

**The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Contracts for Businesses with Characteristics that Align
with the Definition of Underserved Community
October 19, 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 19, 2021, from 1:00 pm- 3:00 pm ET.

Participant Data

Ahead of the virtual session, registration totaled 41 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in the session with totals around 42 participants.

Participants were invited to voluntarily 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.²

For those that participated in polling, about 50% identified as a person of color and about 50% identified with the “other” category. One of those who selected the other category made note of how they identify as a Native American and a single mother. Sizes of businesses represented during the polling activity were on the small side with about 34% of businesses employing 0-5 people, 33% employing 26-50 people, and 33% employing more than 500 people.

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.

² Due to a polling technical error, the data, except for geographic representation, was recorded through the Zoom chat function. Data about participants' geographic representation was taken from registration.

Participants reported learning about small business opportunities from the following sources: SAM.gov (38%), the U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization Website (12%), Industry groups (12%), associated small business groups (12%), and Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (PTACs) (12%), and other (14%). Those who selected other mentioned they learn about contracting opportunities from state and local agencies, associations of small affinity business groups, and other federal agencies' emails and websites.

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 answered the following: about 50% responded with never, 34% responded with sometimes defined as perhaps a few times a year, and 16% responded with rarely defined as maybe once or twice a year.

Geographically, participants registered from the following states: Alaska, Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Washington state.

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 welcomed 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 how helpful Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (PTACs) can be for businesses, how the size and the scale of a business matters when trying to develop and find procurement opportunities, and it can be complicated and confusing to begin working with the federal government.**

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. A small, disadvantaged business owner raised their concern around how being successful at winning contracting opportunities at the state level does not translate nationally. Large companies and firms dominate across industries when gaining access to the federal contracting system. Participants continued to build on the barriers that exist for small businesses when trying to enter the federal contracting sphere, especially when competing against large firms who have established trust and quality assurance from previous federal contracting awards and 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:

- What has been your experience submitting proposals for procurement and contracting opportunities with DOI? What has been helpful? What was challenging?
- 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?

Participants were encouraged to move from their perceptions of the federal contracting system to describing their experience with the system. Additionally, this section provided space to discuss the challenges of working within the federal contracting system. Participants recorded their experiences, reflections, and challenges on the virtual Miro board, which can be seen in *Figure 2: What is working now? What could be working? Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **The main theme that arose from this activity was that it is not easy to work and/or find contracting opportunities with DOI.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, built upon the Miro board theme to ask participants to describe why it is hard to work with DOI, and to provide examples of experiences participants have had as a small business that have made this process challenging. Participants answered that it is hard to communicate with DOI and it is difficult to obtain information around proposals and around why proposals were not awarded. Participants explained the frustration of repeatedly calling the agency, but not receiving a call back or being told DOI could not provide additional information due to proprietary information concerns. In hearing these experiences, participants raised a recommendation that the structures in place cannot be a one size fits all model, but rather making larger steps within the procurement process into smaller, more manageable steps. This process could be done by providing mentorship to smaller firms following their application to ensure they understand how to navigate the procurement process.

Communication

This section asked participants to move from describing the barriers and challenges of the process to begin recommending ways that DOI could engage with businesses to better share information by answering the following questions:

- 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?

Communication emerged as a persistent theme early in the conversation, which allowed this segment of the discussion to focus in on ways that communication and outreach could be improved between the Department and businesses. Participants recorded their recommendations and experiences around communicating with the Department on the virtual Miro board, which can be seen in *Figure 3: Communication Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Participants reiterated recommendations to the Department around creating sustainable relationships with consistent communication such as email and social media. Additionally, participants built upon previous discussion on creating and sustaining**

relationships to recommendations on how the Department structures procurement opportunities to make them more accessible to small businesses that do not have a business development team.

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 “meet and greets” as a great opportunity to increase relationships and communication between small businesses and the Department. Another participant stressed that having requirements around disadvantaged business enterprises (DBEs) working on contracts with larger firms could help break down the initial barriers to being awarded a federal contract. Lastly, many participants felt that Native American contractors are overlooked throughout the contracting process, and to create and sustain relationships between the Department and this community, intentional communication channels need to be established.

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. **Themes that emerged during this discussion included an emphasis on building relationships and eliminating bias in the contracting and procurement process, having targeted outreach to various businesses meeting their needs, and holding the Department accountable with consistent and accessible communication.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space to allow participants to express any additional recommendations and reflections on the discussion. Participants raised an additional recommendation for the Department to create a handbook explaining the different terminology as it relates to bidding, the procurement process, and federal contracting terminology. Participants also continued to build on themes of intentional outreach with recommendations for localized events, such as community small business events.

Overarching Recommendations

Participants throughout the session provided input and feedback to inform the Department. The key recommendations the Kearns and West facilitation team heard and would like to emphasize included:

- Build intentional and sustainable relationships through targeted and local outreach.
- Enable businesses to form a connection with the Department to better understand the process and how businesses with characteristics that align with the definition of underserved communities can be successful throughout the DOI contracting process.

