversation through the Miro board, the chat function, or participants' verbal remarks. Each section began with an introduction to the topic matter and a preview of the questions featured on the Miro board. Each discussion segment concluded with a summarization of themes, and its relationship to the larger goals of hosting a series of listening sessions.

In addition to guided facilitation of virtual activities and open reflection, the listening session opened with words from Rachael Taylor, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management, and Budget. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Taylor welcome the public to be part of a larger conversation about how to make equity improvements to the Department of the Interior acknowledging that these are hard conversations to have, but necessary in making future programs and policies more inclusive. While the Department could not make any promises for immediate action, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Taylor acknowledged appreciation of being in the room to hear participants' experiences and indicated that the Department plans to publish an Equity Plan in the Spring of 2022.

The session closed with remarks from Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, who reiterated that the listening sessions are providing a foundation for future conversations around how DOI can engage with businesses with characteristics that align with the definition of underserved communities. He also reiterated his appreciation for all who participated in these conversations and encouraged participants to continue to have conversations with the Department.

Themes and Concepts

Four thematic conversations were held during the listening session: (1) perceptions, (2) what is working now and what could be working, (3) communication, and (4) recommendations. A summary of each conversation is included below.

Perceptions

This section looked for participants to begin the conversation by answering the following questions:

- What types of opportunities do you know exist?
- Do you feel that your business is competitive for DOI contracts? Why or why not?
- Anything else we should know?

Participants were encouraged to describe their experiences when accessing federal contracting opportunities and to elaborate on whether they felt their business was competitive within the DOI procurement process. Participants' words, reflections, experiences, and recommendations on this segment were recorded on the Miro board, which is included as *Figure 1: Perceptions Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Themes that arose during the Miro board activity included an emphasis on the capabilities and competitiveness of small businesses, the businesses constraints for Indian businesses, and businesses wanting to propose their own contracting opportunities to the Department.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, opened additional space for participants to reflect on comments from the virtual Miro board or for general perceptions on the procurement process. Participants continued to reflect on the challenges of being a small firm competing against larger, more experienced firms. Participants built upon this theme to stress that small companies, particularly, those without business development offices struggle to find and apply for contracting opportunities.

What is working now? What could be working?

This section moved participants to begin thinking more about their experiences with DOI's procurement and contracting processes by answering the following questions:

done through targeted emails, open houses, and industry days. Participants emphasized that intentional outreach involves specific messaging around procurement and networking opportunities based on the company and/or the targeted community.

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space for participants to elaborate on anything written on the Miro board, or any additional recommendations or thoughts on how to improve communication. Participants raised additional needs for communication around opportunities, particularly, around the best ways to message opportunities. Participants recommended the Department use PTACs to communicate new opportunities and reach out to businesses when there is a request for proposal (RFP) within their locality or region. Participants also recommended holding additional opportunities for networking between businesses and the Department through conferences, industry days, regional forums, or meet and greets.

Recommendations

This section empowered participants to recommend ways to improve the procurement and contracting process through the following questions:

- How can DOI reduce barriers that underserved and/or small and disadvantaged businesses face when they participate or attempt to participate in procurement and contracting opportunities?
- What could immediately help your business (or those you represent) to be more competitive and “procurement ready” for federal contract awards?
- Anything else we should know?

Participants in previous topics had begun naming recommendations to the Department, and this space gave them the opportunity to expand on previously mentioned examples, and the space to suggest additional recommendations. Participants then used the virtual Miro board to record their recommendations and concluding thoughts, which can be seen in *Figure 4: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Many participants recommended implementing structures that would require large businesses to work with smaller businesses on the same contracting opportunity, such as small businesses acting as a sub-contractor to a prime contractor, to allow for partnership and mentorship between the companies of different sizes. Lastly, relationship recommendations addressed supports for networking, communicating opportunities, and creating additional resources and supports for businesses interested in pursuing contracting opportunities.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space to allow participants to express any additional recommendations and reflections on the discussion. Participants stressed that opportunities are posted, but there is not assistance or accountability from the Department in assisting businesses be successful. Additionally, participants recommended potential networking opportunities for people to directly communicate with the government quarterly to create open channels of communication around accessing opportunities, applying for opportunities, creating partnerships with other firms and businesses, and successfully being awarded a contract.

Overarching Recommendations

Participants throughout the session, and not solely during the recommendation’s discussion, provided input and feedback to inform the Department. The key recommendations the Kearns and West facilitation team heard and would like to lift included:

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- Developing intentional communication to businesses that meets businesses' needs and communicates potential opportunities for firms. Participants recommended this could be done through intentional and creative email communication, localized contacts, utilization of PTACs as partners, and events that bring contractors and the Department into conferencing and networking spaces.
- Supporting networking events to connect small businesses to larger businesses through sub and prime relationships.
- Provide clearer communication channels for businesses to access the Department's point of contacts.
- Creating tutorials and trainings to understand the requirements and technical expertise included in RFPS and/or simplifying the language within RFPs to make it more accessible to businesses unfamiliar with DOI's procurement process.

Appendix A: Miro Board Screenshots

This Appendix features participant responses to a DOI Listening Session on Contracts for Businesses with Characteristics that Align with the Definition of Underserved Community on October 26, 2021, from 1:00 pm- 3:00 pm ET. The sticky notes included on the boards reflect participants' own words, experiences, reflections, and recommendations.



Figure 1: Perceptions Miro Board Screenshot

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCE SUBMITTING PROPOSALS FOR PROCUREMENT AND CONTRACTING OPPORTUNITIES WITH DOI?

IF YOU HAVE NOT SUBMITTED A PROPOSAL, WHY HAVEN'T YOU?

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO SUBMITTING PROPOSALS FOR PROCUREMENT AND CONTRACTING OPPORTUNITIES WITH DOI?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?

