The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Tribal Discretionary Grants
October 27, 2021, 5:00 pm- 7:00 pm ET [1]

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 Tribal Discretionary Grants on October 27, 2021, from 5:00 pm- 7:00 pm ET.

Participant Data

Ahead of the virtual session, registration totaled 127 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in session, around 90 participants.

Participants' demographic information was voluntarily collected through Poll Everywhere to understand who was participating and as a tool for building community in a virtual space. Participants were asked about their geographic location, Tribal affiliation, and grant application and access.

Polling data demonstrated that about 66% of attendees had previously applied for grant funding. and out of that percentage about about 75% of participants had been awarded grant funding.[2] Many discover grant opportunities through Grants.gov (35%), emails from the Department (23%), word of mouth (13%), U.S. Department of the Interior website (12%), outreach events (12%), and other (12%).

Polling showed that participants with the following Tribal affiliations participated in the session: Mechoopda, Karuk, Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, Cherokee, Pueblo of Isleta, Swinomish, Dine', Squaxin Island Tribe, Suquamish, Cherokee, and Paiute.

[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] Twenty-nine participants answered the polling question as it relates to applying for grant funding, whereas, twenty-four participants answered the question regarding grant awards. The differences in total numbers explains the percentage discrepancies.

Participants also demonstrated a wide geographic area with participants located in the following states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, and Washington.

Agenda Overview

The purpose of this listening session was to understand how DOI can support tribal operations, economic development, education, resilience, and other key functions through grant funding. Additionally, these listening sessions will inform DOI about the barriers to applying for and accessing discretionary funding.

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

- If you have applied to discretionary grants administered by DOI in the past, what has been your experience?
- If you have not applied for discretionary grants administered by DOI, why not? What would make it easier for you to access grant opportunities with DOI?
- What are the barriers to applying for grant opportunities with DOI? How can DOI remove or reduce barriers that Tribal Nations and communities face when participating or attempting to participate in DOI-administered grant opportunities?

Utilizing these questions, Ben Duncan, Kearns & West led participants through a series of discussions. Each segment corresponds to a dedicated fifteen minutes of 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 their relationship to the larger goals of hosting a series of listening sessions.

In addition to guided facilitation of virtual activities and honest reflection, the listening sessions opened with words from Bart Stevens – Deputy Director of Field Operations for Bureau of Indian Affairs. Deputy Director Stevens thanked everyone for their participation in prioritizing conversations about how the Department can advance equity.

The session closed with remarks from Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, who reiterated that the listening sessions provide a foundation for future conversations around how DOI can engage with Tribes. He also reiterated his appreciation for all who participated in these conversations and encouraged participants to continue conversations with the Department.

Themes and Concepts

Four thematic conversations were held during the listening session: (1) perceptions, (2) barriers, (3) recommendations, and (4) communication and relationships. 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 discretionary grant opportunities do you know to exist?
- What types of grant opportunities do you wish existed? Or best align with the needs of your Tribal community?
- Do you feel that your Tribe/Tribal organization is competitive for DOI administered discretionary grants? Why or why not?

Participants were encouraged to describe their experiences when accessing Tribal discretionary grants and to elaborate if they felt their Tribe or Tribal community felt competitive throughout the process. Participants' words, reflections, experiences, and recommendations were recorded on the Miro board, which is included as *Figure 1: Perceptions Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Themes that arose on the Miro board included needing DOI to offer grants that appropriately match the needs of Tribal communities. Participants also mentioned the lack of awareness about grant opportunities and where to find them, and the fact that the capacity among Tribes varies due to differences in Tribes' sizes leading to inequitable access.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West then opened the space for participants to continue to reflect on their perceptions and experiences navigating the federal grant process. Participants raised their appreciation for grant opportunities but mentioned the enormous effort grants take from Tribal capacity. The competitive nature of grants has Tribes competing for financial support. The size of the Tribe, internet access, line of credit supported, designated grant writers, institutional grant knowledge (budgets, spreadsheets, English language proficiency), and navigating between various Tribal support agencies all become barriers for applicants. Suggestions included forming non-Tribal alliances and lenient guidelines for Tribes to access grants during the application process. For those who successfully win a grant, executing the grant can be difficult with staff turnover and capacity within the Tribe. Unsuccessful applicants expressed the frustration over not receiving constructive feedback from the Department, which prevented them from improving and reapplying for the same or new grants.

Barriers

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

- What has been your experience applying for grants administered by DOI? What has been helpful? What has been challenging?
- If you have not applied for a discretionary grant administered by DOI, why not? What would make it easier?
- What are the barriers to applying for discretionary grants administered by DOI?

Participants were then encouraged to consider how they perceive the process and reflect on what prevents Tribes from successfully accessing DOI-funded grants. Participants recorded their reflections,

comments, and experiences on the Miro board, which can be seen as *Figure 2: Barriers Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Themes that arose from the Miro board delve deeper into why limited capacity discourages Tribes from applying for grants. Participants expressed that larger Tribes have a competitive advantage when accessing grant funding because they can dedicate more personnel and resources to searching and applying for opportunities.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West then opened the space for participants to continue reflecting and raising additional barriers to their access or success with Tribal discretionary grants. Some participants specifically mentioned familiarity with the Tribal Climate Resilience Program from the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a source of Tribal grant funds. Many participants agreed with the sentiment that once the grant cycle ends, the funding ends; however, the need in the communities remain, which are all basic needs to allow communities to live on their land safely. Participants indicated a need for funding from everything to housing, updating infrastructure, and stable internet connectivity. Participants gave suggestions on the grant program side to provide templates and examples for applicants to use. Participants also mentioned that creating a clear, concise checklist to lay out documents required for submission would be helpful. An additional suggestion was to have a team of people on Tribal staff within Tribes themselves dedicated to support grants, which would help with capacity on the applicant side.

Recommendations

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

- How can DOI remove or reduce barriers (for example, update policies, practices, or programs) that Tribes face when applying for discretionary grants?
- What could immediately help your Tribe (or those you represent) access discretionary grant funding?
- What else should we know?

As the conversation moved from perceptions to barriers, Ben Duncan, Kearns & West then moved participants to propose actions that could be taken to increase access to Tribal grant funding. Participants recorded their recommendations on the Miro board, and a screenshot of this board is provided in Appendix A as *Figure 3: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot*. **The themes that arose during this discussion included simplifying the grant process, allowing different methods for submission with both email and mail-in options, and providing training to Tribes on how to write grant applications.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West then opened the space for participants to continue to reflect on their recommendations for the DOI Tribal grants process. Participants raised recommendations for DOI to simplify applications, eliminate eligibility requirements, provide technical support and staff connected to the grant, and have workshops to provide support and answer questions. Simplifying the process could look like having a clearly defined timeline, sending opportunities to Tribes that meet the tribal community's interests, and setting clear project timelines. Recommendations to provide support for applicants included having all grants be on one website or central location. Another suggestion was to get staff out into the community to build relationships with applicants to engage in active participation and spread awareness of the grants available for Tribes.

Communication and Relationships

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

- What are the best ways to notify you and your community about discretionary grant opportunities? What are examples of successful strategies? What strategies don't work?
- What recommendations would you make to the Department of the Interior to improve its outreach about funding opportunities and reach all Tribes and Tribal organizations?

Lastly, participants were asked to further build upon the theme of communication and relationships to think specifically about the structures that would support intentional communication and relationships. Participants were given a chance to write their recommendations on the Miro board, which is included in *Figure 4: Communication and Relationships Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Participants' contributions to the Miro board can be summarized as suggesting the Department maintain consistent contact, while providing financial and technical assistance support to Tribes.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West then open the space for additional reflections on communication, relationships, or comments. Participants suggested emails with forecasted funds, including estimated amounts and deadlines. These emails should go to the subject matter expert point of contact for a given grant and not only Tribal leaders. Participants also suggested simplifying communication channels and tailored approaches through building relationships will allow Tribes to have personal connections and points of contact at the DOI during the application process.

Overarching Recommendations

Throughout the session, participants provided recommendations to the Department. Many of these recommendations touched upon building connections between Tribal serving agencies and Tribal nations to support applicants due to their limited capacity. The key recommendations the Kearns and West facilitation team heard and would like to emphasize included:

- Building connections between Tribal serving agencies and Tribal communities
- Establishing a designated DOI regional liason that Tribes can communicate with regarding grant programs.
- Creating one central location for the application process for all Tribal grant programs to allow all who are applying a clear understanding of timeline, necessary format, and previous examples of successful grants.
- Allowing users to find resources based on need and sign up for email alerts to grants that make sense for each community (in the form of a customizable applicant profile).
- Providing opportunities for feedback with unsuccessful applications can give applicants tools to have support and more robust future applications.

