

## Transcript for October 10, 2023 Lunch 'n Learn meeting

**[This transcript was edited for accuracy and clarity.]**

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Welcome to the October 10th lunch and learn on using subcontractor inclusion plans. I'm Drew Zavatsky, your host for the series. With me today are fellow DES staff, Alexander Kenesson and Zoë Mroz. I will let you introduce yourselves.

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

**Slide 2** Hello everyone, my name is Alex Kenesson, procurement supervisor, DES. I used to be on the DES team that did Statewide Contracts and managed teams that did those. Now I'm on the Small Agency Team, so I'm a little closer to these policies that we're going to discuss today. I work on contracts for agencies that are too small to have their own procurement staff. I'll be presenting some of what DES is doing with subcontractor inclusion plans and some ideas for that. Drew?

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

As always, I am more than ably helped out by my go-to person, Zoë Mroz.

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Mroz, Zoë (DES)

Thank you so much, Drew. Hi, everyone, Zoë Mroz, I'm on the policy team, and am the team's management analyst. I'll be here to take your questions and answers and monitor chat.

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

Thank you so much.

**Slide 3** So, here is an overview of what we're doing overall as DES, the state's lead procurement agency. As background, we procure and manage over 200 statewide contracts with around 1500 vendors. The vendors are in all aspects of public life in Washington state, Municipalities, counties, special districts, et cetera. We do Interstate commerce with various collectives like NASPO. And we also are responsible for developing and implementing procurement policies and procedures for all Washington agencies.

**Slide 4** OK, why do we do all this? Well, because the statutes and Governor's orders have told us to do so. Part of the intent behind all of procurement reform in RCW 39.26 was for us to encourage and facilitate state agency purchases of goods and services from Washington small businesses. In addition to that intent, it's more specifically laid out in RCW 39.26.090(6), where it specifies this encouragement not just to small businesses but also microbusinesses, minibusinesses, and minority- and women-owned businesses to the maximum extent practicable, as well as veteran owned businesses (see RCW 43.60A.200). As I'll discuss in the next slide, we always took this very seriously, but it was brought to the forefront by events back in 2019. And of course, last year our governor issued executive order on equity and public contracting, EO 22-01.

**Slide 4** So 2019 is when the disparity study came out, it made its findings and specific to what we're talking about today, the second recommendation on their list of about 10-12 recommendations was for DES to examine all Washington state agencies' current goods and services procurement policies and practices in order to give more user-friendly access to potential bidders and proposers.

**Slide 5** This examination was done by working with all the stakeholders around the State at all levels of government, private industry, public agencies, to figure out what would be the sensible way to address the disparity. Part of the solution was to increase subcontractor work awarded to small and veteran-owned firms. The logical step was to increase subcontractor inclusion plans. So, we wrote that into the policy.

**Slide 7** Most of you present today are aware of the supplier diversity policy. You probably have already looked at it as well as the accompanying virtual handbook.

**Slide 8** And as you can see, there is a list of eight tools for implementing the policy. But actually C-7, "Other Strategies" has about three separate tools within it. Subcontractor inclusion is, I think, strategy 7(b). The idea, then, is that there's basically ten tools for agencies to use to try to increase spend with small and veteran businesses.

**Slide 9** This slide shows a copy of the page out of the handbook for section 7(b). We included this image in response to many questions that we received early on with the policy and the handbook, when some people saying, "wait, we can't even find this stuff. So, what does it actually look like when we're in there?" So, this slide is showing our response to those questions. Now we're going to talk about the actual subcontractor inclusion plans, when and how.

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

**Slide 10** So even before I get to this slide, I should address what a subcontractor inclusion plan is. In case you don't know, a subcontractor inclusion plan basically is a document you'd include with a competitive solicitation that asks vendors whether they intend to use subcontractors if they are awarded the contract. There are some questions to address:

- What does a subcontractor inclusion plan look like?
- What kind of subcontractors are you (the awarded contractor) going to use?
- How do you include small, veteran, diverse subcontractors in your solicitation document?
- What needs to be put in writing?
- And should you use a subcontractor inclusion plan – when would it be a good idea?

The short answer is that you use subcontractor inclusion plans whenever you think subcontractors would be used by the awarded vendor. But because we do not predict the future well, it is safe to say that most competitive solicitations should include subcontractor inclusion plan language. The next question is, how do I use it?

Well, if you are not used to using a subcontractor inclusion plan, the Supplier Diversity Handbook gives some good examples in templates that are available there.

Some other questions that we get often:

- What is the requirement for using a subcontractor inclusion plan?

- Can I score them?
- Do I have to score them?
- What logistically in this limitation does it look like?

The handbook addresses all of these questions.

Regarding scoring, you can score inclusion plans, but you have to be agnostic as to protected characteristics. So, you can't score them if they're identified as minority- or women-owned. You can only score non-protected classes such as "small businesses" or "veteran-owned" businesses.

In addition, at DES we only score them as pass/fail.

The standard DES solicitation language tells bidders, "If you are using subcontractors, you must include a subcontractor inclusion plan and you must tell DES that you intend to use subcontractors." But beyond that, we let the vendors decide what details they will include in their response. There does have to be enough information to demonstrate that the vendor, in good faith, intends to use subcontractors.

And another common question we get is how can I enforce them?

What we typically do is put anything that could be understood as a deliverable in the subcontractor inclusion plan into the performance metrics of the contract. We make that a part of the goals to say, "in order to get your annual extension, you have to document to us that you have met the goals that you voluntarily set."

That's why subcontractor inclusion plans should also have performance requirements. The idea is if the vendor has not met the requirements, we (DES) may choose to cure the default. Perhaps by suspending the contract. Or we may fail to renew you. Or even terminate the contract. Remember, the vendor provided the information and so we want to hold them accountable for that.

Now I want to call out something that's kind of unique to DES. We often have many six-year contracts and I understand on an agency level the contracts are more project based and you might not get an opportunity to enforce the contract until it is about to end. The supplier diversity policy says you shall minimally check in annually to make sure that they are maintaining their goals. Also note that many individually, competitively solicited contracts will last less than a year. So, what do you do in that case?

Well, hopefully you did get a chance to check midway through the contract or while the contract is still panning out, but even if you didn't, we can hold them accountable for future responsibility. If the vendor did not meet the goals that they have told us, effectively they have lied to us. If for example, they said, "we're going to use 10% small businesses" in their subcontractor inclusion plan but then used no small businesses, they have not met what their performance goal.

Remember that all agencies are required to "monitor performance-based contracts . . . to ensure that all aspects of the contract are being properly performed and that performance standards are being achieved." RCW 39.26.180(1)(j). to that end, I want to make sure I've got a record of the vendor's failure. That way if the vendor bids again I can say, "hey, look this one project two years ago you said you were going to use 10% small businesses and you used zero." That is a huge concern to me. So, at the very least, I would at the end of a contract, if it is less than an annual contract, still check in to see what those records were and make a record of a vendor not meeting what it said it would do.

The importance for that too is then you're making a good faith effort to make sure that they're standing by their subcontractor inclusion plan and the vendor knows that you're paying attention. Drew, do you have anything to add to that?

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

The one thing I'm going to add to that is doing holdbacks, which is when you put aside a percentage of the purchase price of the contract (often 10%) with the idea that it would only be awarded once all of the performance requirements are fulfilled. That incentive is substantial, particularly when the profit is less than 10%. That holdback can really get the vendor's attention.

Using a holdback can also help a solicitation obtain best value. Although using a holdback provision might reduce the number of bids overall, it tends to winnow out a lot of the bad bidders. So, you're getting quality bidders competing for state dollars. This is one way of enforcing performance standards that I've seen be effective.

**Slide 11** Alright, so let's unveil our new brand strategy, the Interested Subcontractor List.

This got me more excited about procurement related stuff than I've been in a long time.