- Improve clarity around the procurement process through creating additional tutorial or training material to help simplify both federal and procurement terminology for all to understand
- Offer more consistent and accountable communication to businesses trying to contact the Department for assistance during the procurement process.

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?

Access to the POC's is very helpful

Very limited experience but I feel that it is standard and fine. Could be overwhelming for some but we are familiar with Gov't proposals

I am new to the entire contracting processing, so I am in learning mode. A lot to learn! It can be overwhelming and confusing.

A lot of small business dont understand how to read and understand a solicitation

Depending on your area of service there are several factors. Size of opportunity, any preference that might give you a niche or advantage, return on taking that chance to market yo an agency. Time is money. also Area of performance because of your size.

Am I correct in assuming that companies with large contracts are "supposed" to have set-asides for small businesses? And if so, how is it being assured that they are doing this?

WHAT WAS CHALLENGING?

It is just challenging in general

I havde had a great amuont of difficulty pursiuing DOI Opportu cities

Lots of issues. Getting past /Past Performance requirements

It generally is not easy doing business with IDOI

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



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?

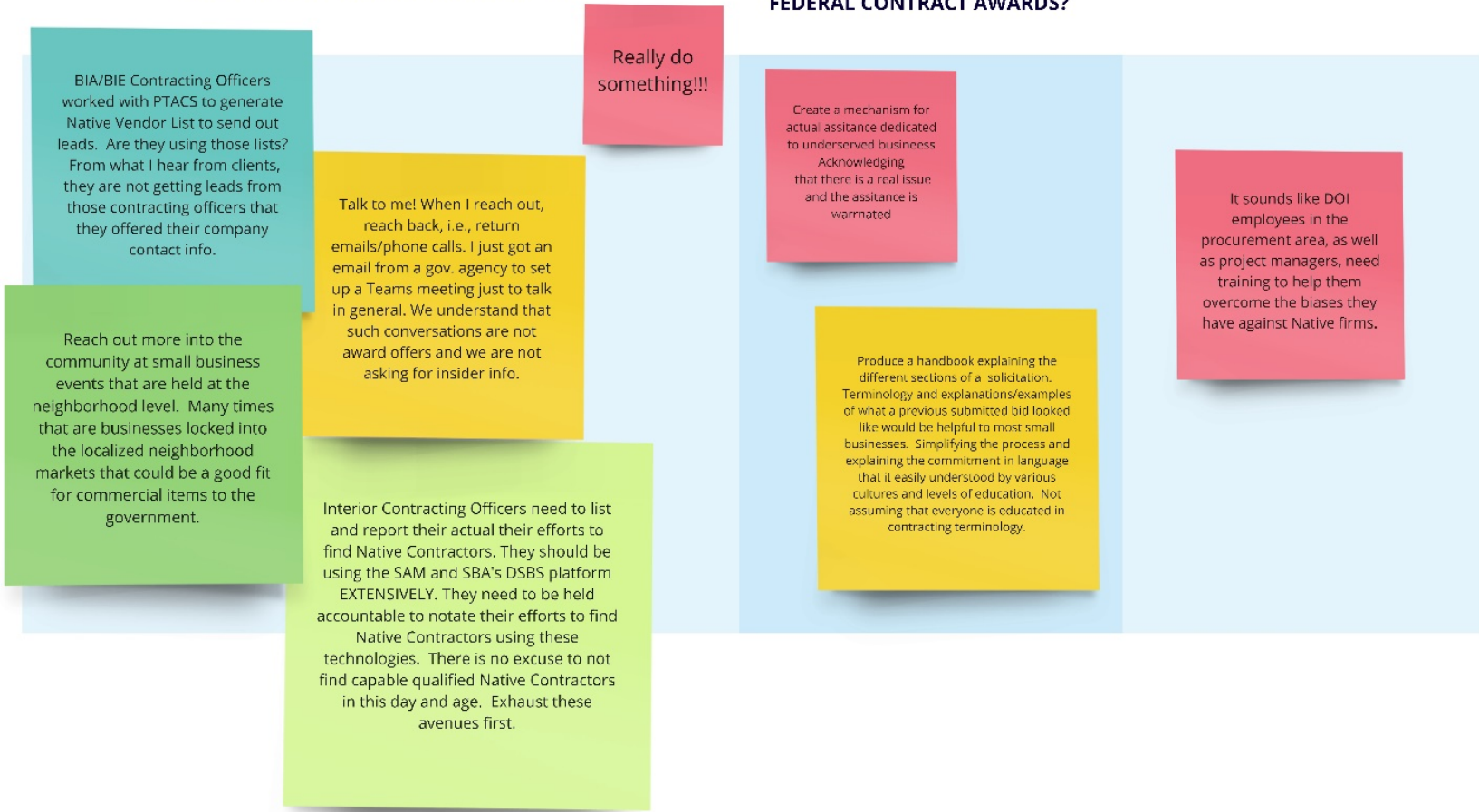


Figure 4: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot