

The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Tribal Discretionary Grants
October 20, 2021, 8:00 pm- 10:00 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 Tribal Discretionary Grants on October 19, 2021, from 8:00 pm- 10:00 pm ET.

Participant Data

Ahead of the virtual session, registration totaled 38 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in the session around 30 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 about their geographic location, tribal affiliation, and grant application experience and access.

Polling showed that participants were from the following Tribal affiliations: Wyandot, Choctaw, Me-Wuk, Cowlitz Indian Tribe, Comanche Nation, Suquamish, Mvskoke (Muscogee Nation), Navajo Nation, and Nisqually. Geographically, participants were located in the states of Arizona, California, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Washington, D.C, and Washington state.

Out of those who participated in the polling activity about 63% had previously applied for grant funding before, and out of that percentage about 71% of participants were successful in receiving grant funding. Many discover grant opportunities through emails from the Department (26%), word of mouth (26%), outreach events (20%), grants.gov (20%), and other opportunities or websites (6%).

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.

Agenda Overview

The purpose of this listening session was to understand how DOI can support Tribes through grant funding, what barriers exist related to applying for and accessing discretionary funding, and what actions the Department can take to address those barriers.

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 on 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 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 to 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 corresponded to a dedicated fifteen minutes of conversation through the Miro board, the chat function, and 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 sessions opened with words from Rachael Taylor, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management, and Budget. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Taylor welcomed participants to the session and noted her appreciation for their participation in the conversation. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Taylor also stressed that these listening sessions are crucial to developing and continuing better nation to nation relationships and honoring Tribal sovereignty.

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 Tribes. 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) 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 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 indicate whether they felt their Tribe or Tribal organization 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 additional structural resources to be competitive for grant opportunities, building relationships with the federal government, and understanding more about federal regulations and grant awards.**

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 that guidelines and awards are very strict. This prevents Tribal nations the ability to pivot their programming in unprecedented times, like a pandemic. Participants also shared that there seems to be a disconnect within Tribal communities between those who have professional degrees and those who are doing the work locally, which has impacted the ability to create successful community programs. This began a conversation around creating intentional and sustainable relationships and partnerships between Tribes and the federal government.

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 not only how they perceive the process, but to reflect on what prevents Tribes from being successful accessing DOI-administered 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 included: intentional and consistent communications between the federal government and Tribes to truly understand needs; assistance with navigating the federal grants process; and communication around how to find grant opportunities.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space for participants to continue to reflect and raise additional barriers to their access or success accessing Tribal discretionary grants. Participants raised additional barriers around communication and noted that DOI emails to Tribal Leaders are not always the most effective way to inform Tribes of opportunities, making it important for the Department to understand how to communicate with Tribes intentionally and successfully. Participants collectively recommended that the Department seek to better understand good points of contact around grant funding opportunities.

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?

Participants' discussion built upon previous discussions on the barriers and perceptions, to propose actions that could be taken to increase access to Tribal grants. Participants recorded their recommendations on the Miro board, and a screenshot of this board is provided as *Figure 3: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Themes that arose during this discussion included: a need to have specific liaisons within the Department that Tribes could discuss grant opportunities with relevant to their Tribe and/or region, funding and professional support to help Tribes develop grant writing capacity, simplifying the processes to make grant funding more accessible, and improving the ability to find grant funding across federal agencies in one central location.**

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 a structural recommendation to DOI around simplifying the process by first having Tribes submit a letter of inquiry (LOI) to see if they qualify to write the larger grant application; therefore, preventing tribes from dedicating resources to grant opportunities they are not competitive to receive. Participants also raised concerns about the competitive nature of applying for federal grant funding. Participants stressed that more resources should be allocated to all federally recognized Tribes, eliminating Tribal competition.

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 build upon the theme of communication and relationships, further, to think specifically about the structures that would support intentional communication and relationships. Participants were given the chance to write their recommendations on the Miro board, which is included as *Figure 4: Communication and Relationships Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Participants' contributions to the Miro board indicated that some were suspicious of the current system. In addition, participants encouraged truly connecting with the Tribal communities to inform better programming, requires a need for specific communication mechanisms such as targeted outreach to specific members of Tribes, and recommended hosting additional opportunities for training and mentoring of Tribal youth.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space for any additional reflections on communication, relationships, or any additional comments. Participants continued to build on themes of intentional outreach in terms of making Tribes aware of the opportunities and communicating with them throughout

the process to support them in developing a successful application. Additionally, participants raised the disconnect between Tribes and the federal government's legislative process when trying to lobby for additional federal funding. Participants recommended that funding structures could be evaluated regionally, so in areas with many Tribal nations are granted more funding.

Overarching Recommendations

Participants throughout the session, and not solely during the recommendations discussion provided input and feedback to inform the Department. Many of these recommendations touched upon themes of communication, relationship building, and simplifying the grant process. The key recommendations the Kearns & West facilitation team heard and would like to emphasize included:

- Reforming DOI structures including how funding is allocated, communicated, and awarded.
- Adding Tribal grant liaisons in each region to assist Tribes in being competitive in the process and create more intentional and sustainable relationships between the department and Tribal nations.
- Creating targeted communication campaigns through partnerships, emails, and regional events to ensure that the Department is contacting Tribal leadership successfully.
- Creating a first step in the grant application process to allow Tribes to first send a LOI to see if they are competitive for grant opportunities.
- Developing and hosting additional programs that provide training and mentorship to Tribal youth.

Appendix A: Miro Board Screenshots

This Appendix features participant responses to a DOI listening session on Tribal Discretionary Grants on October 20, 2021, from 8:00 pm- 10:00 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 APPLYING FOR DISCRETIONARY GRANTS ADMINISTERED BY DOI?

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?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?



Figure 2: Barriers Miro Board Screenshot

WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO NOTIFY YOU AND YOUR COMMUNITY ABOUT DISCRETIONARY GRANT OPPORTUNITIES?

WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS WOULD YOU MAKE TO DOI TO IMPROVE ITS OUTREACH ABOUT FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES AND REACH ALL TRIBES AND ORGANIZATIONS?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?



Figure 3: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot

HOW CAN DOI REMOVE OR REDUCE BARRIERS (E.G. UPDATE POLICIES, PRACTICES, OR PROGRAMS) THAT TRIBES FACE WHEN APPLYING FOR DISCRETIONARY GRANTS?

WHAT COULD IMMEDIATELY HELP YOUR TRIBE (OR THOSE YOU REPRESENT) TO ACCESS DISCRETIONARY GRANT FUNDING?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?



Figure 4: Communication and Relationships Miro Board Screenshot