NIH Welcomes Diverse Perspectives

Session Transcript:   
2021 HHS Small Business Program Conference: Diverse Perspectives SEEDing Impactful Innovations

Matt McMahon: Hello. Welcome, everyone. I'm Matt McMahon. I'm the Director of the SEED office at NIH. On behalf of all of our staff here, I'd like to welcome you to the HHS Small Business Program conference. It's been a long time since we've had a Small Business Program conference, actually, the last one we did was in 2018, in Dallas. So we're really excited to be bringing this program back to you. And we're also really excited about the virtual format.

We've had a great response. There are over 2,100 people registered from all 51 states, I mean, 50 states and the District of Columbia. So half of the registrants who are planning on attending this meeting have actually never received a SBIR or STTR award before. So we're really excited about achieving our goal of reaching an exciting new segment of the innovator community in this conference. So since our last conference, there have been a lot of changes, and a lot of really important things going on at NIH. And I'll talk about three.

So first, we formed a new office at NIH called the SEED Office. So I'll talk a little bit about that. The second thing is the effect of the COVID-19 public health emergency has really been profound, but it's enabled our remote work and strengthened our outreach in a way that's really enabled us to reach more people through this conference than we have with in-person meetings. And then the third thing I'll talk about is how NIH has really reinvigorated our focus on diversity. So I'll start out with just some brief words about our new office.

The SEED Office is a trans-NIH coordinating office. And the goal of that office is really to strengthen the research and development pipeline. And the idea is to help investigators when they come up with that discovery, that scientific discovery, and they first have a glimmer: "hey, this idea could really have an impact on patients, it could help people."

Our office is designed to help those researchers get that idea out of the laboratory and turn it into a product development project, and help them support that project in the early stages of development.

So there are three components to our new office. The first is an Academic Innovation Team that supports academic innovators at the very beginning of this journey. And we do that through a nationwide network or proof of concept centers. And that network encompasses over 100 institutions across the country. And the second component is the Small Business Team. And that's primarily why we're here today, to talk about the small business programs, and all of the different support and infrastructure that we wrap around that. And then the third component is our Innovator Support Team. And that's basically like our in-house consulting team.

We have entrepreneurs in residence, we have regulatory experts, people with expertise in insurance payment, and the important issues that you'll have to address to actually get a product into the healthcare marketplace. So those three teams work together to strengthen the innovation ecosystem. You'll hear more about those teams throughout the meeting.

I also wanted to say that we're getting ready to launch a new website that talks more about our office. The URL is live now, it's called, it's SEED, SEED.nih.gov. But the new website that's going to replace what's there now will be revealed soon. So hold your breaths for that. We'll leave some more excitement for you in the near future. So the first thing I want to talk about is the COVID-19 public health emergency. So if you go to covid19.nih.gov, that's a consolidated site for everything at NIH that's related to COVID.

You can find information about our strategic response, treatment and vaccine progress, administrative flexibilities to help NIH researchers who are affected by COVID. But the thing I really want to talk about is, what's the COVID-19 public health emergency mean for small businesses and the small business portfolio? Well, since the beginning of the epidemic, we've supported 43 of the small businesses that are in within our SBIR and STTR portfolio with extra funding to pivot to address COVID-19. And they've done all kinds of exciting things like develop new treatments for COVID, optimized vaccines to make them cheaper and easier to deliver, and a host of other things. And those supplements were made available to companies with additional money that was given to us by Congress.

Another major component of NIH's response to the COVID public health emergency is the RADx program. And RADx stands for Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics. And that program was launched with a $1.5 billion influx of money from Congress designed to help NIH develop brand new tests to test for COVID. And 68 small businesses across 11 states have been supported so far by the RADx program to either develop or scale up the manufacturing of COVID diagnostic tests. And we've had some super exciting results.

So one of the small businesses in that portfolio is Ellume. You may have heard of Ellume because they were one of the first home use COVID tests that were approved for use in the United States. Another small business, Mammoth, is applying CRISPR technology to COVID detection. So there's tons of activity going on there. And as time goes by, more and more of the COVID tests will be available in the public markets, will actually be coming from projects that were supported by RADx. So despite COVID and the public health emergency resulting from that, NIH is still open for business, and we're still stronger than ever.