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

So I'm like Drew. I'm really, really excited about this. We heard from HCA that they're doing something very, very interesting and exciting. And I have an expression that I like to share with my procurement folks, "There is no such thing as plagiarism in procurement." If another agency is doing something that you like, you absolutely can steal it. But this is me giving credit to HCA for this interesting, innovative idea. I'm going to use it for one of my larger scale solicitations, for a \$750,000 custom website. I'm absolutely going to use it, and I'll tell you why.

What are we talking about here? Well, HCA had a problem – they were being criticized for not unbundling properly. The main issue was their staff didn't realize that unbundling was a possibility for a particular situation. Frankly, we could all have this issue because sometimes we don't really know whether unbundling is a possibility. This can be true despite all the RFI in the world and all of our contacts in the world. So here is HCA's solution.

So, they're using this thing called an interested subcontractor list. What is it and how does it work?

**Slide 12** HCA has amended their solicitation content and schedule a little bit. As you can see on the slide, this is a new solicitation schedule. And they added a form to their solicitation, we'll show the form in a second. HCA said, hey, if you want to be a subcontractor, maybe you can't fill the whole scope of the work we need done, but if you're interested in being a subcontractor to a Prime on this, or you think you can maybe help a Prime out in some areas where a Prime may be deficient, just let us know. Once you let us know what you can do, we will post the Interested Subcontractor List. Notice that this happens at the end of the bidder questions due period. At that same time, the Interested Subcontractor Responses are also due.

Adding the Interested Subcontractor timeline requires you to have time frames to be able to allow this to happen during the overall solicitation, but I think this is really interesting. I am beginning to think of this as a kind of dating service for Primes and Subs.

From there, they're going to release this list of subcontractors and their unique capabilities. On October 12th, the day after the Primes get this subcontractor list, they'll say "hey, everyone, here are some firms that are interested in becoming subcontractors here." Notice, too, that HCA makes no promises to Subs that they will get any contracts under this. HCA is providing this as a service, to possibly match-make Primes and subs. The tool lets Primes know, "here's some Subs that you can look out for." It also begins to hold some of the Primes accountable to say, "hey, look, we have a diverse sub on the interested subcontractor list."

I'm excited to pilot this for DES's \$750,000 custom website project. I'm learning that unbundling is a consideration that is intertwined with the Interested Subcontractor List. From past experience, it's clear that the areas for unbundling vary per Prime. Some Primes want it unbundled, others, maybe not. If I asked 10 different potential Primes, I'll get 15 different answers about how to unbundle this, and many of those will be directly opposed to each other. So, this is a way I can let the Primes figure out the optimal unbundling for the solicitation.

This strategy kind of marries Primes to subs, and the key is the agency would bear limited responsibility. – we are letting the market do some of the work for us. Note that we are proposing this as a service and an option for bidders. It's not required from the Primes, but it gets a lot of information about potential subcontractors.

Another benefit of the Interested Subcontractor List is that if you ever redo this solicitation, you are starting ahead: you have a list of those Interested Subcontractors, and so you can restart the solicitation with more confidence about whether you're unbundling the contract, and if the market might support the unbundling. This might also be more effective than an RFI.

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

Another benefit: using an Interested Subcontractor List can develop valuable business intelligence that can be transferred to many other solicitations. What I learn in one solicitation where I used the Interested Subcontractor List, led to unexpected unbundling. I can use that wisdom with all future solicitations. So, it's a multidimensional way to expand a template for your solicitations and procurement practice.

When I was talking to HCA, they pointed out that they are now including this as part of the boilerplate for all solicitations. Because you know, they now know that they don't always know about whether a Prime will be using Subs or that they can unbundle something in a given solicitation. This strategy helps gain that information. They really are doing some excellent customer service not just for the agency, but you know as a matchmaker: the vendor community is a stakeholder in this whole process. OK, next slide.

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

Actually, let's keep the slide up. I know there will be questions later, but there's a lot of questions in the chat on this slide that we can answer now.

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

Great.

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

So I'm just going to cover some of them real quick.

**Question #1** From Julie, did they mention why they only allowed one day for a subcontractor reply?

**Answer #1** It's more than one day. HCA issued the Interested Subcontractor List request with the RFP on September 28<sup>th</sup>. So, an interested subcontractor has from September 28<sup>th</sup> to October 11<sup>th</sup> to respond and then HCA assembles and posts the Interested Subcontractor List October 12<sup>th</sup>. Because bids are due November 7<sup>th</sup>, all bidders have about a month to look at that List and then contact those interested subcontractors and see if they want to implement them from there.

**Question #2** Let's go to Megan's question. How do you plan on posting that list to be available to the bidders?

**Answer #2** I believe the way HCA does it is they just post it as an amendment to the solicitation in WEBS, kind of like a Q&A would be posted.

**Question #3** Another question is from Nancy. Couldn't we also do this step before we publish?

**Answer #3** Sure, if you've got the time, I don't see why you couldn't do something like this. Perhaps if you release it with the RFP, there's a little more skin in the game. Everyone knows that this is actually happening, as opposed to an exploratory testing of the marketplace. As an aside, one of the critiques that we've heard from small vendors is, "I don't have time to bid on something unless I know it's an actual bid and monies will be spent by the state for it." But overall, I agree with what Nancy said, and I think it would be a great practice to do it before the bid if you do it alongside the bid. You may also get more responses or additional responses to your solicitation.

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

And HCA reports the strategy has been successful. The reason that it's now part of their boilerplate is that there's some Primes that are getting some subcontractors. That's what the strategy is designed to accomplish.

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

**Slide 13** Let's go ahead and move on to the next couple of slides. As you can see, HCA have added an interested subcontractor list section with some basic instructions to their solicitation boilerplate document.

**Slide 14** In this slide are the instructions for potential subcontractors. They are asked to fill out their name, their contact information and probably no more than a couple sentences (a maximum of one or two paragraphs) as summary of their capabilities as it relates to the scope of work.

Notice that there are no guarantees that you will be hired just because you submit materials to get on the sub list. All this will do is give you access to any opportunities under the solicitation.

You can see the capabilities summaries are mentioned in item "ii". They must be two paragraphs or less, you really want to include enough information so that a Prime would be interested to contact you and know what to contact you for; the information the sub provides is designed to build the relationship with any potential Prime from the solicitation.

I like this tool because I think this is pretty low risk for HCA. The message is that HCA will use this tool as a service. It is going to try and connect some Subs with Primes, but ultimately, it's the Primes' responsibility always to conduct their business.

I would mention in a pre-bid conference, "hey Primes this is a way to increase your scores. If there is an area of the solicitation that you think you might be a little deficient in, well now you can get a sub and say hey, we looked and we saw in the subcontractor interested party list there's this sub who has these strengths. So, we would be interested in utilizing them to shore up our bid. This could result in a bidder getting even more points in the evaluation process." We make no promises, but you can see the benefits to this strategy.

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

**Slide 15** The next slide has some excellent disclaimer language.

**Question #4** Will this example be added to the Handbook?

**Answer #4** That is a great question. We see that it is working for HCA. We will be trying it at DES, and if our experience shows that it works, we will add it to the handbook.

Going back to the slide, I really like the language about the posting date, and the clear admonition that late submissions will not be posted. Also, this section clearly states that there is no guarantee of a subcontract; it's just part of the solicitation process; the subcontractor list should not be construed as an endorsement; and the interested party is responsible for the completeness and accuracy of the information of their submission. The message is clear: "your reputation as a sub presenting to all of the Primes and the state agencies, is on the line. So don't mess around and get your information in on time, and you'll help out the process."

This is dynamite stuff. It responds directly to some of the business community's complaints about how we're opaque and how we're not inviting in other vendors as subs.

**Question #5** Has HCA had any Subs respond? And have they been selected to work with the ASV officially? curious.

**Answer #5** Yes, they've had Subs respond. Some of their solicitations have generated Subcontractor Inclusion Lists. HCA is very happy about that.

**Slide 16** And I believe we are ready now for more Q&A.

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Mroz, Zoë (DES)

Perfect. So, we've been kind of doing a little answer-as-we-go. So, I'm just going to skim through the Chat, and I think we had a question that we didn't get to about the timeline.

