

**The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Contracts for Businesses with Characteristics that Align with the Definition of Underserved Community**  
**October 21, 2021, 5:00 pm - 7:00 pm ET <sup>1</sup>**

**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 21, 2021, from 5:00 pm - 7:00 pm ET.

**Participant Data**

Ahead of the virtual session, registration totaled 13 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in the session with totals around 15 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 if 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 the business, their previous experience in applying for federal contracts, and if their business had been awarded a contract.

The polling data highlighted the diversity in the audience with 43% of participants identifying with a racial or ethnic minority group, 14% identifying as part of the LGBTQ community, and 14% answering that they did not identify with any of the EO 13985 underserved community groups.

In terms of applying for federal contracting opportunities, 80% of the participants who participated in the polling activity had previously applied for an opportunity, whereas 20% of participants had not previously submitted a proposal. Based on those who had applied for procurement opportunities with

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

the Department, 80% were successful. Participants indicated that they typically discover contracting opportunities through the following sources: SAM.gov (33%), Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (PTACs) (33%), industry groups (16%), DOI forecasting of Contracting Opportunities (9%), and word of mouth (9%). 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" (80%) and "often" defined as more than a few times per year (40%).

Geographically, participants joined from the following states: California, Georgia, Louisiana, New Mexico, Ohio, and Virginia.

### 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, captured 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. Sara Omar, 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 participant's 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 Andrea Brandon, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Budget, Finance, Grants, and Acquisition. Deputy Assistant Secretary Brandon 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 conversations can be difficult, but necessary in making future programs and policies more inclusive. While the Department could not make any promises for immediate action, Assistant Secretary

Brandon acknowledged DOI's 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 emphasized 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 the time needed to track solicitations, the challenges of finding teaming partners, the difficulty of learning the process, the low return on investment (ROI) for dedicating time and resources to a process that small businesses often do not win, and the importance of size and the scale of a business when trying to develop proposals and find procurement opportunities.**

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 participant expressed feelings that the contracting process advantages the prime contractor over the sub-contractor. Several small business owners agreed and added that large corporations are more successful at winning contracts, which builds their experience and portfolio, making them more competitive for future opportunities. Additionally, it was noted that there is a significant imbalance in the pay rate between the prime contractor and the sub-contractor. One participant shared difficulty with finding teaming partners. Another participant shared that, despite thirty years of professional experience, they were treated as a novice contractor when they left their job working for a prime and opened their own small business. 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 that 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 describe 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 large companies could dedicate time and resources to bidding low and frequently, whereas small businesses cannot afford to dedicate continual resources to the application process.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, built upon the Miro board theme to ask participants to describe why it is hard to work with DOI and share examples of experiences they have had as a small business that has made this process challenging. Participants answered that there is a lack of accessible information, and it is difficult to connect with DOI representatives. Participants expressed the frustration of being denied without receiving any feedback on how to improve their chances for the next bid. In addition, participants shared that they face systemic challenges because large corporations appear to have meaningful relationships with DOI contacts, while small businesses feel boxed out of these networks. Lastly, participants shared that they feel that large corporations use loopholes to win bids that were intended for small businesses.

#### *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?

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 recommended that the Department distribute information via chambers of commerce, facilitate matching programs for small businesses to become teaming partners, and target outreach and opportunities for very small businesses.**

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. Participants stressed the importance of

enforcing the Buy Indian Act and urged the Department to increase transparency and communication around contracting choices. One participant raised the issue that communication is unlikely to make a difference if small businesses do not have the resources needed to apply for contracting opportunities. Also, several participants agreed that they did not understand why their bids were rejected and pointed to a lack of transparency and feedback throughout the process.

### *Recommendations*

This section empowered participants to use their imagination and think of recommendations or 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 increasing transparency surrounding how bids are chosen, building relationships and eliminating bias in the contracting and procurement process, having targeted outreach to various businesses, and holding the Department accountable with consistent and accessible communication.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space for the last time to allow participants to express any additional recommendations and reflections on the discussion. A participant raised an additional recommendation to fund business associations to function as a bridge between the Department and small businesses. Participants also continued to build on themes of building relationships between contracting officers, prime contractors, teaming partners, and mentors.

### **Overarching Recommendations**

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

- Increasing transparency and feedback throughout the procurement process so that participants can learn to improve their chances of winning an award.
- Offering businesses opportunities 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.
- Increasing consistency and accountability in communication, especially when businesses try to contact the Department for assistance during the procurement process.

## Appendix A: Miro Board Screenshots

This Appendix features participant responses to the DOI Listening Session on Contracts for Businesses with Characteristics that Align with the Definition of Underserved Community on October 21, 2021, from 5:00 pm - 7:00 pm ET. The sticky notes included on the board 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?**

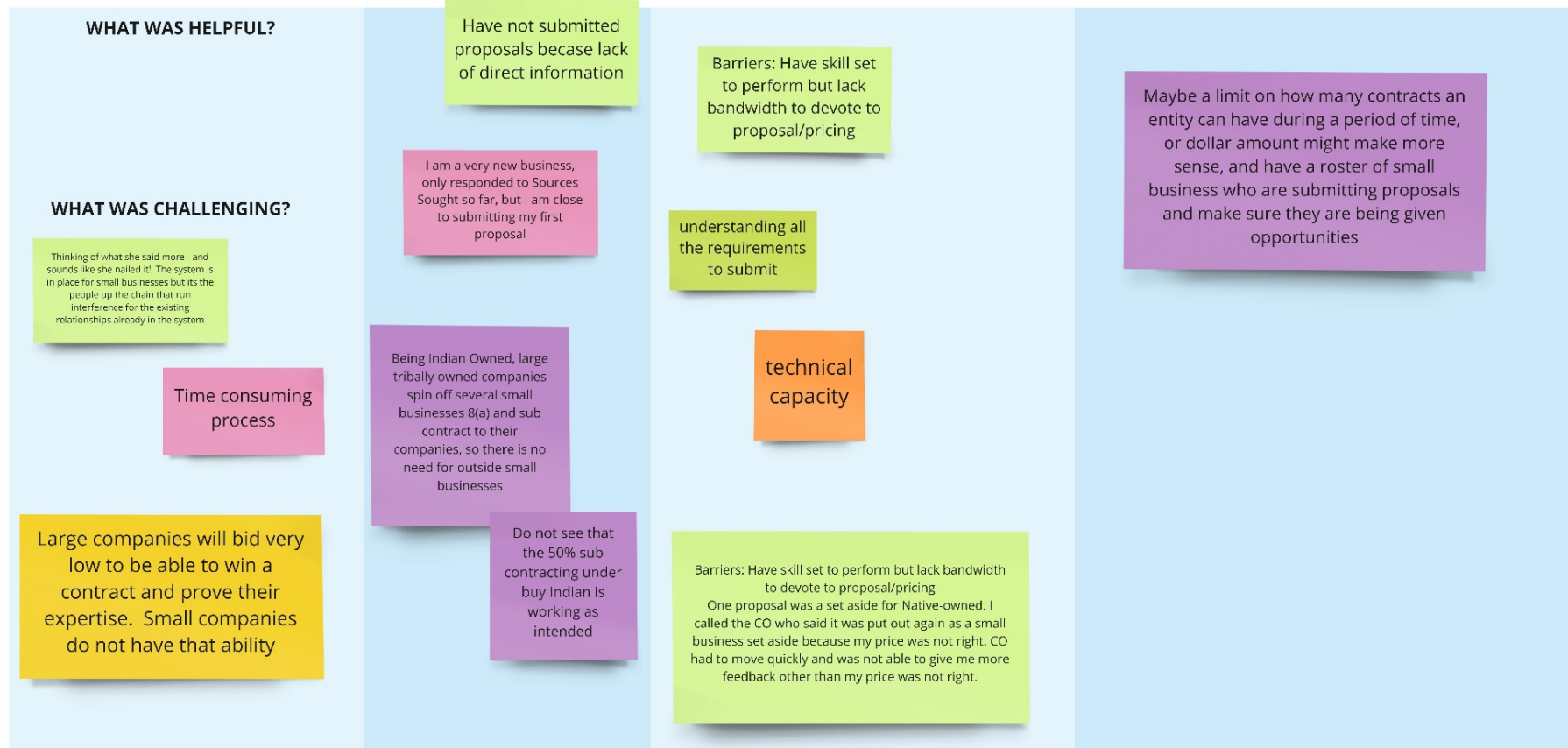


Figure 2: What is working now? What could be working? Miro Board Screenshot

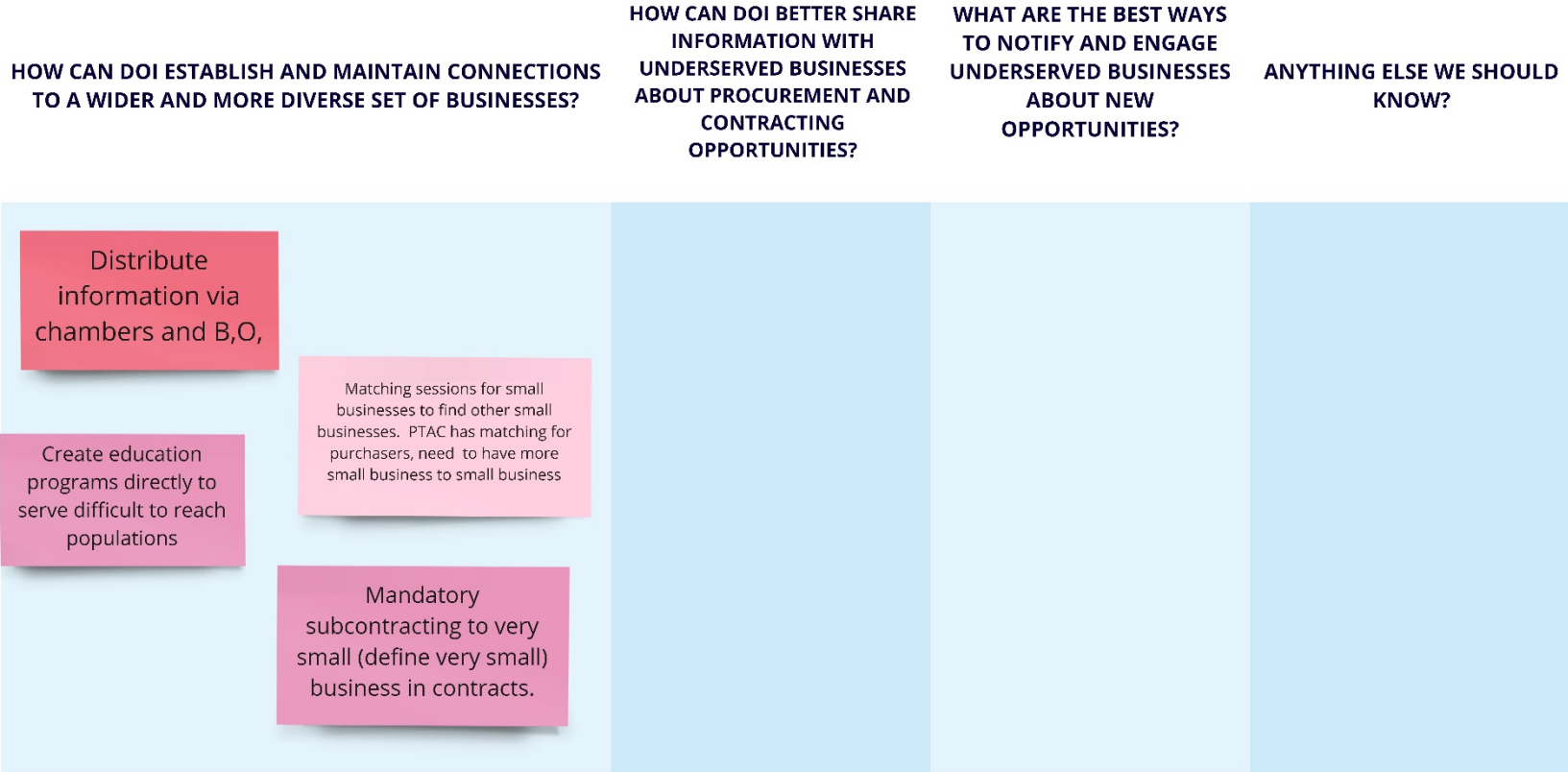


Figure 3: Communication Miro Board Screenshot



**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