Now, the second thing I really want to talk to you about is about NIH's commitment to increasing the diversity of the biomedical workforce. So that's a long standing goal of the SBIR and STTR programs. It's actually congressionally mandated in the 1982 legislation that formed the small business programs. But that commitment was really reinvigorated last month when NIH Director Francis Collins announced the new UNITE initiative to end structural racism in biomedical research. And that was a really exciting announcement. It's a trans NIH initiative. And you can find more out about that initiative at nih.gov/ending- structural-racism, nih.gov/ending- structural-racism.

Now, what does that mean for us in the small business program, though? The name of the conference basically explains how we feel about it. It's diverse perspectives, seeding impactful innovations. So this isn't just like a numbers game for us, we count things to hold ourselves accountable. But the real goal of this program is to use the $1.2 billion that we manage every year to produce a substantial health care impact. And anyone who studies or even reads about the shocking health care disparities in this country really understands that we need a broad spectrum of personal backgrounds and experiences, in addition to the educational and professional experiences that people have to go after the challenges that affect communities in all parts of the country.

So if we want to help address the healthcare challenges in the Native American community, or the impact of the opioid epidemic in rural communities, or persistent challenges like heart disease, COPD, obesity, we're really going to need to recruit a diverse cadre of personal viewpoints and perspectives and backgrounds to go after those issues. We have a website where we have nearly 70 success stories through a small business program, and you can find that on our website. If you just Google NIH SBIR success stories, you can find this page. And 20 of those stories are from women or minority owned companies. And we think that that's a really exciting way for us to show people that those projects and those companies are producing really impactful solutions.

So just some examples. There's a company, Intrinsic Life Sciences, that's exploring the underlying causes of anemia. There's another company called Eyenuk that's using artificial intelligence to prevent blindness and diabetes. And these are like really persistent problems. There's a third company where there's a success story on the webpage called ACMA Social Marketing. And they're using photo novellas to educate at risk populations about health disparities. So that diversity framework really drives us. And I think those give some examples of what we're trying to accomplish.

There are major healthcare challenges affecting this whole country that are not centered in the biotech hubs of Boston and San Francisco. And we recognize that. We want to support a portfolio of companies all around the country. And there are major medical challenges that affect communities that are not the main customer bases of the largest biomedical research companies or the large drug companies. So by supporting a more diverse group of innovators who are passionate about the diverse range of healthcare challenges that they face in their communities, we're trying to use the money and the resources that we have at our disposal to really try and cover the spectrum of those health care needs in a more equitable way. So that's really what it's all about for us.

So you might be asking yourself, "Okay, that all sounds good, but how are we going about doing that?" A few years ago, we conducted some extensive market research to help us understand the most effective ways to increase diversity within our programs. And that's just a fancy way of saying, we talk to people, and we ask them in a structured way. And a few key issues emerged. One was awareness of the programs. Another one was addressing barriers to entry. A third was, we realized there are a number of persistent myths about the program, sometimes based in very real concerns from the past.

And the fourth one is the need to provide ongoing support to new investigators to make sure that once we get that in the program, they can be successful. So this meeting also emphasizes this type of communication and making connections. So we really want to emphasize the opportunity and encourage you to schedule One-on-One Meetings to talk to the staff members who can really become your SBIR and STTR sherpas, who can really like help you navigate through this process, get into our portfolio and take advantage of these resources.

We also have a new working group, a trans-NIH working group with people from all across NIH, who are working together to operationalize this commitment to increase the diversity of the entrepreneurial workforce. So in this meeting, you're going to hear about a bunch of programs and services and opportunities. Some of them are old, some of them are brand new. And these can really help you get your foot in the door, and not only get your foot in the door, but use the small business program to help you adjust- to help you address the healthcare challenges that are really most important to you. So throughout the meeting, we'll provide little snippets and metrics for us to ponder together. And those metrics are going to be really useful because some of the metrics dispel myths about the program.

Others point out areas where we really need to improve, and we're committed to working together with you to come up with solutions to those problems that we identify together. And then together, we can use this $1.2 billion dollar program and all the support that we've wrapped around it to enhance health and save lives all around this country.

So with that, I'll sign off and wish everyone a fun and exciting meeting. And if you have any questions or problems, feel free to contact us through the Information Desk on the left side of your screen, or you can always email our office at SEEDinfo@nih.gov. So thank you very much and enjoy the conference.