**Question #6** Is the Interested Subcontractor List published by email or on a public facing website?

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

**Answer #6** I'll answer multiple aspects of that question. I want this List to be an exhibit to the solicitation. Also, I want the vendor responses to go to the official email that my bids are going to come in on. And as a result of that, I am going to publicly post this on WEBS. This keeps the List part of the official solicitation process.

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

To illustrate what Alex is saying, I'm now showing slide #13, which specifies that the Subs are responding to the RFP Coordinator. This ensures that the process will be transparent and fair. Everyone reviewing the solicitation gets the same message, that the information that is sent to the RFP coordinator will be included when s/he puts together the List. That List will then be posted as an amendment to the RFP.

This is fantastic business information to have. If I were a Prime, I'd be happy because I want the advantage of presenting a meaningful subcontractor inclusion plan if I'm going to bid.

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

Another benefit to using the List process is its impact on Primes. By using the List, the Prime must justify its Subs selection for the solicitation. Consider a situation where a Prime is presented with a list of interested subcontractors, and four of them are smalls. If the Prime chooses not to select any small vendors, you, the procurement coordinator, are going to raise an eyebrow and say, what? Why did the Prime do that? It's the Prime's responsibility to respond fully to a solicitation. The list tells me that there are Subs out there, and they have to respond accordingly.

Next question.

**Question #7** Do we need to be including subcontractor inclusion plans in exempt contracts (e.g., direct buy contracts)?

**Answer #7** I think it's a great question. Do they need to be included? No. But why not? You can always ask if Subs will be used, even in a direct buy. It will probably be useful to ask how the Subs will be used. Any small or veteran Subs used could add to the agency's spending goals.

Next question.

**Question #8** Is there some kind of technical assistance or expectation setting available for the process of training inexperienced Subs?

**Answer #8** Public works Subs may have more experience in this realm. However, many nonprofits and small, diverse businesses may have zero experience responding to an RFP. In terms of technical assistance, the form provides general information, but that said, typically bidders and inexperienced subcontractors may still not totally understand what they're signing up for, or how to sign up for it. The



best advice I have is to consult with APEX Accelerators, formerly known as PTAC (Procurement Technical Assistance Center). Here is a link to hem: [APEX Accelerators](#). APEX has a Washington Chapter.

The other reason I love APEX Accelerators: as a procurement coordinator, I have to be a referee. With regard to a solicitation that I run, I have to be impartial, right? Well, APEX Accelerators doesn't. They can provide coaching and guidance that I would love to give but can't, because I have to remain impartial.

APEX will schedule appointments and break apart these processes for small businesses. Their staff have specialized in advice regarding public works and goods and services solicitations. I have seen some of their efforts and they can really, really, really help.

The current need for increased supplier diversity puts an emphasis on the important role that APEX Accelerators can play. All state agencies want to reduce barriers to working with small businesses. We want to be open and transparent to our small businesses. But we need to balance this initiative with the requirement to remain impartial. Example: I can't help you write your solicitation. APEX can.

Next question, from Megan Clark.

**Question #9** Next question, do you have Subs include their OMWBE certification status?

**Answer #9** I think we do in our solicitations, yes. That being said, although I want to know, I wouldn't make that a limiting factor for the solicitation. Another thing we've heard from small businesses is they are having a hard time getting certified by OMWBE, it's taking too long. Or the process is too cumbersome.

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

One thing that I just learned about two weeks ago is that OMWBE has waived all of their fees for certifications, at least through the end of the year, if not through the end of the fiscal year. That is a good development, because that was a lot of the barrier to getting certified.

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

Next question, from Shannon.

**Question #10** I've been entering contracts into Access Equity for the past few days and I've come across an issue with determining the amount of money or percentage of funding that is going to subcontractors when a deliverable based statement of work (SOW) is used rather than a budget-based SOW. Do I need to backtrack to get a subcontractor inclusion plan for those contracts again?

**Answer #10** My answer would be if an SIP wasn't a part of the original contract, it's kind of hard to add an SIP once a contract is in full swing. But if an SIP was a part of the contract, you should feel free to make sure the vendor or the contractor provides clear enough data that you can give the data to Access Equity.

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

Remember that all of this stuff is forward looking. In other words, you're in the process of getting

current data entered into Access Equity, which is great to the extent that you can. But this is not designed to be a historical research project.

Access Equity has gotten up and running very recently and not every agency has access to it yet. So, it will be up and running in the next 6 to 12 months. But we are in the initial stages of using the program; the focus is gathering as much current data as we can.

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

The same is true for the Supplier Diversity Policy as a whole. The intent for the first year of the policy (through April, 2024) is for agencies to make good faith efforts to comply with its provisions. If you can demonstrate that, you'll probably be OK. What do you what say to that, Drew?

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

It's right. This whole year 2023 into 2024 is a benchmarking year. Our inquiry right now is whether agencies are getting the supplier diversity compliance architecture in place. If it's getting in place, great. If it's not, OK – now we know that it's not. And then DES is there to assist with whatever needs to happen to comply with the policy.

Recall that compliance is not simply using all ten tools of the policy because not every tool is applicable for every single solicitation? So, this first year is designed to be a time when agencies explore what it really means to work with the policy. Regarding the next risk assessment, it's going to have a focus on the supplier diversity policy. It's for benchmarking an agency's compliance with the policy.

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

Next question.

**Question #11** Should we include an SIP even if the subcontractor isn't an OMWBE, small business or veteran owned business?

**Answer #11** At DES we require an SIP, generally speaking. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. But DES will require an SIP of anyone who's using subcontractors, period, even if they aren't planning on using an OMWBE, small business, or veteran owned business. If you are using subcontractors, no matter the type, we want your subcontractor inclusion plan.

Next question.

**Question #12** You mentioned that HCA was very successful using the Interested Subcontractor List - did HCA mention if most of the Subs were already registered in WEBS as a Vendor so they get the auto notices from WEBS?

**Answer #12** Great question. Any Sub that is registered in WEBS at the time of the solicitation would receive automatic notification from the WEBS system. Using the Interested Subcontractor List provides an additional benefit to the vendor community – the opportunity to notify the soliciting agency *and all interested Primes* – that the vendor is available to work as a Sub. This improves the likelihood that Primes will include a subcontractor inclusion plan with their bid package.

Of course, there will still be the barrier that the message will only be sent to vendors that are registered in WEBS. Outreach will help solve this problem.

Next question.

**Question #13** Is the intent to only use a subcontractor inclusion plan with solicitations?

**Answer #13** We already answered that earlier, in case you missed it, that answer is in the policy and handbook. They are geared toward using SIP's in competitive solicitations. Although SIPs are not required in noncompetitive procurements, they may still be useful as a reminder that the State is asking the vendor community to diversify who it uses as Subs. Even if it's a \$30,000 direct buy, I'd love to know what your inclusion plan for Smalls are from there.

Next question.

**Question #14** Finally, based on the many questions being asked, it would be helpful to have a Q&A in the handbook, in the SIP section.

**Answer #14** We will be doing that.

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

After each of the Lunch 'n Learn sessions, we publish three documents. The first is an edited transcript of this meeting. The second is the presentation slides themselves, and the third is a list of the Q&As that came up in the chat. The three documents will be posted to our website in the same place where you went to register for this meeting.

Zoë, anything to add for the good of the order?

0:49:26.570 --> 0:49:28.840

Mroz, Zoë (DES)

I put a link in our chat to our survey. Please take our survey to help us improve these sessions and add more sessions in the future. We really appreciate your time taking that.

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Zavatsky, Drew (DES)

Alright, thank you so much. I want to thank everybody for being here. Alex, you're a superstar. I appreciate your help with the presentation. And as always, I would not be able to do what I do without Zoë Mroz doing what she does so well.

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Kenesson, Alexander (DES)

And I'll do a shameless plug: DES has a special services team for small agencies and large agencies. If you are an agency of under 100 employees, we can help to draft your solicitations for you. We know you may not have a procurement person on staff, so we have those resources. I will put a link in the chat for that. And if your agency has more than 100 people, DES has contract liaisons that provide consulting services for procurement-related questions.