Appendix A: Miro Board Screenshots

This Appendix features participant responses to a DOI listening session on Tribal Discretionary Grants on October 27, 2021, from 5:00 pm- 7:00 pm ET. The sticky notes included on the boards reflect participants' own words, experiences, reflections, and recommendations.

Figure 1: Perceptions Miro Board Screenshot

Figure 2: Barriers Miro Board Screenshot

Figure 3: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot

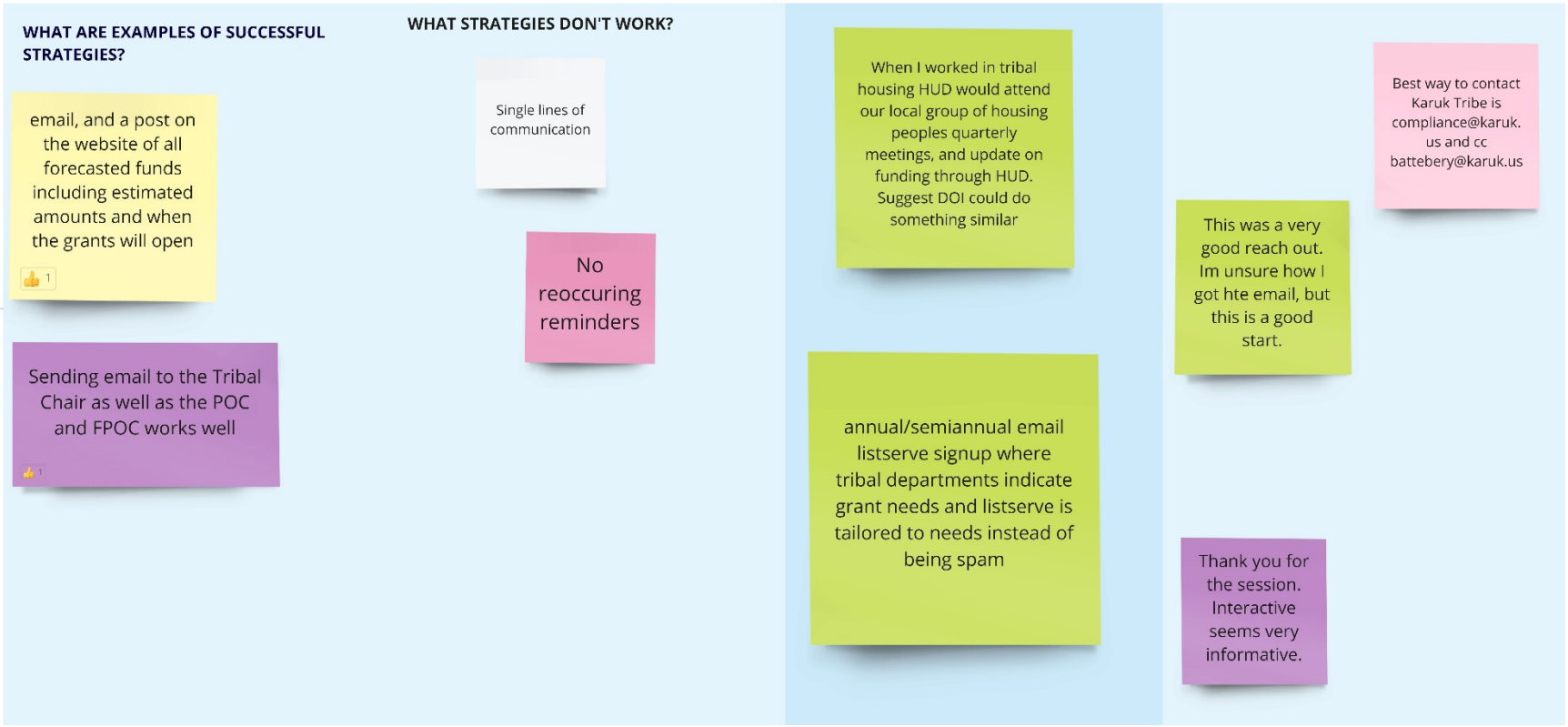

Figure 4: Communication and Relationships Miro Board Screenshot