

**The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Contracts for Businesses with
Characteristics that Align with the Definition of Underserved Community
October 25, 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 Contracts for Businesses with Characteristics that Align with the Definition of Underserved Community on October 25, 2021, from 8:00 pm- 10:00 pm ET.

Participant Data

Prior to the virtual session, registration totaled 17 registrants. This session saw a decrease in participants from previous listening sessions, with a total of 8 participants present.

In every session, Kearns and West invited participants 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.²

The polling data highlighted the diversity in the audience with 75% of participants identifying with a racial or ethnic minority group. For this session, 100% of participants mentioned they employ less than 25 people for their business. Out of the businesses represented about 66% of them have applied or submitted a proposal to the Department.

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 technical difficulties, Poll Everywhere did not function during this session so information was gathered via Zoom chat. Data was not recorded for the following question: Have you ever received a federal contract?

When participants were polled around where they learn about opportunities most participants use Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (PTACs) (66%), SAM.gov (16%), and other (33%). When asked about 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 (50%) and often (50%).

Geographically, participants joined from the following states: Illinois, Louisiana, Utah, 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 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. 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 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 and thanked participants for prioritizing this listening session. She acknowledged that these are difficult conversations to have and that they are needed in shaping future equitable and accessible

programming. While the Department could not make any promises for immediate action, Taylor acknowledged their appreciation to participants in sharing their 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 that align with characteristics of underserved communities. He emphasized the goal of hearing from those closest to the challenges for creating recommendations, shared his appreciation for those participating in these sessions and encouraged everyone 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 lack of awareness of what opportunities exist, not knowing how and where to access information, unfamiliarity with who to talk to in the agency when support is needed with the procurement process, the difficulty with timelines and how the size and the scale of a business matters 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 small business owner spoke about their experience pursuing opportunities with DOI, particularly finding the website difficult to navigate. They pointed out that the website lacks information about who to contact for questions and support. They additionally emphasized the need for more help in general in understanding how to pursue opportunities and who one could and should talk to. Participants continued to build on additional barriers in pursuing contracting opportunities including the difficulty of providing thoughtful responses in the application due to federal agencies having quick turnaround times, especially for small businesses with limited capacity.

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 transition from their perceptions of the federal contracting system to describing their experience with the system. Additionally, it 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. **Themes that emerged from this activity included the challenges small businesses have when trying to make themselves competitive against larger firms and businesses. In the words of small business owners, they feel as though it is harder to compete with larger businesses for procurement opportunities, and many times they do not meet the necessary performance qualifications to earn contracting opportunities.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, built upon the Miro board themes to ask participants to expand further on what is creating challenges in the process. A small business owner shared that often businesses need experience to obtain opportunities, and small business without previous experience have challenges in meeting the criteria. Additionally small businesses do not have a pathway to obtain such experience which would allow them to compete for contracting opportunities. Participants further emphasized the importance of mentorship and resources to support small businesses in the process of applying for opportunities, including understanding qualifications. A participant shared that it would be helpful if government agencies provided free webinars or workshops for small businesses and underserved communities that walked them through obtaining federal opportunities as it could be an overwhelming process.

Communication

This section asked participants to move from describing the barriers and challenges of the process to begin providing 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 shared the importance of establishing sustainable relationships, using different communication channels such as social media**

and email to promote opportunities, and performing data analysis to create an equitable process for small businesses to obtain opportunities.

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, opened the space for participants to expand on what was written on the Miro board and to share additional thoughts on how to improve communication. A participant shared a recommendation of creating a data base to establish “check and balances” process in which DOI could look at all the business have applied, identify businesses that have applied multiple times but have not received an award and provide feedback and mentorship from business that are successful at obtaining opportunities to ensure disadvantaged businesses can be competitive.

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 previous 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 the discussion included the importance of holding more listening sessions and doing targeted outreach, the need for improvement in communications and reducing complexity in proposal processes for contracts.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened the space for the last time to allow participants to express any additional recommendations and asked agency employees observing today’s discussions to share their takeaways from the session.

