

The US Economic Development Administration’s Grantmaking to Indigenous Entities

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In this brief, we explore the US Economic Development Administration’s (EDA) grantmaking to Indigenous entities, which include federally recognized and state-recognized tribes; Native Hawaiian and Native Alaskan entities; tribally owned enterprises; tribal consortia; and other entities dedicated to serving Indigenous communities.¹ EDA funds support a range of activities, including economic development planning, construction projects, and initiatives around workforce development and Indigenous entrepreneurship.

Although the organizations and communities we describe span a range of political, geographic, cultural, and legal contexts, they are distinct from non-Indigenous entities in their shared experiences of structural barriers—resulting from historical oppression and US federal law—that limit their ability to access and control resources. Most of these Indigenous entities are also eligible for grant programs and funding terms from EDA that are not open to their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Our primary dataset captures EDA’s grantmaking to Indigenous entities during fiscal years from 2012 to 2024. This period is particularly relevant to EDA’s work with Indigenous communities because it encompasses EDA’s first grant program available exclusively to Indigenous applicants—the Indigenous Communities program—and because EDA implemented procedural and staffing changes during this time that were intended to better support Indigenous communities in accessing and leveraging resources from EDA.

A better understanding of trends in applications and awards across applicant entities and geography stands to inform actions by EDA that can help to improve the distribution of its funding. For example, describing awarded funding relative to state and regional characteristics can help to answer questions such as: “where have Indigenous entities either not applied for or not been awarded grant funds by EDA?” This in turn can inform outreach efforts and future funding program design.

We supplement these administrative data with results from a survey of Indigenous economic development practitioners conducted in 2024–25. These data, while from a small sample of respondents, help to capture self-reported economic development priorities, activities, and challenges facing Indigenous communities.

Our findings and top-line numbers include the following:

- 1,075 applications from 321 Indigenous entities were submitted to EDA during fiscal years 2012–24. Of those, 653 applications (61 percent) were awarded, totaling roughly \$375 million in funding from EDA.²
- Many applicants (n = 112; 35 percent) have yet to have an application awarded. By contrast, 17 percent (n = 56) of applicants have received five or more awards.
- Awards are most prevalent in western states, including Alaska, but the number of awards per state does not always align with the size of the state’s Indigenous population or number of recognized tribes.

- 84 percent of Indigenous entity applications to EDA’s planning grant programs were awarded. Planning awards tended to be smaller compared with awards from other funding programs, which are awarded less frequently (44 percent).
- Housing development was the top economic development priority reported by survey respondents.

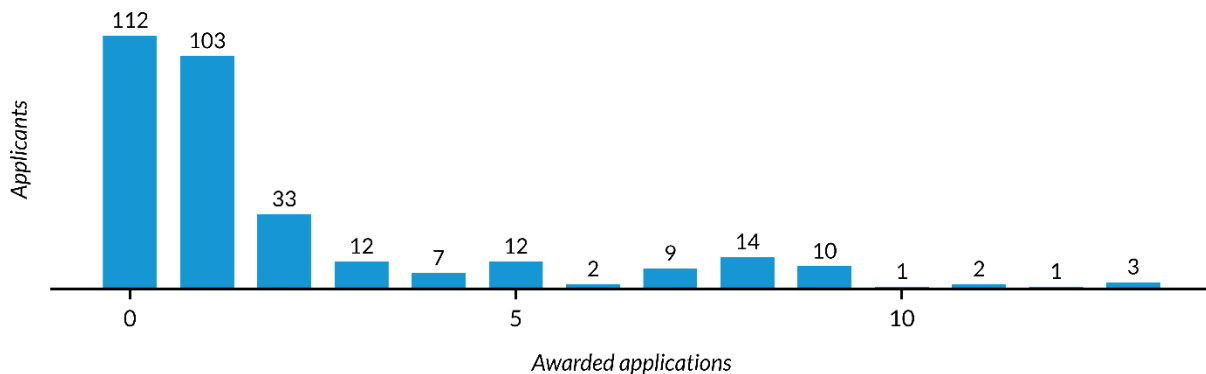
This brief is intended to provide insights to EDA, to other funders of Indigenous economic development, and to Indigenous communities about potential opportunities to strengthen and grow Indigenous economic development, with the goal of supporting thriving and resilient Indigenous economies into the future. Like many other federal entities, EDA received an influx of funding to address COVID-19 recovery goals. Since that funding has expired, EDA’s annual budget has returned to roughly its prepandemic levels and staff levels have fallen. Accordingly, some of the opportunities highlighted in this brief would require additional funding or tradeoffs between other existing services and/or grantmaking that EDA currently provides. In any case, action to support Indigenous economies is needed from across the range of federal, state, and philanthropic funders, not merely from EDA alone.

Distributions of Grant Applications and Awards

During our analysis period covering fiscal years 2012–24, 321 Indigenous entities submitted a total of 1,075 applications to various EDA funding programs. Some applicants were both prolific and successful, receiving more than ten awards from EDA during this time span (figure 1). Applications were submitted by applicants based in most—but not all—states and territories in the US (figure 2).

