

Social Equity Program (SEP) Advisory Committee

Meeting Minutes

Date: December 2, 2025

Location: Virtual Meeting (Zoom)

Recorded: Yes

1. Agenda Overview

Once additional committee members joined (including Rep. Rachel Talbot Ross and representatives from Four Directions Development Corporation), Dr. Brien Walton restated meeting objectives:

- Review entrepreneurial challenges in targeted communities.
- Discuss outreach strategies and partner identification.
- Evaluate and refine the draft SEP eligibility criteria and application framework.
- Confirm the timeline for launching the application window and awarding seed grants.

Brien also clarified roles:

- **DECD** maintains program authority.
 - **Advisory Committee** provides consultative guidance.
 - **Brien** executes research, drafting, outreach planning, and application management.
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2. Presentation: Native American Entrepreneurship & Barriers

Presenter: Matt Lewis, Four Directions Development Corporation

Matt offered an in-depth overview of barriers faced by Native American entrepreneurs in Maine:

- **Barriers to Capital:** Limited access to loan products, equity investment, and culturally appropriate financial services.
- **Infrastructure Challenges:** Transportation obstacles, broadband limitations, and geographic isolation.
- **Resource Gaps:** Lack of business training, technical assistance, and early-stage support.
- **Community-Based Solutions:** Four Directions created entrepreneurship centers to bring training, coaching, and business services onto tribal lands.
- Matt also described Four Directions' work with individuals reintegrating from incarceration: credit repair, budgeting, financial counseling, and business planning.

Rep. Talbot Ross and Brien asked about the disproportionate incarceration rates of Indigenous populations and how the program might address structural barriers during reentry.

3. DECD Updates & Administrative Items

- **Resource Tracking:** DECD plans to track all program interactions, publish meeting minutes, and update the SEP website as required.
- **Program Staffing:**
 - Rep. Talbot Ross requested the job description for the re-advertised staff position.
 - The committee also requested contact information for the Department of Labor’s liaison (“Dylan”).
- **Website Resources:** The group recommended adding additional civil rights and reentry-related materials to the program resource list.

4. SEP Framework: Eligibility, Application Questions & Scoring

Brien presented the draft SEP application and scoring rubric. Key committee feedback:

Lived Experience & Narrative-Based Evaluation

- Rep. Talbot Ross stressed the importance of capturing lived experiences of discrimination and the War on Drugs.
- Members noted the need for qualitative space for applicants to articulate systemic barriers and generational trauma.

Critical Analysis & Business Readiness

- The committee underscored the need for thoughtful evaluation of business readiness, without penalizing entrepreneurs who have historically lacked access.
- The group affirmed that the rubric should balance *reparative purpose* with *practical investment criteria*.

Alignment With Legislative Intent

- Eligibility should not drift toward generic economic development criteria.
- The program must remain focused on African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Indigenous populations disproportionately harmed by systemic racism and the criminal justice system.

5. Targeted Outreach Planning

The committee identified communities and organizations essential for outreach:

African American Community

- African American churches in southern and central Maine
- NAACP (including Bangor and Portland branches)

Hispanic/Latino Community

- Community-based organizations serving Latinx families
- Community colleges and adult education centers with bilingual programming

Indigenous Communities

- Wabanaki Alliance
- Tribal government offices
- Four Directions entrepreneurship centers

Committee members emphasized meeting communities *where they are*, including physical presence in neighborhoods with high concentrations of target populations.

6. Geographic Prioritization

Brien presented county-level demographic concentration data. Discussion reaffirmed focus on:

- **Cumberland**
- **York**
- **Androscoggin**
- **Penobscot**
- **Select rural counties with tribal communities**

Rep. Talbot Ross highlighted the need to account for communities disproportionately impacted by the criminalization of substance use during the War on Drugs.

7. Next Steps

Refinements to Program Materials

- Revise eligibility criteria, narrative prompts, and scoring rubric to reflect committee feedback.
- Build a test application form ready for internal evaluation by **January 1**.
- Finalize partner outreach framework and public-facing materials.

Outreach & Coordination

- Initiate targeted outreach beginning in January.
- Provide advisory committee with resource updates and requested documents.
- Add the following to the SEP website resource list:
 - *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander
 - Links to the Drug Policy Alliance
 - ACLU resources related to racial justice and reentry

Application & Ideal Award Timeline

- **Application Opens:** February 1
 - **Grant Awards Issued:** April 1
 - **Total Seed Grant Pool:** \$150,000
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8. Action Items

(Directly derived from transcript content)

- **Revise eligibility criteria and scoring rubric** to better reflect legislative intent and community access realities.
 - **Develop a test application form** by January 1.
 - **Conduct targeted outreach** to partner organizations; prepare for February 1 application launch.
 - **Update SEP website resources** with recommended civil rights and reentry-related materials.
 - **Communicate with DAFS** about project update.
 - **Invite DOL contact (Dylan)** to the next advisory committee meeting.
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9. Adjournment

Members expressed appreciation for Matt Lewis, Susan Hammond, and Four Directions for their leadership in Indigenous entrepreneurship and reentry support. The meeting concluded with a commitment to finalize refinements and prepare the SEP for public launch.