A participant raised that there is a misconception that minority firms are given special consideration in competition; however, that is not that case and often those with experience and capacity are the ones at advantage and successful at obtaining contracting opportunities. Participants further shared the importance of DOI and other federal agencies in hosting more listening sessions and conducting additional, targeted outreach as they believe there is potential in creating meaningful impact through processes like these that involve the public. Participants that attended as listeners from federal agencies had the opportunity to share reflections on what they heard. They shared the importance of honoring communications coming into the Department from small businesses and ensuring responses are useful, acknowledged that opportunities for underrepresented groups are difficult to obtain, thanked participants for their honesty and reiterated commitment to creating equitable opportunities.

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 highlight included:

- Creating mentorship and training opportunities to simplify the complex procurement process for all
- Improving communications, including making it easier to navigate federal procurement opportunities websites and being able to connect with the Department for assistance throughout the procurement process in a simple, efficient manner
- Establishing data analysis metrics to identify which businesses are at advantage and disadvantage of receiving opportunities to help inform equitable processes
- Investing in providing resources and support, such as designated Department points of contact for businesses, trainings, and webinars for small, disadvantaged businesses to become competitive and successful throughout the contracting 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 25, 2021, from 8:00 pm - 10:00 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

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?

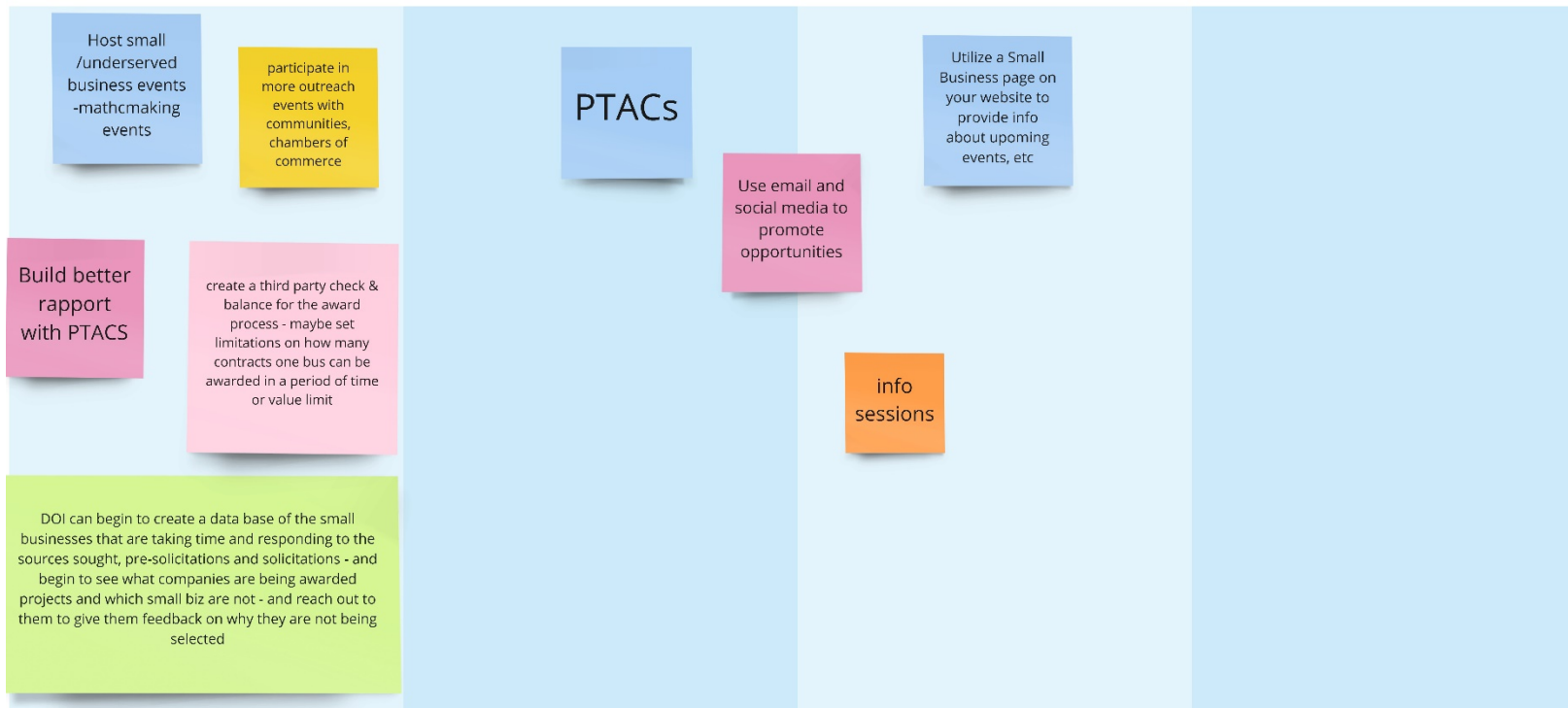


Figure 3: Communication Miro Board Screenshot

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?