Grant application patterns show that there are a significant number of Indigenous entities (n = 112, 35 percent) interested in pursuing economic development work with funding from EDA that have yet to receive an award (figure 1). Supporting first-time grantees may be an important strategy to build economic development capacity among relatively smaller Indigenous entities or Indigenous entities with less economic development experience, particularly if initial awards help seed subsequent successful applications, either to EDA or to other funders. For example, initial planning awards might help grantees secure additional funding for project implementation, or a small first grant might allow a community to hire a temporary planner who then helps with subsequent grant writing and plan implementation and becomes a permanent employee. Additional targeted outreach from EDA’s regional offices—which could increase awareness of appropriate grant opportunities—and mini-grants to cover grant writing support might help interested applicants secure their first grants from EDA.

FIGURE 1
Many Applicants Have No Awards but a Small Share of Applicants Each Have Five or More
Indigenous applicants by number of awarded applications



Source: Author’s analyses of EDA grant application data from fiscal years 2012 through 2024.
Notes: N = 1,075 applications from 321 applicants.

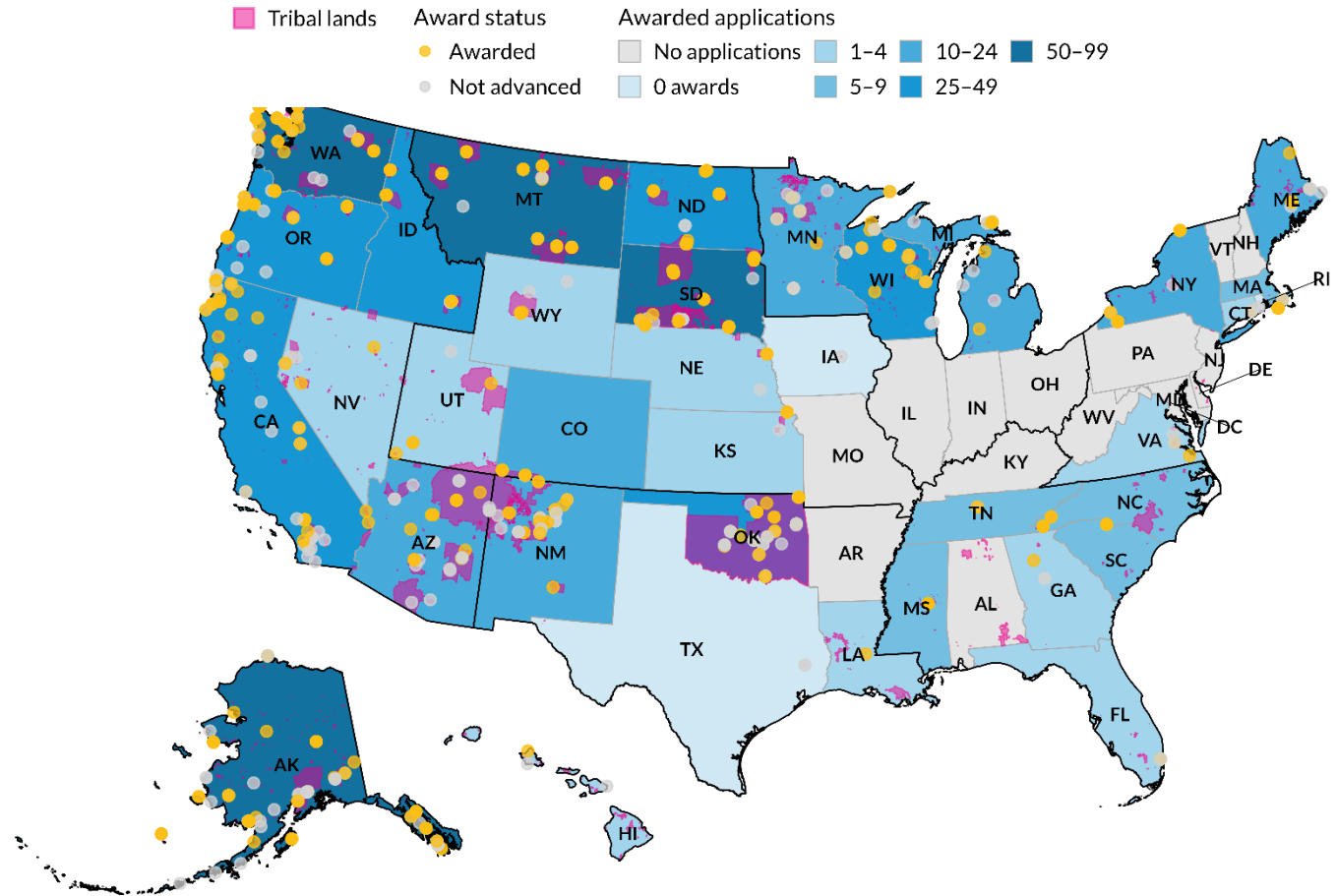
As of fiscal year 2024, \$5 million was appropriated to EDA explicitly for Indigenous entities, and EDA has made this funding available as an addendum—Assistance to Indigenous Communities—to its umbrella Economic Adjustment Assistance funding program. Although this funding is so recent that it is not captured in the records analyzed in this brief, its focus—projects ranging from \$75,000 to \$200,000 that support capacity building, planning, and technical assistance—may address some of the grant writing and other capacity barriers mentioned above. However, because Assistance to Indigenous Communities application requirements are the same in structure and complexity as those for other Economic Adjustment Assistance funds, this process may still be challenging or prohibitive for many Indigenous entities. Simpler application requirements that are scaled to Assistance to Indigenous Communities award sizes could facilitate successful applications from tribes that have not previously been awarded EDA funding. States or philanthropies could play catalyzing roles by either providing direct grant-writing technical assistance (e.g., akin to the model of Wyoming’s Grant Assistance Program³) or by providing true mini-grants on the order of \$2,000–5,000 to allow communities to directly hire assistance for EDA grant applications.

Geographically, we find that awards to Indigenous entities are most prevalent in the western states (including Alaska), which is also where many federally recognized and state-recognized tribes are located (figure 2). A group of contiguous midwestern and eastern states—which either have no or very few recognized tribes—have yet to have any applications submitted by Indigenous entities, and generally there have been few applications from or awards to Indigenous entities in the Southeast or mid-Atlantic.

FIGURE 2

Indigenous Entity Grant Awards Are Concentrated in the West; Many States in the East and Midwest Have No Applications

Indigenous entity grant applications to the US Economic Development Administration by award status



Sources: Author’s analysis of EDA grant applications from fiscal years 2012 through 2024 and US Census Bureau TIGER/Line Native Areas.

Notes: N = 1,051 applications from Indigenous entities; applications currently under consideration are not included. EDA’s six regions are outlined in black. Locations reflect applicants’ addresses. Tribal lands encompass the geographies included in the US Census Bureau’s TIGER/Line data on native areas, which includes “both legal and statistical American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian entities for which the Census Bureau publishes data.”⁴

Although awards frequently align with the location of tribal lands, state-level awards to Indigenous entities do not align consistently with either the number of estimated tribes (or their counterparts in Alaska and Hawaii) or with states’ Indigenous populations. For example, Montana has eight federally recognized tribes, 69 awards to Indigenous entities, and a rate of 11 awards for every 10,000 Indigenous residents, while California has 107 federally recognized tribes, but only 45 awards to Indigenous entities for a rate of less than 1 award per 10,000 Indigenous residents (table 1).

TABLE 1

States with the Largest Shares of Indigenous Residents Do Not Always Have the Highest Rates of Awards

Indigenous entities, applications, awards, and Indigenous populations by state for top 15 states with largest award volumes

State	Indigenous Entities		Applications		Awards		Indigenous Residents		
	Federally recognized	State-recognized	N	Applicants	N	Awardees	Per 10k Indigenous Residents	1,000s	Percent of population
Alaska	228	0	143	51	84	27	7.2	116	15.8
Washington	29	0	112	22	72	16	5	145	1.9
Montana	8	0	104	18	69	16	10.8	64	5.9
California	107	0	81	39	45	26	0.8	545	1.4
South Dakota	8	0	76	17	52	10	7.3	71	8
Oregon	9	0	62	13	42	8	6.6	64	1.5
Oklahoma	37	0	57	20	27	16	0.9	306	7.7
Arizona	19	0	55	24	24	11	0.8	312	4.3
North Dakota	4	0	45	7	33	6	8.7	38	4.9
Wisconsin	11	0	43	14	26	12	5.6	46	0.8
Idaho	4	0	41	4	25	3	10	25	1.3
New Mexico	22	0	37	22	19	13	1	200	9.5
Minnesota	12	0	33	8	17	7	3.2	54	0.9
New York	8	2	32	3	23	2	2.2	103	0.5
Michigan	12	0	26	9	19	5	3.9	48	0.5

Source: Author’s analyses of EDA grant application data from fiscal years 2012 through 2024 and 2018–22 5-year American Community Survey data.

Notes: “Indigenous entities” describes the number of unique, state-recognized entities represented in the US Census Bureau TIGER/Line American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian dataset and the number of federally recognized entities included in the US Bureau of Indian Affairs Tribal Leaders Directory, <https://biamaps.geoplatform.gov/Tribal-Leaders-Directory>.

Given the available data, it is unclear what drives these differences in award rates.⁵ Factors that may play a role include differences in awareness of EDA funding opportunities, differences in Indigenous entities’ grant application and management capacities, and differences in funding orientation. For example, Montana has relatively few tribes, but each tribe occupies significant land area, whereas California has many more tribes, but each occupies a relatively small land area. California may also have a much larger share of Indigenous residents who live outside of tribal areas compared with Montana; such Indigenous populations are likely to be supported by other EDA grantmaking activities but are unlikely to be closely tied to EDA award rates to Indigenous entities as defined here, because such entities are typically located within or adjacent to tribal lands. Further, tribes in California may be more focused on alternate sources of revenue, such as from gaming and hospitality—facilitated by their relative proximity to urban population centers—compared with tribes in Montana. Additionally, differences in state government funding opportunities may lead tribes in Montana to apply for funding from EDA and other federal funders more frequently.

To increase awards in states with lower award rates relative to their Indigenous populations—such as California, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico—EDA could explore opportunities to expand its proactive outreach to and relationship building with Indigenous communities in these areas, especially with communities that have previously submitted applications to EDA but have not yet been awarded a grant. Continuing to partner with relevant Indigenous organizations to advertise funding opportunities could help raise the profile of EDA’s grant programs among Indigenous communities, while attendance and presentations at national and regional events focused on Indigenous economic development—such as the Reservation Economic Summit (national) and the Affiliated Tribes

of Northwest Indians, Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, and United South and Eastern Tribes (all regional) conferences—could both build awareness of EDA’s funding programs, maintain existing connections with tribes, and seed new relationships between Indigenous communities and EDA’s regional offices.

Priorities for Indigenous Economic Development

Understanding where Indigenous communities are focusing their economic development efforts is critical to evaluating and improving alignment of funding opportunities. Working with EDA grant application data, we characterized both the types of funding programs Indigenous applicants applied to (figure 3) and common keywords applicants used in their grant applications (figure 4). To understand more about communities’ economic development goals, we also present EDA applicants’ self-reported economic development priorities from a small survey of Indigenous grant applicants (figure 5).

Indigenous applicants to EDA have submitted a majority of their grant applications to EDA’s Planning program—including partnership planning and short-term planning—which support communities with developing community-level economic development plans (figure 3). Economic development plans are an important early step in implementing economic development projects because they help to identify assets and needs, prioritize economic development goals, and map resources and strategies to these goals in a coordinated fashion.⁶ Indigenous entity applicants have very high award rates when applying for planning grants: more than three-quarters of all such applications have been awarded, and less than 10 percent have not been advanced to funding (the remainder are still under consideration). The prevalence of applications to EDA’s Planning program suggests that many Indigenous communities come to EDA either to begin their community-wide economic development work or to update plans that have been in effect and need refreshing.

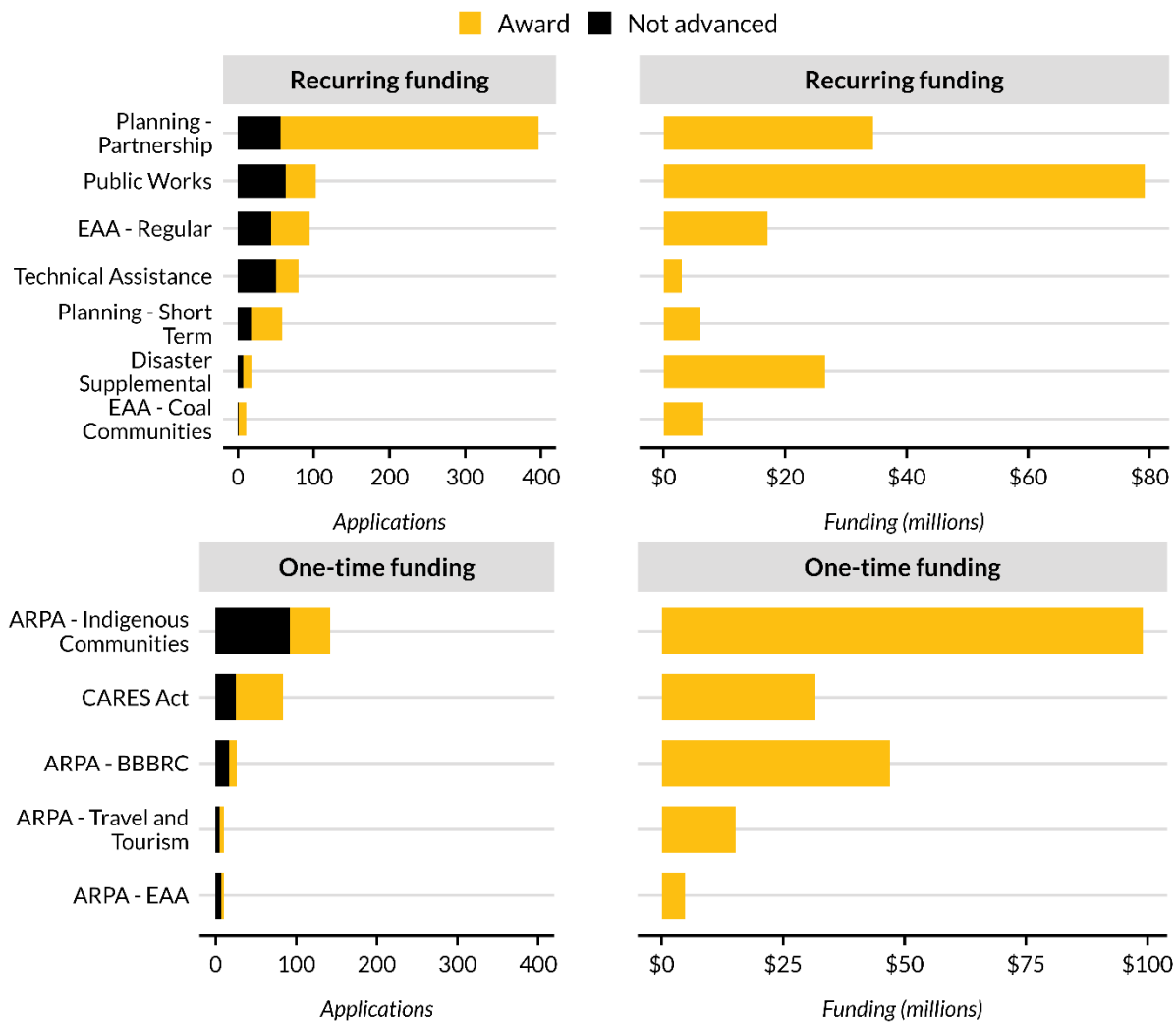
In contrast to EDA’s Planning program, other funding programs at EDA have seen fewer applications from and lower award rates to Indigenous entities. The Indigenous Communities (IC) program—a one-time program funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in 2021 and 2022—is the second-most accessed funding program by Indigenous applicants and accounts for roughly one-third as many applications as the Planning program. Applicants to the IC program also saw much lower award rates than applicants to the Planning program, with roughly one in three IC applications being awarded, reflecting the substantial interest in this funding relative to the funds available. Notably, the IC program was a one-time funding program, whereas EDA’s Planning program involves recurring funding opportunities. The other funding programs with significant volumes of Indigenous applications—Public Works (recurring funding), Economic Adjustment Assistance (recurring), Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) funding (one-time), Technical Assistance (recurring), and the Build Back Better Regional Challenge (one-time)—all also have lower award rates among Indigenous applicants as compared with EDA’s Planning program.

Funding patterns highlight two other important phenomena: (1) while Planning program applications and awards are prevalent, they account for relatively small shares of total dollars awarded: the Public Works and Indigenous Communities programs lead in dollars awarded despite accounting for fewer awards; and (2) much of the funding to Indigenous entities to date is via one-time funding programs created with dollars from ARPA and the CARES Act. Accordingly, helping Indigenous grantees transition from Planning awards—which have relatively high award rates but usually provide relatively limited funding—to greater-dollar-value awards, such as for construction-involved projects funded via Public Works—will be important to EDA’s continuing role in supporting Indigenous economic growth and resilience.

FIGURE 3

Most Awards to Indigenous Applicants Are Made under EDA’s Planning Program

Application counts by appropriation and award status



Source: Author’s analyses of EDA grant application data from fiscal years 2012 through 2024.

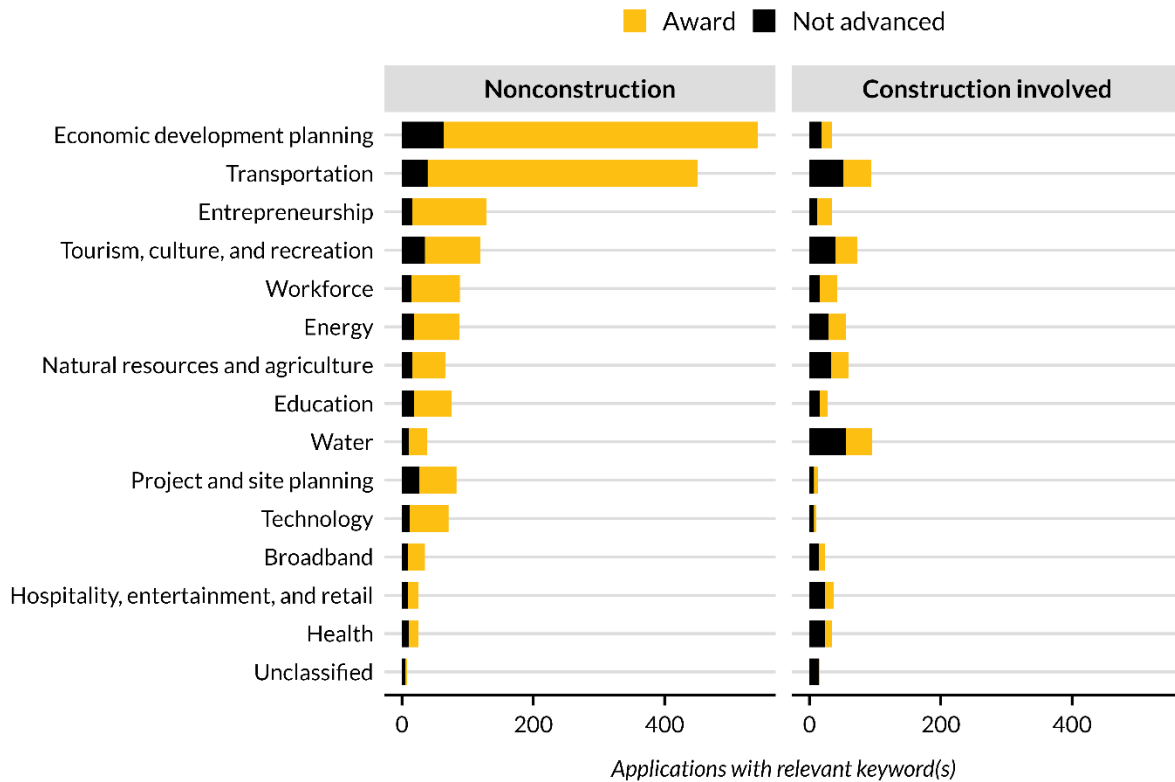
Notes: N = 1,067 applications with information about their funding programs. “Planning” includes both short-term and partnership planning programs. ARPA = American Rescue Plan Act. EAA = Economic Adjustment Assistance. CARES = Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security. BBBRC = Build Back Better Regional Challenge. OIE = EDA’s Office of Innovation and Entrepreneurship. “Other” includes other funding programs with fewer than ten applications from Indigenous entities; these include: ARPA—Statewide Planning, Research, and Networks; Alaska Fisheries Disaster; OIE—STEM Talent Challenge; and University Center Technical Assistance. Applications that were not advanced often do not have funding amounts listed in the data; these applications are not visualized in the subplots that visualize funding amounts.

Although there is not a standardized classification system employed by EDA to categorize projects into different topic areas, we identified relevant keywords using applicants’ project descriptions to better understand which domains Indigenous applicants were focused on. As shown in figure 4, awards that included some mention of economic development planning were most common, and most of these were awarded (note that while many of these awards were focused on economic development planning, others may have simply referenced existing economic development plans to justify their proposed projects). Transportation was discussed in many construction-involved and nonconstruction projects, suggesting its relevance to a wide range of economic

development activities. A significant number of nonconstruction projects—almost all of which have been awarded—were also focused on entrepreneurship, suggesting that many applicants see smaller, individually owned businesses as an important part of their communities’ economic well-being. For communities where large, tribally owned enterprises focused on gaming and hospitality have historically dominated economic development, the inclusion of entrepreneurship may reflect an important growth in economic development orientation. The very high award rate for applications mentioning entrepreneurship also suggests this may be a topic area that EDA is particularly interested in supporting.

Applications for construction-involved projects and nonconstruction projects differed in their use of key terms (figure 4). Planning was mentioned in the great majority of all nonconstruction applications, compared with fewer than half of all construction-involved projects, a trend that also applied for transportation.

FIGURE 4
Indigenous Entities Often Submit Applications That Discuss Planning and Transportation
Frequencies of economic development keywords in Indigenous applicants’ application descriptions



Source: Urban Institute analyses of EDA grant application data from fiscal years 2012 through 2024.

Notes: N = 906 applications that were either awarded or not advanced and that had information describing their proposed projects. Unclassified applications are those that did not match keywords for any of the specified economic development domains.

The distinction between projects involving and not involving construction is important on multiple fronts. For one, EDA has awarded many more grants to Indigenous entities for projects that do not involve construction than for those that do, but the relatively small share of awarded projects that do involve construction (15 percent) account for a disproportionate share of awarded funding (67 percent; \$285 million). Construction-involved projects also frequently entail longer timelines and more complex contracting and implementation considerations than do

projects without construction; these factors can pose significant challenges for smaller Indigenous entities with limited staff.

We also surveyed a subset of applicants and asked them about their economic development priorities (figure 5). Applicants routinely cited housing development as a top priority, followed by education and workforce development and resilience preparedness. The emphasis on housing among survey respondents aligns with priorities among Economic Development Districts: a recent report from the National Association of Development Organizations finds that Economic Development Districts are increasingly prioritizing housing development as a key component of economic development.⁷ Although EDA historically does not fund housing development, it nonetheless has other opportunities to support Indigenous communities' housing needs. For example, EDA could provide additional training and technical assistance to support awardees in planning for housing as a component of their Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDs). EDA could also provide additional guidance and resources (e.g., case studies of successful projects) to support grantees in implementing mixed-use projects—where housing and other nonresidential uses are either colocated in the same building (e.g., apartments above a health clinic) or generally within the same area (e.g., a mixed-use neighborhood with apartments on one side of the street and retail and light manufacturing on the opposite side)—where residential development is funded by other sources. Partners and other funders in this space, such as the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, could consider whether they can prioritize additional resources to meet these needs and/or how they could coordinate their activities with EDA's housing-adjacent work.

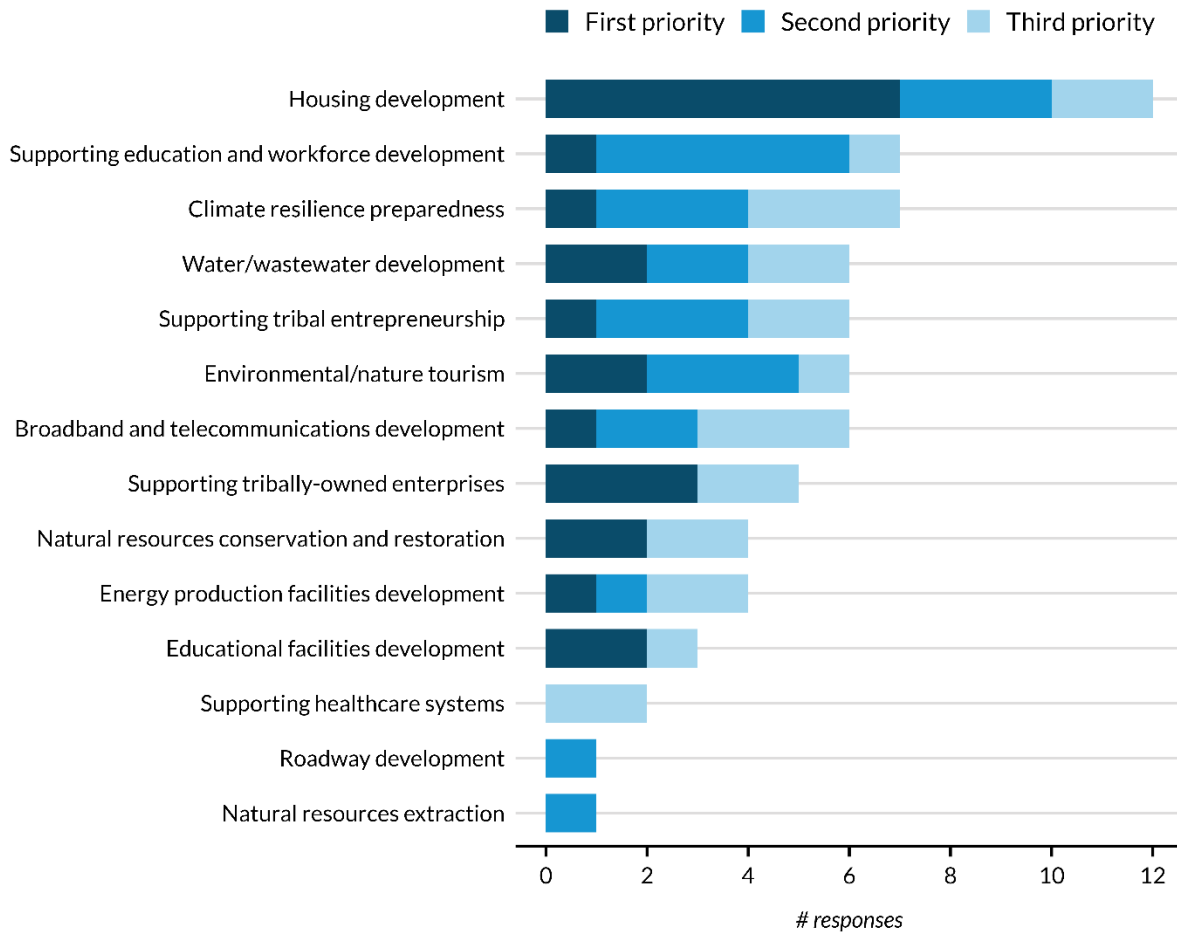
Although many applications—both involving and not involving construction—refer to transportation (figure 4), only one survey respondent indicated that road development was a priority (figure 5). This may indicate that Indigenous applicants have other transportation considerations in mind—for example, siting new development close to existing transportation infrastructure—and/or that EDA funding programs may be perceived as a better source of funding for road development than for other, higher-priority economic development project types (such as housing development). Supporting tribally owned enterprises, including casino development, was ranked as a priority by less than one quarter of respondents ($n = 5$), and only one respondent reported natural resources extraction as a priority, even though both casinos and natural resources have historically been prominent components of many Indigenous communities' approaches to economic development and revenue generation.

Because EDA is not the only funder in the Indigenous economic development space, we surveyed grant applicants about which non-EDA funding sources they had applied to in recent years to understand possible gaps and overlaps around various economic development domains. Funding for broadband from the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program and through the National Tribal Broadband Grant were the most-cited federal funding programs, suggesting that the relatively infrequent discussion of broadband in EDA applications (figure 4) despite the relative prominence of broadband as an economic development priority (figure 5) may be a function of other prominent federal funding sources focused on this domain.

FIGURE 5

Housing Development Is an Economic Development Priority for Indigenous Grant Applicants

In response to: “What are your community’s current economic development plans and activities?”



Source: Urban Institute analyses of a survey of applicants to EDA funding programs conducted in 2025.

Notes: N = 24 responses from economic development practitioners working with Indigenous entities. Topic labels are those listed on the survey instrument verbatim, with minor edits for brevity.

Conversely, survey respondents cited other funders in the housing and disaster preparedness spaces relatively less frequently. The Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program, for example, was selected by only 17 percent (n = 4) of respondents. And although respondents selected multiple sources of housing funding—including the Indian Community Development Block Grant, Indian Housing Block Grant, Low Income Housing Tax Credit, and assorted other programs from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development—each source was only selected by approximately a third or less of respondents. Although this may be due in part to the character of survey respondents’ roles—respondents were primarily economic development practitioners, not housing planners or developers—respondents consistently spoke to the need for more affordable housing in their communities, suggesting that there may be funding gaps in this space. EDA may have an opportunity to expand on its work in these areas to address needs of Indigenous communities that are currently under-addressed by programs from other federal funders.

Conclusion

This brief highlights some of EDA’s achievements to date in supporting Indigenous economic development and surfaces opportunities that EDA, its partners, and other funders of Indigenous economic development can consider as they continue to work to strengthen Indigenous economies. These include the following:

- EDA has granted hundreds of millions of dollars to Indigenous entities. Its ARPA-funded Indigenous Communities funding program, which was exclusively available to Indigenous entities, was a particularly substantial recent commitment that funded dozens of projects across the country.
- EDA has funded more than 300 distinct Indigenous entities. At the same time, many Indigenous entities have applied for but never received funding from EDA. Proactive outreach, technical assistance, and other grant-writing supports may help these applicants secure their first funding from EDA and pursue other economic development funding opportunities.
- The number of Indigenous entity awards by state does not always align with the number of Indigenous residents or the number of recognized tribes in the state: some states have relatively few Indigenous residents and recognized tribes but relatively many awards, and vice versa. Prioritizing outreach to and relationship building with Indigenous entities in relatively underrepresented states could support greater numbers of applications from Indigenous entities that have not yet received, or have received relatively few, awards to date.
- Most awards to Indigenous entities have been made via EDA’s planning programs, but these awards tend to be for relatively small amounts of funding. By contrast, a relatively small number of high-dollar-value, construction-involved awards account for the bulk of funding to Indigenous entities. EDA should consider whether it can adapt its funding programs to help more Indigenous entities move from smaller planning awards to larger projects focused on plan implementation. A recurring funding program open only to Indigenous entities, akin to the highly subscribed Indigenous Communities program, may be one effective approach. A complementary approach might include providing additional technical assistance resources as part of construction-involved awards to Indigenous applicants.
- Housing was the top economic development priority among survey respondents. Housing development—in addition to producing high-quality and affordable housing—can drive intersecting economic development goals, including providing new jobs, increasing tax bases, and helping to recruit and retain workforce. EDA historically does not fund housing development but could support Indigenous communities’ housing goals by encouraging and supporting housing planning activities as part of funded CEDS work and by providing resources to streamline grantees’ efforts to build mixed-use projects.

Notes

¹ Entities included in this analysis are those that have been designated as Indigenous entities in the underlying grants data provided by EDA. Urban Institute staff have manually reviewed these designations to exclude from this analysis entities that appear to have been erroneously categorized as Indigenous entities, but it is possible that some organizations that do not meet our definition of “Indigenous entity” have been unintentionally included, or that other entities that meet this definition have been unintentionally excluded.

² In EDA’s underlying application data, there is one observation for each year of funding disbursed to grant recipients under EDA’s Planning and University Center funding programs. For example, for a three-year Planning award, there would be three observations in the data. However, after the initial award decision at the beginning of the first year, there is minimal discretion involved in subsequent grant years; a three-year Planning grant almost always receives funding in the second and third years. Because each observation—one per year of funding—functionally belongs to a single project, and because that project functionally receives only a single funding decision prior to the beginning of the first year of the grant, we consolidate observations for Planning and University Center awards so that there is only a single observation per project. This results in counts of applications and awards across funding programs that are more comparable. Because of this, numbers presented

here may differ from those published in other venues where a multiyear project is not consolidated into a single observation. Data included in this analysis only run through part of fiscal year 2024. Any application from before 2020 that was listed as still under consideration at the time of analysis was considered not awarded.

³ Wyoming Budget Department, “Grant Assistance Program,” accessed May 22, 2025, <https://sbd.wyo.gov/grants/grant-assistance-program>.

⁴ US Census Bureau, “American Indian Area Geography – 2022,” accessed April 02, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/geo/shapefiles/index.php>.

⁵ One important data limitation is that we do not have any information on the size of Indigenous entity applicants, such as annual revenues or resident counts.

⁶ US Economic Development Administration, “Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDs),” accessed April 02, 2025, <https://www.eda.gov/resources/comprehensive-economic-development-strategy>.

⁷ National Association of Housing Development Organizations, “Solving the Housing Puzzle: EDDs as Regional Housing Changemakers,” accessed May 22, 2025, <https://www.nado.org/housing/>.

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