

Expanding on Equitable Access

A presentation by Kate Mereand
Innovation & Equitable Development
Department of Small & Local Business Development

For the 2021 GMAC Conference



Who is speaking?

I am the Program Manager for the Innovation & Equitable Development (Inno.ED Division).

We are a team of four business development professionals supporting small and microbusinesses in removing or overcoming barriers.

Reach out to us at any time at Inno.ED@dc.gov.



About Inno.ED Programs

Aspire

Made in DC

DC Kiva Hub

Dream Grants

Robust Retail Grants

District Capitalized

Build a Dream Trainings

One-on-One Direct Technical Assistance

Sustainability. Cooperatives. Food Entrepreneurs.

& More

A note about you

- I believe that you believe in equity.
- I believe that you believe in your public service mission.
 - I believe that you work hard every day within the confines of your rules to meet that mission.
- I believe that you know or do many of the things I am going to talk about.
- I believe that together we as grant managers can share best practices and ideas to help advance equity.
 - I tell the public regularly that I believe in you.

Agenda: Of Equity & Access

- Why Equity Requires Access
- Context of DSLBD Grants
- Micro grants, Sub grants, & Fiscal Sponsorship
- How to use Access to Increase Equity
 - Assessing Accessibility of Your Grants
 - Education Increases Equity
 - Outreach Increases Equity
 - Grant Design Increases Equity
 - Applicant Support Increases Equity

Why Equity Requires Access

Defining equity is a collaborative exercise
Increasing equity is an ongoing pursuit

- Achieving goals require multiple small actors
- Community leaders are people who decide to become leaders
- Community leaders need support to build capacity to create positive change
- Community leaders need access to capacity building opportunities & pipelines

Pipelines

All industries, whether for-profit, non-profit, government, or otherwise, need a pipeline of entities who learn how to take on the needed work.

A pipeline is built intentionally to foster healthy competition, which spurs necessary innovation.

Does your work have a pipeline?

Inno.ED Micro grants

Entrepreneurs are Community Leaders

Micro grants build early stage capacity

Our grants are \$10,000 *and under*

- Ward 7 & 8 Microbusiness Dream Grants
- Robust Retail Grants
- Aspire Pitch Grants (new!)
- Made in DC Market Access Grants (new!)

\$3M+ across roughly 400 microbusinesses over 4 years! *Thousands of applicants.*

Inno.ED Micro grants

This doesn't even touch on the DSLBD Main Streets program (operated by another division) which requires each program to make sub grants directly to businesses.

Typically around 60% of DSLBD's budget annually is grant dollars to support our mission.

Pause to send DMPED some love

As our team runs micro-grants regularly and knows what it takes, I just want to pause and share our respect and appreciation for the team at DMPED that ran the massive micro-grant at the onset of the pandemic.

Who feels left out, and are they?

In the last five years my team has engaged well over 10,000 businesses & entrepreneurs in direct training and technical assistance. It's is hard to count, actually.

We often ask them how they feel about various things, as those feelings may drive a lot of their decision making.

More applicants than funding

As all grant managers know, for most grants there are more applicants than funding.

- This is a good thing. (It is!)
- But is it always the same folks who win and lose? If yes, that isn't good. And either way,
- What is the community sentiment about that, *and what does that sentiment mean for the goals we have overall as a city government?*

Who feels left out, and are they?

The most common question we receive is about how to get a grant. (Very hard!)

The most common concern folks raise on that is that they feel grants are designed to leave them out and favor other people.

I don't think those are grant makers' intentions, BUT, those sentiments have power and impact.

Micro grants, Sub grants, & Fiscal Sponsorship

Do you have the ability to add low-risk, capacity building funding opportunities to build your pipeline?

- Micro grants functionally unbundle opportunities, and people can do a lot with \$10,000 or even \$5,000
- If you aren't prepared to handle micro grants, maybe your grantees can be required to make some sub grants to add to capacity building to your pipeline
- Or you may allow fiscal sponsorships to help smaller entities get some experience with industry support

How to use Access to Increase Equity

Assess Access

We constantly question our processes to consider access. It is an evergreen exercise.

I will raise some of the questions that we think about. But I recommend that you use these as examples of the types of questions you might ask in your own grant process regularly.

Assess Access

1. Who engages and who doesn't?

Of potentially eligible applicants, how many and what groups typically apply? Are there groups that might do well with some or all of the grant work that do not apply?

Ask stakeholders and potential applicants who determined to not apply *why* they did not apply.

Assess Access

A shameless plug for small businesses...

Are your grants available to small businesses as well as non-profits? Could they be available?

If yes, you can widen your applicant pool, but you may need to check that your grant design isn't attuned to only non-profits.

Assess Access

2. How large are your grants? Is that a barrier?

Could large grants become multiple smaller grants available to smaller entities?

Can you make sub grants required or offer a wider variety of grant breakdowns from a funding pool?

Assess Access

3. Is eligibility attuned to your audience?

Does it cost money to apply to your grants?
Such as a Certificate of Good Standing, audited financials, or insurance if required at application?

Can you offer options or reduce the costs by finding another way to ensure you meet the rules?

Assess Access

4. Are there unexplained exceptions?

If you require 3 years of taxes, can a newer entity apply and offer a letter? Is that explained?

Are there other unexplained exceptions?

Educate for Equitable Access

Grant processes can be obscure.

So TOO are many of the other government processes that underlie the grant rules (like basic licensing, registration, insurance, and tax questions).

How and when do you educate your potential grantees on the jargon, the nomenclature, and the requirements?

Educate for Equitable Access

DC Grants for Businesses, Generally

Four Part Series: <https://bit.ly/GGDCJULY21>

Shout outs:

- DOEE Grant Writing Class
- CAH Public Review Panels
- *Add others to the chat!*
- *Where do small non-profits learn?*

Educate for Equitable Access

Topics you could educate folks on regularly:

- Basic requirements of your grants
- Where to find your grants (literally)
- Grant-writing and competitive aspects
- The level of competitiveness of your grants (set appropriate expectations)
- The goal and purpose of your full grants
- Standing grant programs and then explain the nature of any occasional grants

Educate for Equitable Access

Grant applications can be a learning opportunity

- Dream Grants are designed and advertised as a way for businesses to learn about basic licensing, registration, and business planning
- We underscore that in every information session and boot camp...
 - *And we provide a paperwork boot camp*

We are proud of folks for even trying.

We always encourage folks to learn from a grant experience.

And we encourage folks to think about how to recycle the work they did for a grant they didn't get into other opportunities.

Educate for Equitable Access

Paperwork Boot Camps

For most of our grant programs, we offer a paperwork boot camp because we found that those topics were confusing enough, and folks would overlook the competitive aspects of the grant in an information session.

Outreach Matters

Everyone is always looking to increase outreach

- We brand our grants for catchy, memorable names, and a set of images tied to each grant round.
- We run events throughout the year designed in part of build our outreach lists for specific grant programs.
- This includes outreach partnerships.
- And we regularly notify the ANCs.

Outreach Matters

Everyone is always looking to increase outreach

- Before a grant opens, if there is time, we create an Eventbrite where folks can sign up to receive notice of a grant opening.
- We share Eventbrite notices to Facebook and we highlight those in various neighborhood groups and small business groups.
- I also usually email everyone I know on top of formal outreach from a email blast.

Outreach Matters

Everyone is always looking to increase outreach

- At times, we have taken to foot across neighborhoods where we saw fewer applications.
- We notify all of the offices of various community affairs.
- When we are doing in person events, we offer them in every Ward, with 5-15 sessions per grants cycle.

Outreach Matters

Grants are also a good engagement tool

- If you need to engage large audiences on topics related to your mission, a set of small grants can help you build your audience for your other work too.
- *Don't discount this point. Even a small grant program of \$5000 grants can draw a lot of attention and build connections.*

Grant Design

Can you adapt the design of your grants?

Grant design covers a broad range of factors big and small, and each one of those could impact equitable access.

We developed our grant programs from scratch with equity as a central principle. If you can't do that, you could still develop an ideal sample and pull elements from that.

Grant Design

Grants are severely stressful for applicants

- Grants take a lot of time
- People pin a lot of hope
- Government terminology isn't obvious
- RFAs are hard to read (for everyone)
- Eligibility has hidden requirements

On each of these, briefly...

Grant Design

Risk Framework/Time Burdens

Micro grants usually take as much time for the grant maker to compete as large grants, though the post-award monitoring can be lighter.

That is because the risk for smaller amounts of money is inherently less. But think about the risk profile of a grant and how that should translate to the level of effort of an applicant.

Grant Design

Expectation Setting (tempering hope)

We talked about expectation setting in education, but it is also set in the RFA and level of documentation and information. Are you setting yours intentionally?

Ex. Great Streets (DMPED) is 5x the amount of funding of a Dream Grant. It is a heavier application lift, reasonably so.

Grant Design

Explain Government Lingo

Acronym soup and jargon happens. But you can do a re-review of all materials (with help from your communications team) to use plain language, define key terms, link to terms of art or programs, and break down concepts.

Plain language is possible for everything.

Grant Design

Assess & reassess the readability of your RFAs

- Can you rename sections? –plain language
- Can you reformat? –encourage understanding
- Can you cut it down? –fewer pages
- Can you add charts? –make info stand out

Ask someone who doesn't work on grants in your agency to read it, and get their feedback.

Grant Design

Assess how you use every piece of eligibility

If you are not using it, are you required to have it?

If it costs money for the applicant, can you:

- Look up the info yourself?
- Move the requirement to the award stage?
- Offer a warning of the expected cost?
- Find ways to reduce that cost?
- Explain in the info session *why* you need it and what it is?

Applicant Support

Set yourself priorities for your support

Ours include:

- Fair and consistent access to info—all emails and no calls
- Transparency on response times—published email response times
- Expectation setting deadlines—courtesy eligibility pre-review, question deadline, immoveable final deadline no exceptions

Applicant Support

Set yourself priorities for your support

Ours include:

- Extensive grant outreach and notifications
- Incredibly fast grant determinations
- Feedback calls for non-awardees
- Ongoing technical assistance & training

Applicant Support

Awardee Support Too

- Awardee orientations
- Awardee call teams
- Awardee tight deadlines
- When we can make it work...incredibly fast payment timelines

TL;DR

Key takeaways:

- Ask the public for feedback on accessibility
- Maybe unbundle your grants
- Think about building a pipeline for your work
- Reduce or explain application costs
- See grants as a learning/teaching experience
- See grants as an engagement opportunity
- Fight to make your materials simpler
- Match level of application effort to risk
- Set priorities for applicant support

Thank you!

- There is a lot that grant managers are doing across government.
- Thank you for letting me share our thoughts.
- We'd love to collaborate and hear yours too.

Katherine.Mereand@dc.gov

Inno.ED@dc.gov