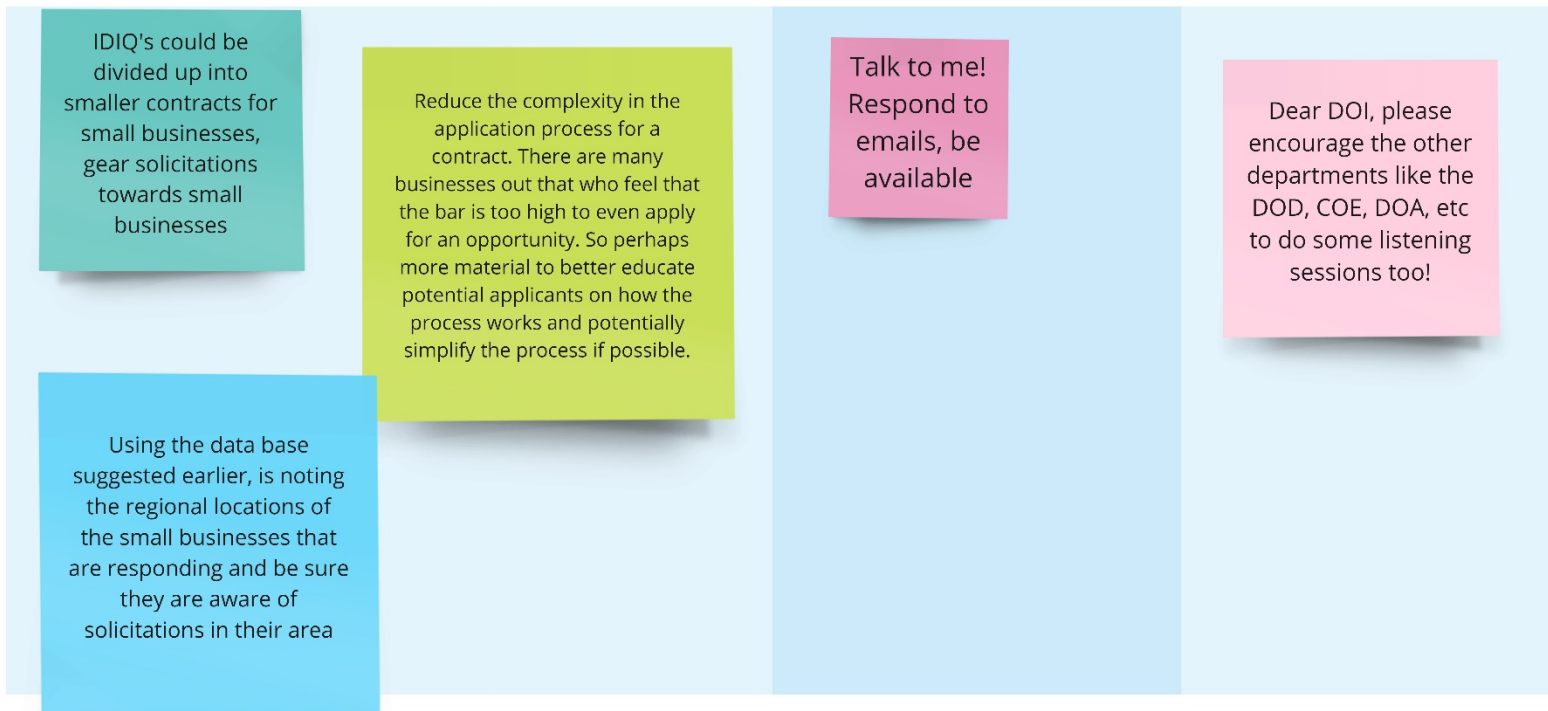


Figure 4: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot