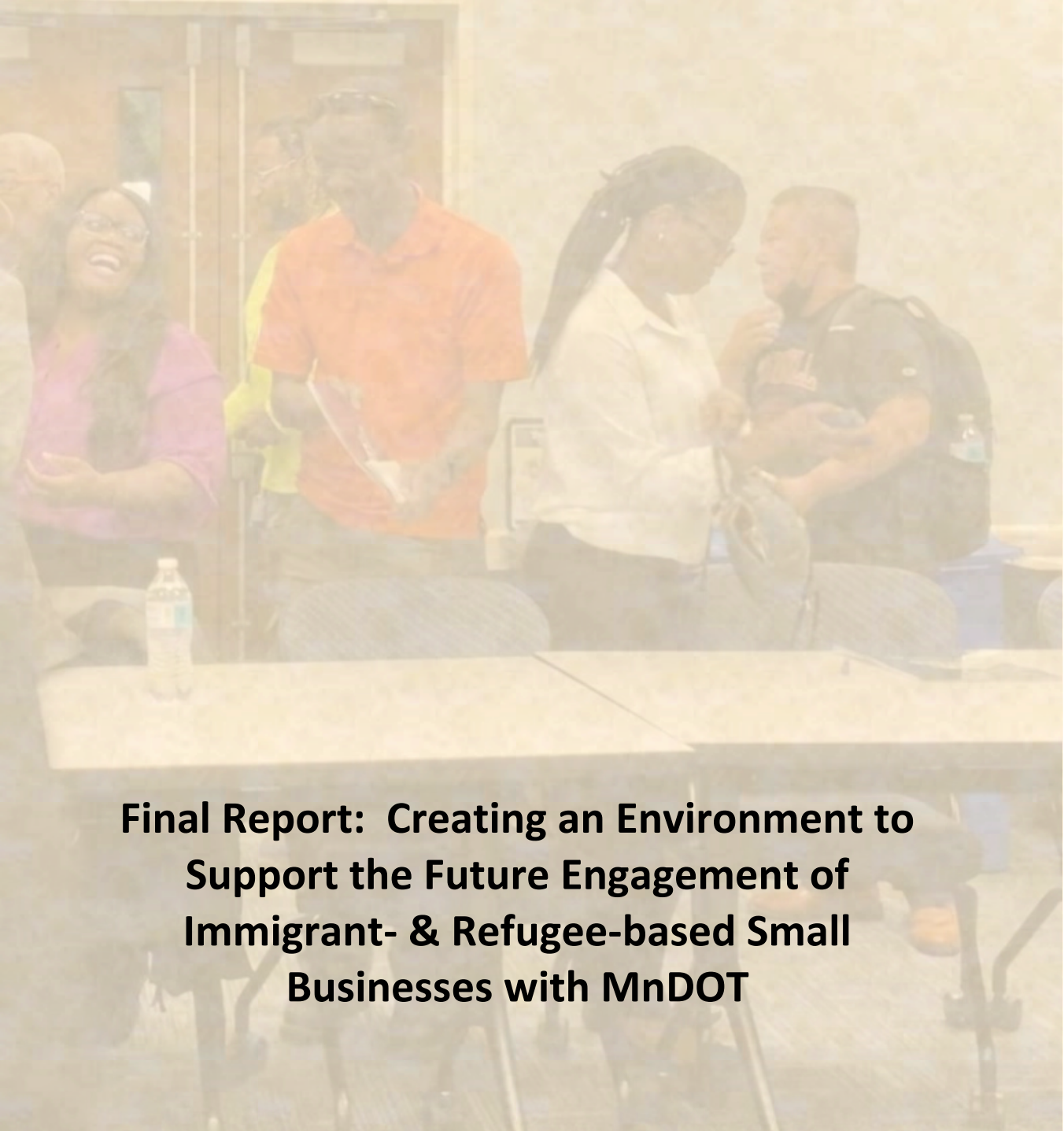




Version 2.0

# DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

A faded background photograph showing a group of diverse people sitting around a table in a meeting room. A woman in a purple shirt is laughing on the left, a man in an orange shirt is in the center, and a woman in a white shirt is on the right. A man with a backpack is also visible on the right.

## **Final Report: Creating an Environment to Support the Future Engagement of Immigrant- & Refugee-based Small Businesses with MnDOT**

*Prepared by Push Strategist, LLC. for MnDOT*

## Contents

<b>Executive Summary.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Overview .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Project Description.....	3
Purpose.....	3
Goal .....	4
Staff Introduction .....	4
<b>Implementation .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Outreach.....	7
The Process.....	8
Participant Descriptions .....	12
<b>Data Analysis .....</b>	<b>14</b>
Participants' Expectations .....	15
Participants' Hesitations .....	16
Participants' Perceived Barriers .....	19
Participants' Reactions.....	21
<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>24</b>
Raise Awareness.....	24
Demystify the Process.....	25
Path to Secure Capital .....	26
Future Training .....	26
Conclusion .....	27
<b>APPENDIX .....</b>	<b>28</b>

## Executive Summary

The goal of this Project is to increase the diversity of participation of Immigrant- and Refugee-based small businesses in the construction industry to reflect the demographics of the State of Minnesota. To encourage and support these small businesses, Push Strategist, LLC. worked in tandem with The Office of Advancing Equity on behalf of MnDOT.

Push Strategist, LLC. went above and beyond the scope of the project by not only identifying immigrant and refugee small business owners, but also qualified and interested BIPOC small business owners. In the initial stages of the

Project, Push Strategist, LLC. recognized a knowledge gap and included an informational session for these small business owners to navigate the process to secure work with the State.



## Overview

### ***Project Description***

The State of Minnesota seeks to use its contracting and purchasing power to increase economic opportunities for small businesses, especially businesses owned by Refugees, women, Native Americans, persons of color, veterans, and persons with a disability. The intent of this Project was to engage small business owners that are immigrants, refugees, and people of color to work with the



Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT). To encourage and support these small businesses, Push Strategist, LLC. is working with The Office of Advancing Equity on behalf of MnDOT.

Over the last few years, the State has significantly increased its prime contracting with local small businesses certified as such under the federal Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) program and the State's Targeted Group (TGB) and Veteran (VET) programs. Few DBE/TGB/VETS win State openly competitive, low-bid construction contracts because they lack the equipment, capital, and bonding capacity to compete against larger, experienced highway heavy contractors. But many small businesses can compete for maintenance or small construction work that does not require the same level of capital and equipment required for the State's large projects.

Since 2016, the State located many small businesses eager to do tree trimming, fencing, encampment cleanup, pond mowing and other work types when staff packaged the work into small contracts with plain language and streamlined processes and documentation so small businesses could compete and perform as a prime contractor. The State staff has awarded millions and millions of dollars to DBE/TGB/Vets since January 2016, for projects across the state in many different work types but still have disparities and want to do better.

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of this Project was to create an environment to help support future engagement of Immigrant- and Refugee-based small businesses with MnDOT. For this project, small businesses that qualify are:

1. small businesses owned by immigrants, refugees, and people of color

2. for-profit enterprises
3. less than 25 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees
4. less than \$1 million annual revenue.

MnDOT was especially interested in promoting underutilized small businesses performing in the professional technical services, construction and maintenance in the 7-county Minneapolis-metro area and adjoining counties that are not presently seeking opportunities with the State. Small businesses performing professional technical services, suppliers, construction, and maintenance type work for other government entities, such as counties, cities, and universities were of particular interest.

### **Goal**

The goal of this Project was to identify immigrant and refugee owned small businesses who could offer services to the state as primary contractors.

The Project identified areas in which the State could better engage this community by gaining feedback from the businesses and key organizations that service this community. MnDOT seeks to increase the diversity of Immigrant- and Refugee-based small businesses in the construction industry to reflect the demographics of the State of Minnesota by:



- building the future workforce
- expanding existing business and workforce skills
- ensuring transparency
- connecting people and firms with each other.

### **Staff Introduction**

#### **Ose Sesay, PI**

As a first-generation Liberian-Nigerian American, Ose Sesay enjoys aiding immigrant professionals and businesses because she understands how difficult it can be to pursue career and entrepreneurship opportunities as a New American. During her tenure in corporate America, Ose led a high-profit division responsible for placing international candidates in employment opportunities

*Prepared by Push Strategist, LLC. for MnDOT*

throughout the United States. Here she gained the skills and expertise critical for recruitment, project management, professional development and driving organizational change.

Her personalized approach brought her major success, and she began a consulting service, Push Strategist LLC, becoming the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion subject matter expert for aspiring professionals, executive leaders, corporations, and small businesses.

Through her PUSH Strategist LLC firm, she identifies value sets, delivering roadmaps and strategies that motivate clients to complete each milestone to meet their ultimate goal: Turning ideas and value sets into profit generating mechanisms and closing various economic gaps for communities of color. With her knowledge of the market, recruitment, entrepreneurship, community engagement, and passion for change, she will truly push you into purpose.

### **Andrea Race, Recruiter**

Andrea Race, brought hands-on experience to this project from working in the field of construction for over 20 years. From the age of 8 to 12 she helped her dad with his tree service business and has now grown to do work on major projects in Minnesota including restoring brick at the Union Depot, form work at the Vikings stadium and various other major projects in MN and surrounding states. She was recently nominated this year for the “Woman in Construction” Award for Redwing Boots. Race was born in Jamaican and migrated to the U.S in her early years. She has passion to help support the needs of the immigrants, refugee and BIPOC small businesses with getting access to world construction and desires to see the field have more leaders of color in MN and beyond.



### **Pang Foua Xiong, Recruiter**

A first-born Hmong American Woman and Mother, Founder of *Community & Co Lifestyle LLC*, born to refugee parents and raised in the homeland of the Dakhóta (Dakota) people/Saint Paul, Minnesota community. A Creative + Humanities Facilitator and Business Strategist, Community-Builder and Youth Advocate. A natural connector, organizing and co-designing creative spaces and



conversation meeting community where they are. She has over 20+ years of experience working directly within community facilitating human-centered and culturally responsive engagement sparking new conversations and actions in leadership uplifting underserved and underestimated community. She provides Strategic Leadership consulting for aspiring entrepreneurs, startups and ecosystem builders; Project Management and co-designing equity-centered strategies; Brand Storytelling co-designing authentic narratives and social media content Communications/Public Relations, Marketing; Fundraising; Creative skills: Photography, Videography, Graphic Designing, Live Streaming and Content Broadcasting; and Language (Hmong) Translation and Interpretation. Her work has created equity-centered, culturally responsive, multicultural and multi-generational conversations, events and activities with a holistic approach focused on empowering positive change, healing and creating belonging in economics, health and well-being and education uplifting communities together in economic prosperity.



### **Angela Shoe, EdD, Data Consultant**

As a first-generation university graduate, Angela has accomplished many roles throughout her career including classroom (traditional and Web-based) instructor, corporate trainer, development consultant, author, and graduate-level professor. Over the years, Angela has honed her areas of expertise in a wide array of areas including program evaluation, assessment and measurement, program development, curriculum/instructional development and design, and adult learning principles. Her professional interests include equity-based education, adult learning strategies, and learner-centered teaching principles. When Angela is not working, she is writing (fiction and nonfiction) and lives on her small farm taking care of a menagerie of animals.

## Implementation

To begin this Project, Push Strategist, LLC. enlisted the help of 2 recruiters (Andrea and Pang) to assist in recruiting and researching underutilized small businesses not known to the State. These businesses should offer services--across residential, commercial, highway heavy, and/or professional technical—and have the experience, transferable skills, or interest in performing highway heavy related contracts with the State, particularly refugee-based businesses. Additionally, Push Strategist, LLC. recruited professional technical service consultants.

## Outreach

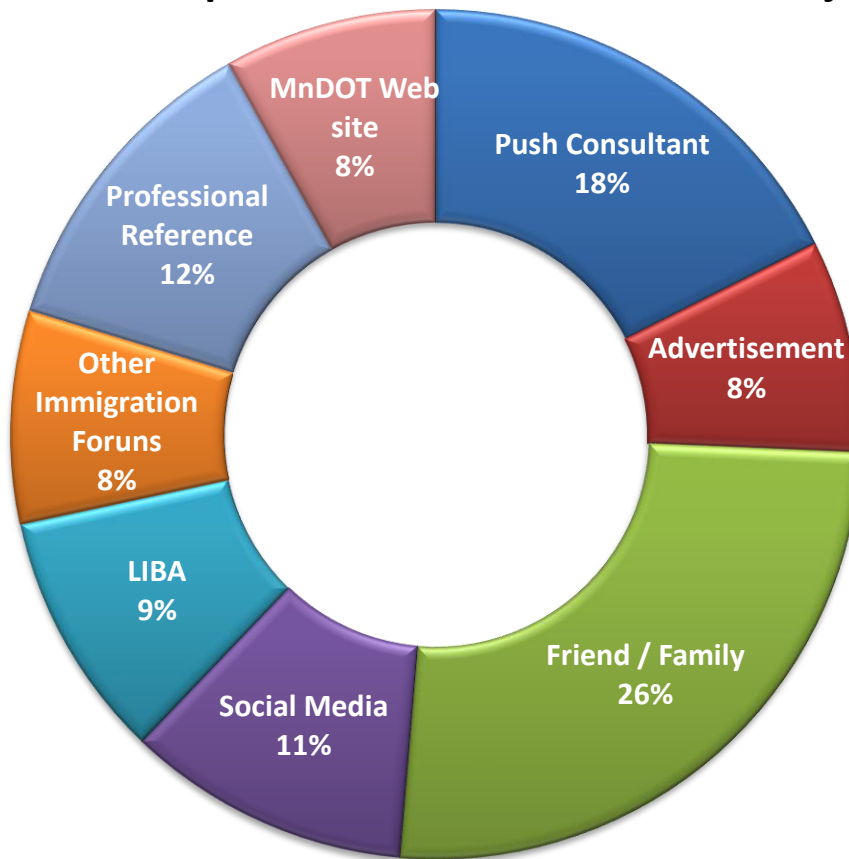
To advertise the Project to prospective participants, both recruiters and Push Strategist, LLC. consolidated their vast network of small business owners to “spread the word” about and broadcast the Project. In addition, the Project was posted on several social media sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.), the MnDOT Web site, and in several forum sites. Andrea, a veteran in the construction profession, tracked down many of her previous colleagues--via phone and in person—and urged them to apply. Pang, an advocate for the area’s immigrant and refugee communities, encouraged potential immigrant businesses and professional participants to join. Additionally, Push Strategist, LLC. curated a pipeline of potential talent and organizations as an engagement tool.



Individual eligibility was determined on a case-by-case during the formal application process. To complete this task, Push Strategist LLC. curated a new list of small businesses not currently quoting and performing State contracts but are a likely fit with the State's small construction, maintenance, and professional technical contracts. As illustrated by the subsequent graph, more than half of the participants found out about the Project through “word of mouth,” a friend or family member (26%), from Push Strategist LLC. and consultants (18%), or through other professional references (12%). The remaining participants learned about the Project through advertisements or online (MnDOT Web site 8%, social media 11%, immigration forums [including the Liberian Business Association LIBA] 17%, or other types of advertising 8%).



## How Participants Found Out About the Project

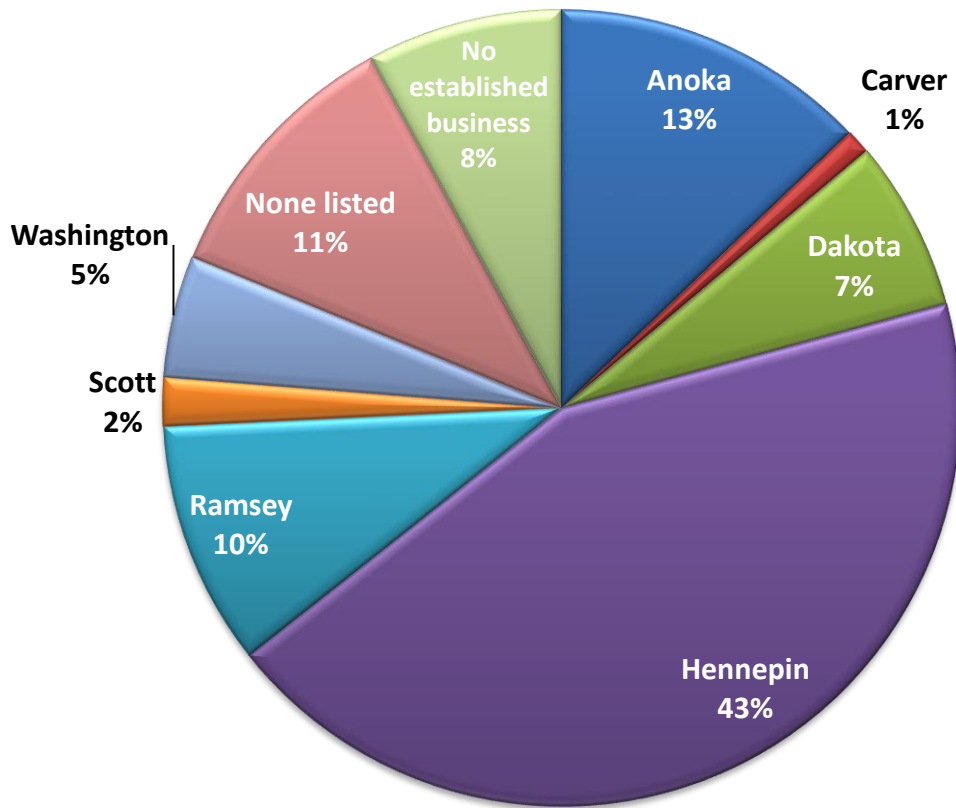


### ***The Process***

After first contact with Push Strategist LLC., participants were instructed to complete and submit a brief survey ([link to survey](#)). Results from the survey revealed that nearly half of all participants' small businesses are located in Hennepin County (43%) with Anoka County and Ramsey County coming in a distant second and third (13% and 10%, respectively). Participants that did not have an established business (or did not specify which county) were approximately 20% of the total. The survey also provided an opportunity to extract valuable information from potential participants as well as another tool to determine if the Project was a good fit for the services they could provide MnDOT.

Upon completion and submission of the survey, the administrator for Push Strategist, LLC. sent frequent email blasts to all participants to remind them to sign up and participate in an interactive, live video (ZOOM) interview. These video sessions were scheduled until mid-June, 2022.

## Business Location Within 7 County Metro-area



For participants to engage with the Project, their businesses must fulfill the 4 points below:

1. A small business owner that is an immigrant, refugee, or person of color.
2. Have a business in maintenance, construction, or a professional technical service.
3. Willing to start a business in maintenance, construction or a professional technical service.
4. Have NOT done work with MnDOT in the last two years.

Moreover, small businesses that deliver professional and technical services must have the required State certifications. A number of participants were not certified and were unclear of the procedure to begin the authorization process.

Early on, many of the participants had follow-up questions and needed assistance with the authorization process. After hearing feedback that participants needed more guidance, Push Strategist, LLC. took action immediately. Push Strategist, LLC. met with a large number of community partners to obtain the best course of action for these participants. The group decided to connect business owners with a mutual colleague employed at the Minnesota Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) to guide the participants throughout the process to earn their required certifications. However, Push Strategist, LLC. wanted to demonstrate--not just explain--to participants the requirements and processes to attain their required certifications.

After recognizing early on that there was a major knowledge gap in the process, Push Strategist, LLC. developed the idea to include informational training sessions ([Appendix A](#), provides a condensed sample) for qualified participants. The sessions were scheduled for participants to:

- allow them to meet one another
- network
- share and discuss contracting opportunities
- ask questions
- learn together in a cohort model.

Above and beyond of the Project's requirements, Push Strategist, LLC. arranged an informational session for participants to ask questions and meet with Tracy Olsen from the Office of Advancing Equity team. Her presence was a "direct inside access" that most of the Immigrant- and Refugee-based small businesses owners remarked they did not have. Mark Cooper, Metro Area Manager, also assisted with business certifications contact information (based on a personal



**Minnesota Department of Administration's MN PTAC  
TriState Webinar: Resources for Small Business**

**Training Topics: Selling to Government**

DATE: 5/2/22  
TIME: 9:00 AM - 10:00 AM (CDT)  
REGISTRATION DEADLINE: 5/2/22 8:00 AM (CDT)  
FEE: NO FEE

**Description:** To Celebrate National Small Business Week, join us for a session to learn about valuable resources available in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Whether you need to create a successful business plan, get expert advice on expanding your business, marketing, understand the government market and requirements to do business with the government, or training your team, there are many resource partners to help you. Information will be shared covering all three states.

Program Format: Online Meeting (Live)  
Point of Contact: Christina Nebel-Dickerson 16512012629



REGISTER HERE: <https://mndgov.ecenterdirect.com/events/1738>

**Minnesota Department of Administration's MN PTAC  
Dept of Administration - PTAC Orientation Class**

**Training Topics: Orientation**

DATE: 5/3/22  
TIME: 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM (CDT)  
REGISTRATION DEADLINE: 5/3/22 1:00 PM (CDT)  
FEE: NO FEE

**Description:** You are encouraged to attend our Orientation Class as the first step in understanding our services and how we can assist in your local, state and federal government contracting efforts. You are invited to acquaint yourself with the State of Minnesota, Department of Administration's PTAC services and resources offered to assist your small business with successfully entering into the government marketplace.

Program Format: Online Meeting (Live)  
Point of Contact: Christina Nebel-Dickerson (651) 201-



REGISTER HERE: <https://mndgov.ecenterdirect.com/events/1738>

**2022 TRAININGS**

@Minnesota Department of  
Administration's MN PTAC

**VISIT:**  
<https://bit.ly/3vTTRIB>



**CONTACT INFO: [info@pushstrategist.com](mailto:info@pushstrategist.com) (952) 491-0088 | [www.pushstrategist.com](http://www.pushstrategist.com) @pushstrategist**

\*A SBA WOSB-Certified Woman Owned Small Business & WBEHC-Certified Women's Business Enterprise

relationship with Ose Sesay). The informational sessions were NOT required, but Push Strategist, LLC. requested the idea to the MnDOT team to be included. Push Strategist, LLC. recognized that



participants needed more guidance beyond the original Project plan to succeed. Ose Sesay collected and compiled relevant resources for participants that were further designed by Pang Foua Xiong.

In addition, all certifying entities collaborated with Push Strategist, LLC. and provided a consolidated Web application portal for participants to apply for one or multiple equity certification programs. These applications were submitted to the required program(s) and certifying entities when starting their applications.

Many interesting and insightful questions, comments, and concerns were amassed during the informational session and should be noted for similar future Projects. Some of the questions posed in training include:

- *“What are some visual examples of properties and workspace that contractors would be bidding for and then what the bidding process would look like?”*
- *“Is there a bidding proposal template available to help newer folks in the bidding process?”*
- *“Does MnDOT work on foreclosed properties and preservation?”*

The MnDot team should take note of the variety and themes of the queries and issues these small business owners asked as they continue to update and refine their contracting and application process and protocols.

After completing and submitting the required certification applications, qualified participants enrolled to attend an interactive, live video (ZOOM) session interview in which the majority was one-on-one sessions. The interviews served 2 purposes:

1. Inquire more deeply about barriers and hesitation to work with the State.
2. Explain in more detail about the Project and how to secure work with the State.

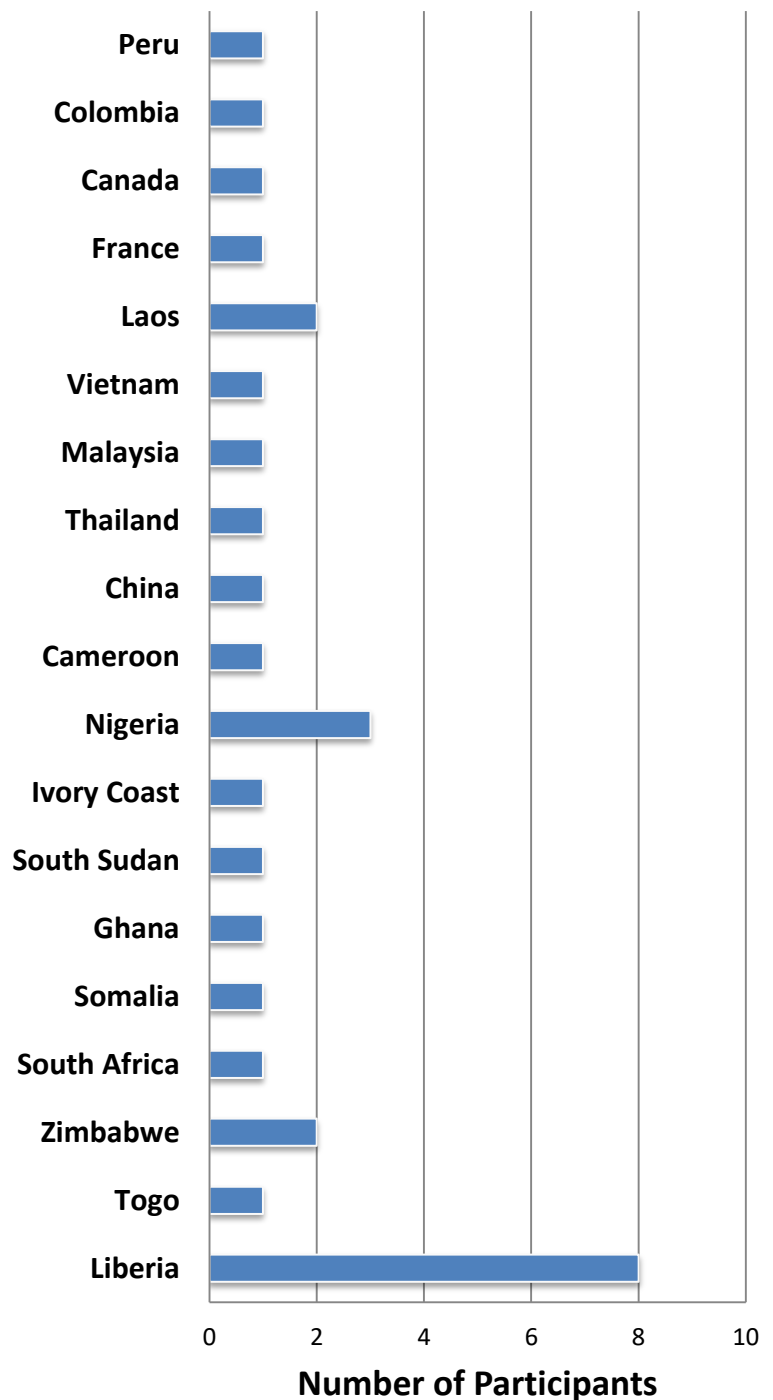
These sessions were recorded for further data collection and analysis.

***Participant Descriptions***

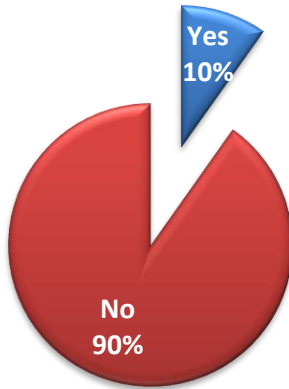
The breakdown of participants born outside of the United States is itemized in the chart to the right. A large majority of participants are from Africa (primarily Liberia and to a lesser extent, Nigeria) along with several from Asia and a few from the Americas. The vast majority of participants responded that English is their preferred or primary language with a few expressing that another language is favored including:

- Somali
- Spanish
- Madi
- Hmong
- Vietnamese

**Birth Countries (born outside of United States)**



## Identify as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin



Thus, for the most part, understanding and communicating in English is not a factor for participants.

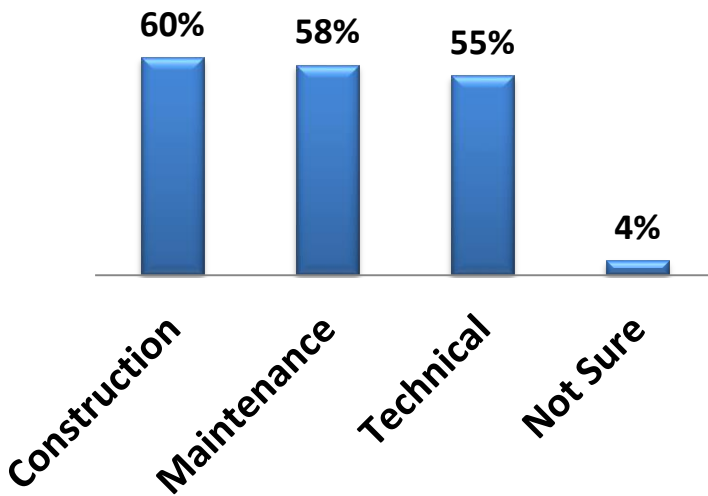
Out of the total number of participants, approximately 10% identify as Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin (2 of these participants qualify as an immigrant and refugee small business).



## Data Analysis

Push Strategist, LLC. gleaned a tremendous amount of valuable data from the survey (N=82) and supporting information in the interview and the training sessions. These sessions provided a

### Services to Offer MnDOT



“voice” and deeper appreciation and understanding of their expectations, hesitations, and perceived barriers to work with MnDOT and the State of Minnesota. The vast majority (96%, n=80) were confident in the construction, maintenance, or technical services they could offer to MnDOT, with some with the capacity to offer more than one.

The number of participants that can provide the three types of services to MnDOT are presented in the chart to the right (the numbers will not equal N=82 due to the capacity of a few participants able to provide more than one service). Logistics was extracted from technical services and created as a subset due to the variances among “technical” services encompassing everything from administrative work to computer programming to transportation. Please note, more details are provided in the final deliverable to showcase the various business types.

Type of Service	Providers
Construction	24
Maintenance	24
Technical	19
* <i>Logistics</i>	7
N/A	15

Some of the other services that were offered and did not fit within these categories included:

- Vending (including food service) (3)

- Housing (1)
- Community Advocacy (5)
- Healthcare (1)
- Business Advising (2)

Although these services are beyond the scope of this Project, and quite possibly the range of employment opportunities at MnDOT, they might be considered a better fit and better opportunity within another department at the State of Minnesota or other government entity.

### ***Participants' Expectations***

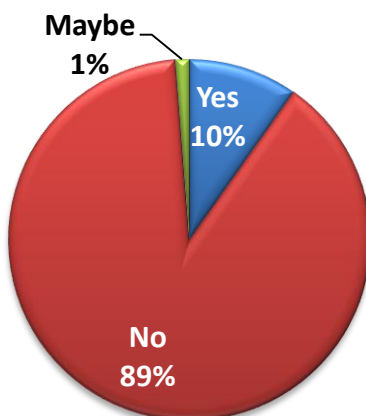
At the time of completing the survey, approximately 10% of participants had done work with the State before. For the participants that HAD previously worked with the State, several expressed some positive statements such as:

- *"The sky's the limit."*
- *"Does the state want to work with someone like me? I had to get over those fears."*

Conversely, they also described receiving payment taking a long time. Some comments were:

- *"Takes too long to get paid."*
- *"Requirements are too rigid."*
- *"None outside of ensuring payment would come on time."*

### **Have Done Business With the State Before**



For the participants who had not previously worked for the State (or if so, it had been over 2 years), they had heard to expect payment from the State takes time; regardless, as small business owners, they explained that they do not have the capacity to wait for to get paid. These business owners had business expenses themselves that needed to be paid. Others rationalized that the State already has pre-existing contracts and vendors to compete with and have low expectations that they could secure a winning bid.

## ***Participants' Hesitations***

When participants who had not previously worked with the State were asked what hesitations they had to do business with the State, they explained:

- *“Because my business is different from what is listed below.”*
- *“My company is new and needed to meet up with some criteria as a company and then move to getting bigger contracts.”*
- *“Being a mom and working full time, the biggest concern is to ensure that I will continue to have work as a small business*
- *“Would like to learn more about what exactly the opportunities are being confirming.”*
- *“How do I get foot in the door if they already have established vendors?”*
- *“In construction you can get to the top and we feel that even with that they will pull us back down?”*
- *“Why will I keep busting my butt when it doesn’t matter, and they find new ways to hinder and put barriers to never reach the top. We (people of color) have been pulled down, so we never reach top?”*
- *“Not knowing who the decision-makers are and what are available.”*
- *“Misinformation-Because some have had a bad experience, the reputation is that it’s hard and we all believe without trying.”*



A consistent theme throughout conversations and responses from participants was the lack of understanding how to maneuver through the certification and application process. Several shared that they did not know where to even begin or who they needed to contact (thus including Tracy and Mike in the Project). As one participant described:

*“I’ve found it difficult to obtain government contracts due to the lack of knowledge on where to look for the opportunity, not understanding the announcements and not savvy on completing the application process.”*

And another:

*“I don't necessarily feel I have the resources or someone I can reach out to, to guide me maybe in the first round. If I learn how to do it, I'll be able to execute accordingly.”*

The number of refugee and immigrant entrepreneurship in Minnesota lags the rest of the nation. According to the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, “the State’s historically low unemployment, and

high labor participation rates and job opportunities may be contributing factors, resulting in less entrepreneurship and startup activity.

Minnesota’s comparatively younger



immigrant population and immigrants’ higher education attainment levels are additional considerations.” Moreover, the lack of access to capital is a major barrier. Because Minnesota’s economy is primarily built upon small businesses, the rates of entrepreneurship are important to its long-term economic success.

For these small business owners to succeed, the State must market business resources to potential immigrant entrepreneurs to improve access to capital. As one participant explained:

*[It comes to] “cultural misunderstanding. Common sense is not common and many times the State uses one size to fit all. This presents an unfair balance in the delivery of services.”*

A number of participants found some of the requirements to be vaguely written and were hesitant to apply because they were not sure if the services that could provide fit within the requirements.

Moreover, one participant explained that:

*“(People] Think immigrants don’t have the knowledge or expertise because of the language barrier. Also, people not working with immigrants because they feel like they only work with people who they identify with.”*

Another shared that he thought that he was:

*“Not being seen as equal to the other competition. Always expected to be cheaper for the same if not better work.”*

Another participant explained it might not even be external factors holding the Immigrant- and Refugee-based small businesses owner, rather:

*“Coming from a[n] African perspective, fear of discrimination and racism. Working on helping Africans become more open minded and not make barriers or excuses even with the things we have encounters.”*

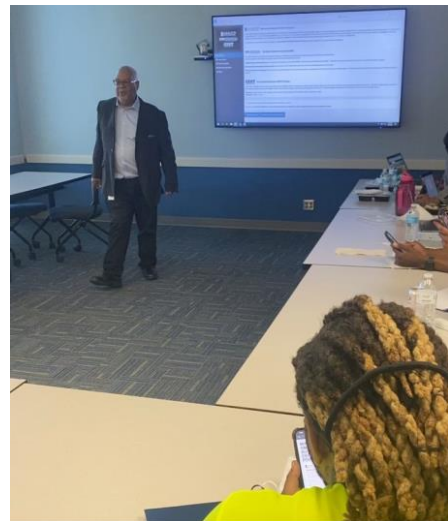
However, sometimes it is external factors outside of their control:

*“As a person working in a construction for a long time it’s a male’s club and particularly white male dominated.”*

And another lamented that it was not always racism, either:

*“People not seeing worth and experience as a handyman one man show and charge way less than most companies.”*

Participants are hesitant to do business with the State for many reasons, but a running theme is not knowing or understanding the certification, application, and bidding process. Push Strategist, LLC. immediately recognized this hesitancy as a wide gap that needed filled. The Push Team responded with a comprehensive training that walked participants through these processes and introduced them to key individuals working within the State. More training and with a more culturally sensitive environment and “user-friendly” format could be a path for these Immigrant- and Refugee-based small business owners to feel less like “imposters.” Several participants expressed they felt lost in the community at-large and asking for help to secure business with the State seemed out of reach.



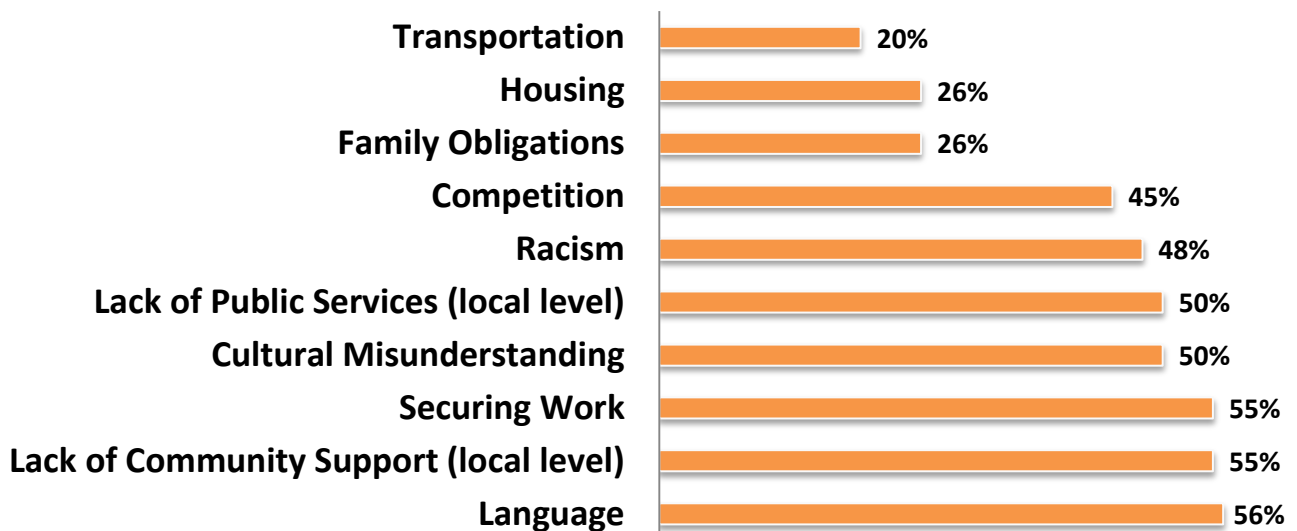
However, Push Strategist, LLC. can provide future training and the technical assistance required to address these gaps to reinforce their confidence in their professionalism, expertise, and competitive services they can provide.

### ***Participants' Perceived Barriers***

Along with hesitations participants shared about doing business with the State, they also revealed the barriers they have observed as a small business owner in the Minneapolis-metro area. By far, Immigrant- and Refugee-based small business owners detected that language and lack of cultural understanding as well as a lack of support and services hindered them from securing work. As one participant explained:

*"I think language is probably the biggest impediment to small refugee businesses not succeeding. Most immigrants come to this country not fully speaking/understanding English which can provide a real obstacle from the paperwork that goes into starting a business to the types of aid or even contracts you may be able to access."*

## **Barriers Faced by Small Refugee-based Businesses**





These barriers, partnered with “imposter syndrome,” create a difficult challenge for small business owners when they are unfamiliar with the required process and protocol, have no idea what needs to be done, and no one to ask for help. As one participant explained:

*“We are not talking to the right people when it comes to networking and those people who can take us to the next level. We don't have access to them. The small groups we are part of, we are limited by the ability to reach out because we do not have a bridge to make an initial connection.”*

Overwhelmingly, the Immigrant- and Refugee-based small business owners cited access to capital and funding as a significant barrier to working with the State ([Minnesota Chamber Foundation, 2021](#)). Several participants explained that juggling their professional as well as personal budgets can be daunting at times. Many owners are supporting their family—and sometimes family that lives abroad—and having bills and payrolls that need to be paid in the short-term may not align with income coming in. Some fears included not having the financial security, business acumen, or capital to achieve growth and achieve continued success in their business. As several participants shared:

*“Lack of funding, investing own savings in business makes it tough. We know contracts are out there but how do we get to them and get to take advantage of them.”*

And:

*“Being a minority, the lack of information in the resources and the groups and the bridging together we do not have access to anything to grow. Lack of funding and under the radar on how to follow the guidelines. Without this bridging and building relationship, this would be a barrier for our new business.”*



Participants were keen on the idea of connections or referrals to services in the community that could guide and educate them on several features such as small business training, financial counseling, networks in their industry, access to working capital and grants, and how to locate and bid for contracts. Push Strategist, LLC. can provide MnDOT a “one stop shop” to provide a culturally-equitable access to learning and accessing such opportunities. As one participant replied, “...not alot of refugee BIPOC people know to go to state or govt websites...” Because of their lived experiences, Push Strategist, LLC.--along with their technical service providers and partners-- possesses the visibility, practical experience, and expertise working with these communities.

Nearly half of participants stated that racism was a barrier that they faced at work. Some comments included:

- *“A lot of businesses aren't willing to give black and African American people the same opportunity as our white counter partners.”*
- *“Large companies are hesitant to do business with black and African American business owners.”*
- *“Because of your color so your chance of getting an opportunity is far less than others.”*
- *“They don’t trust people of color recommendations or ideas and they talk down as if we are not worthy and opinion doesn’t matter.”*
- *“Bias controls the availability of opportunities as well as all of the other aspects that affect everyday living of non-people of color and immigrants the same.”*

The MnDOT team should again consider partnering with Push Strategist, LLC. to educate and inform on cultural-sensitivity and other issues facing these small business owners.

### ***Participants’ Reactions***

Participants had insightful feedback to recommend to Push Strategist, LLC. during the interviews and training. Participants disclosed that a lack of awareness of the resources available is a massive challenge facing small businesses. A statement from one participant:

*“Community members are often not aware of the available support and when they do become aware, they often faced additional barriers (language, racism, and*

*misinformation). It makes it harder to trust that the system will work for you and forces community members to only trust resources they know for certain grants and work. Need more TA services and community outreach.”*

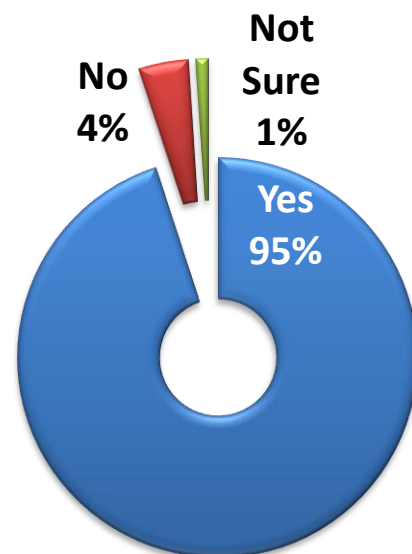
Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that the training session was a huge benefit as it provided them with greater insight on the entire process that is required to do business with the State. Upon completing the Project, many participants expressed that they are more confident in their ability to navigate and participate in this process. Participants suggested that more outreach—such as the training that was provided to them—as well as other material, such as flyers, mentorships, a dedicated Web site (or app), and instructional videos would be helpful and useful. And, of course, “word of mouth” through personal and professional referrals.

Nearly all participants were interested in pursuing contracting opportunities with the State. A very small minority of participants were not interested (n=2) or not sure (n=1) if they wanted to engage with them. One participant said, *“Some employers take advantage of immigrants and do not offer a fair pay rate.”* For these small business owners to be confident and know the full process to do business with the State would be an immense opportunity for them to grow their business and compete on a much more level playing field.

Some positive reactions from participants upon completing the Project included: *“... getting yourself out there could be a barrier...”* and *“...do more of these kind of sessions...”*and, as one participant said:

*“I haven’t been given as much opportunity as my counter parts. Thankfully people who know me advocate for me and help me to get business.”*

### Participants Interested in Pursuing State Contracting Opportunities

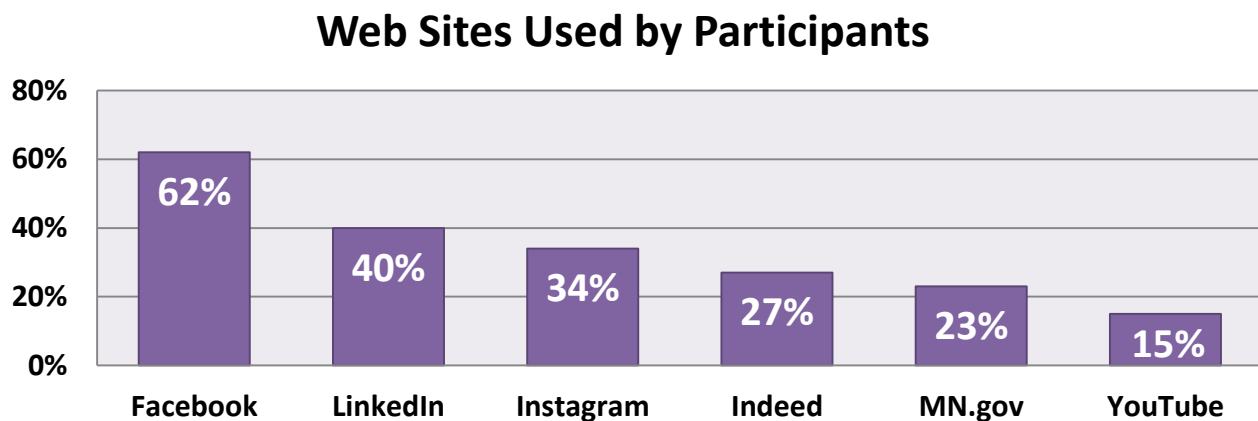


Opportunities such as this Project integrates the Immigrant- and Refugee-based small business owners into the Greater Metro Minneapolis area and increases the diversity of participation of Immigrant- and Refugee-based small businesses in the construction industry to reflect the demographics of the State of Minnesota.

## Recommendations

### ***Raise Awareness***

A large number of participants seek employment opportunities and advertise with social media; some of the more popular sites included LinkedIn and Facebook. Moreover, approximately 1 out of 4 participants go to Indeed and MN.gov to search for opportunities.



Other sites used to advertise and to seek employment opportunities that were mentioned included:

- Angie’s List
- CareerForce
- Glassdoor
- Twitter
- Pinterest
- TiKTok

A significant number of participants also admitted to not using the Internet to advertise or research employment opportunities at all. These participants—as well as those that do use the Internet—used different approaches such as:

- Flyers
- Yard signs
- Business cards
- Follow-up Plan

Some suggestions that many participants expressed were that more advertisements and outreach are necessary for small businesses. MnDOT needs to raise awareness about the different

services, program, grants and funding resources available to small businesses, especially to refugee or immigrant owners. Since most of these participants are online, a logical place to raise awareness would be on social media (LinkedIn, Facebook) and employment sites (MN.gov).

MnDot should also connect and work more closely with local organizations and community groups that represent and serve immigrants and refugees. These groups have native language



resources that can share and broadcast MnDOT opportunities along with career and skill building programs. Push Strategist, LLC. can guide MnDOT to convene and meet with these existing activities that appeal to this targeted population. MnDOT should make a commitment to continue to be present in these communities with updates on opportunities and training resources.

### ***Demystify the Process***

Push Strategist, LLC. identified a key knowledge gap--business owners not understanding and difficulties navigating the application and certification processes--and responded with informational and FAQ sessions specifically designed for the unique needs of refugee and immigrant small business owners. Because of the quick response to identify this gap, Push Strategist, LLC was able to build capacity and successfully facilitated 20 businesses to start and/or complete the CERT certification process. MnDOT needs to establish a more “user-friendly” interface in its online resources. An upgrade to the Web channel will make it easier for potential qualified small business owners to understand and navigate the system and the process. MnDOT must establish a more transparent path in its application and certification processes and enlist mentors who are culturally- and linguistically- informed. Push Strategist, LLC. has the capacity, expertise, and connections to “demystify” the required processes for these small business owners.





## ***Path to Secure Capital***

An overarching and consistent theme in the participants' comments was the lack of access to resources and funding. MnDOT can create opportunities for small business owners to work with



Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) and general contractors and maintenance to create access to funding sources to help get started on certain projects that require a certain amount of funds. The Minnesota Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) should explore creating expert and peer mentorship meetings and

opportunities. PTAC could also encourage small business owners to collaborate and pursue RFPs collectively.

## ***Future Training***

Push Strategist, LLC. identified 4 key topic areas that require further training:

1. *Accounting as a Contractor* (bonds, cash flow, etc.)
2. *Financial Capital Access* (banks, SBA, etc.)
3. *Bid Documentation Interpretation*
4. *Collaboration + Development* (communication and media that is culturally-appropriate)

Push Strategist, LLC. retains the technical experts and trainers who have similar life experiences as these small business owners. Through these lived experiences, Push Strategist, LLC. is qualified to assist MnDOT connect with these immigrant and refugee communities. Together, MnDOT and Push Strategist, LLC. can build a better understanding for these small business owners on how to work with MnDOT and other State entities.



## **Conclusion**

Push Strategist, LLC. went above and beyond the scope of the Project by not only identifying immigrant and refugee small business owners, but also qualified and interested BIPOC small business owners. Through the work and data gathered by Push Strategist, LLC., the Project achieved its target and beyond. As one participant shared:

*“Access to information and resources...not sure where to go and who to ask. This program is great because it’s a one-stop shop to gain info, and now I can do the work.”*

The positive responses, as well as the dynamic involvement from participants that joined the Project and successfully secured work from the State, demonstrate its success. MnDOT should consider moving forward with the recommendations provided by Push Strategist, LLC. in this report.

## APPENDIX

*HYBRID IN-PERSON & VIRTUAL WORKSHOP*

# Push Insiders

## Business School 101

FREE  
EVENT

BEST PRACTICES & STRATEGIES IN DEVELOPING A BUSINESS PROPOSAL

### with Ose Sesay

A workshop tailored to prepare entrepreneurs and small businesses with business tools to expand opportunities. In this workshop, participants will explore their own business readiness and strengths and gain insights into essential components to prepare for new contract opportunities.

*Facilitated By: Ose Sesay, Founder & CEO- PUSH STRATEGIST LLC*  
*Trainer: Mark Cooper, Metro Area Manager Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC)*

[REGISTER NOW](#)



**DATE**            Saturday, June 4, 2022

**TIME:**            5:00PM to 8:00PM CST

Saint Paul, Minnesota 55155



Register at <https://www.pushstrategist.com/>

*In partnership with:*  DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

 DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION



## Today's session

## Agenda:



### Section One-15 mins

- Discussion questions/dialogue

### Section Two-15 mins

- Discuss opportunities with MnDOT and PTEC
- Questions and next steps!



  
PUSH STRATEGIST, LLC

## MAINTENANCE / CONSTRUCTION EXAMPLE WORK TYPES

- ADA construction
- Bridge Flushing
- Bridge Tender
- Building Demolition
- Chain Link Fencing
- Crack sealing
- Culver repair
- Ditch cleaning
- Drainage
- Fence repair
- High Tension Cable
- HVAC
- Litter Removal
- Living Snow fence rejuvenation
- Mowing
- Planting
- Small animal fencing
- Snow fence installation
- Traffic Control
- Tree Clearing/removal
- Vegetation management

## PROFESSIONAL SERVICE EXAMPLE SERVICE TYPES

- Asbestos and regulated waste assessments
- Bridge, roadway, culvert designs
- Building facility designs
- Communications
- Communications/Engagement
- Construction inspection
- Data Analysis
- Digital photography/video production
- Engineering
- Environmental Impact
- GIS tools
- Graphic Design
- Historic preservation
- Inventories, (e.g., ADA, guardrail, fencing)
- Load rating analysis
- Meeting facilitation
- Outreach
- Photogrammetry services
- Planning assistance
- Process assessments
- Project schedule review
- Public Engagement
- Real Estate appraisals
- Regulated waste removal
- oversight
- Surveys
- Technical writing
- Traffic Studies
- Training
- Transcription services
- Travel demand forecasting

# FILL OUT THIS FORM

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT OPPORTUNITIES TO WORK WITH MNDOT

Small construction, Maintenance, and  
Professional-Technical Contracts

(projects can value up to \$250,000.00)

Our team will contact you once you fill out this form:

<https://bit.ly/3KgCKbn>