WHAT WAS HELPFUL?

RFPs with clear requirements

Many of mine go through grants.gov. Having everything in one place is helpful.

Webinars

Having a point of contact to answer questions

I have submitted proposals. I usually work with my PTAC rep. or find opportunities with Sam. gov. The contracting representatives have been willing to work with us to answer any questions and clarify anything.

I have not though, I'd like to.

the types of meetings do not yet exist to submit a proposal for regarding the black community.

SB don't always have the exact past performance or past experience necessary for larger opportunities.

The Buy Indian Act should be used more than it currently is within the DOI

I'd love to find more opportunities in our geographical area.

DOI could use the SBA programs like 8(a) and HubZone better. DOI seems reluctant to use the 8(a) program.

Many opportunities

WHAT WAS CHALLENGING?

The time it takes to write a good proposal

Upon award the follow up can be slow.

The amount of time to respond is often a limiting factor. Knowing about opportunities is another, unless you are in conversation with someone ahead of time. Being competitive once an opportunity is on the street greatly reduces your success rate for services. Not having clear key words for our services is another barrier even though we have a track record working with DOI.

I agree with whoever said RFQs are often not clear. The equivalent of a pre-proposal conference for services would be something that could be very helpful to small businesses.

A few thoughts-How are set asides born? ...and how can departments like DOI be sure that the right process is in place for those set aside projects

Figure 2: What is working now? What could be working? Miro Board

HOW CAN DOI ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN CONNECTIONS TO A WIDER AND MORE DIVERSE SET OF BUSINESSES?

HOW CAN DOI BETTER SHARE INFORMATION WITH UNDERSERVED BUSINESSES ABOUT PROCUREMENT AND CONTRACTING OPPORTUNITIES?

WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO NOTIFY AND ENGAGE UNDERSERVED BUSINESSES ABOUT NEW OPPORTUNITIES?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?

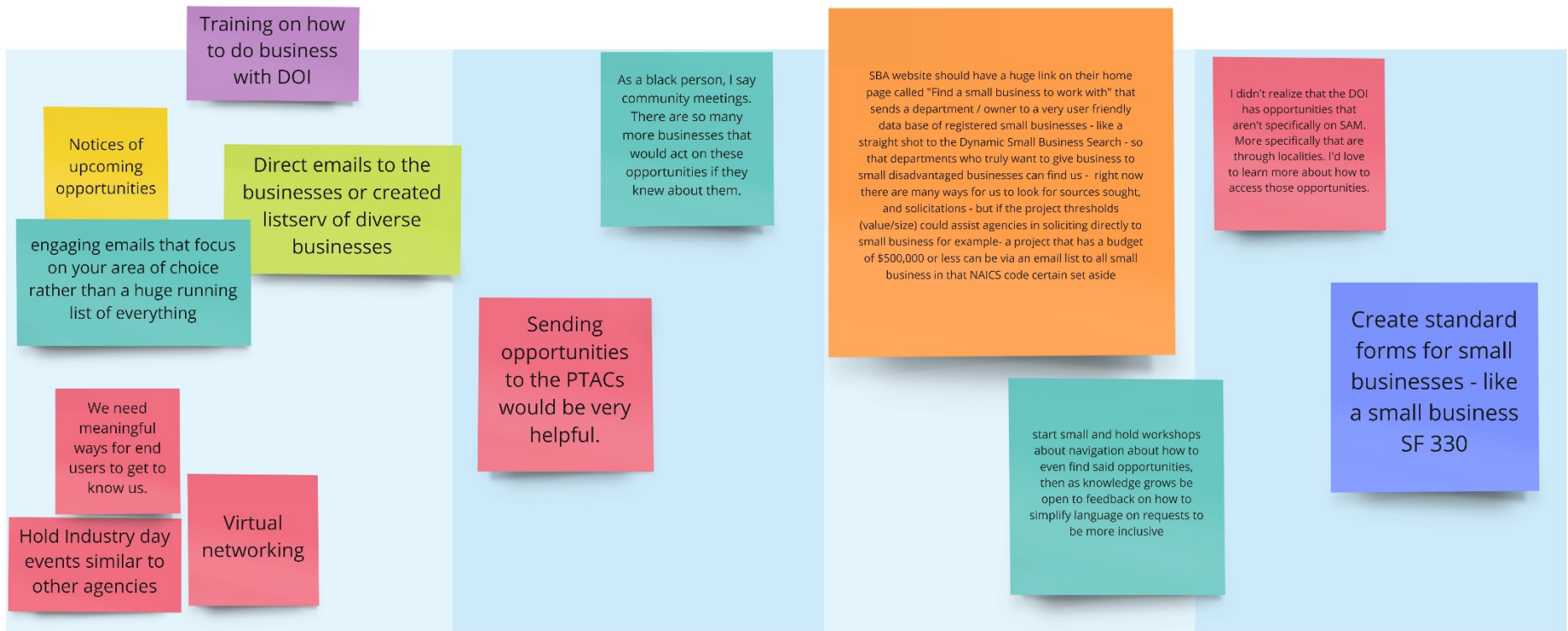


Figure 3: Communication Miro Board Screenshot

HOW CAN DOI REDUCE BARRIERS THAT UNDERSERVED AND/OR SMALL AND DISADVANTAGED BUSINESSES FACE WHEN THEY PARTICIPATE OR ATTEMPT TO PARTICIPATE IN PROCUREMENT AND CONTRACTING OPPORTUNITIES?

WHAT COULD IMMEDIATELY HELP YOUR BUSINESS (OR THOSE YOU REPRESENT) TO BE MORE COMPETITIVE AND "PROCUREMENT READY" FOR FEDERAL CONTRACT AWARDS?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?



Figure 4: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot