Scaling Work with Indigenous Entrepreneurs – The Need for Liaison/Navigator Roles for Entrepreneurial Economic Development and Ecosystem Building in Rural and Tribal Communities

The New Mexico Tribal Entrepreneurship Enhancement Program (NMTEEP) began in April 2022, funded by a 3-year grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration. The goal of the program was promoting job creation and economic development in coal-impacted communities through promoting entrepreneurship in tribal and rural communities via the following four key components (see flyer in packet):

1. **Tribal Liaisons**
2. **Entrepreneurial Training**
3. **Storytelling**
4. **Community Outreach/Ecosystem Building**

After 3 years of work, key discoveries found by the Tribal Liaisons were created into a Final "Discovery Report" (included in your packets). Out of all the findings from NMTEEP, a key discovery and theme that arose, was the importance of the tribal liaison role and their ability to help build, guide, and navigate the local, state, and regional entrepreneurial ecosystems for other entrepreneurs in their communities. The nature of this role is the heart of the program and the driving force of its success. Several elements that make this type of role and model unique as well as impactful include:

1. **Autonomy** – Tribal liaisons have the freedom to operate within their communities as they see fit regarding discovery, programming, and navigation. They are not burdened by bureaucracy and guide the vision of what needs to happen for entrepreneurs within their communities.
2. **Trust** – Tribal liaisons are already trusted members of their community which allows them to work with their unique population of entrepreneurs
3. **Experience** – Tribal liaisons have firsthand experience regarding navigating their local and regional entrepreneurial ecosystems. They know the barriers and what is needed to navigate and overcome the system.
4. **Relationship-based** – Tribal liaisons focus on building trust and relationships with entrepreneurs in their communities as well as with local, state, and regional entities and bridge the communication and cultural gaps that exist between the two.

These findings were further emphasized during a follow-up Discovery Session on March 31st, 2026 during the Scaling Work with Indigenous Entrepreneurs Event, key stakeholders including former NMTEEP tribal liaisons met and discussed important elements and lessons learned regarding the NMTEEP Model and program. Key recommendations and next steps from this session include:

1. **Funding long-term, trust-based roles such as the Tribal Liaison role** to provide mentorship, peer networking, ecosystem building, entrepreneurial support, navigation, and job growth within tribal and rural communities.
2. **Provide sustained investments that allow trust-building and ecosystem development over time** rather than relying on short-term grant cycles and restrictive reporting structures.
3. **Develop entrepreneurs and small business advisory boards for local and state government** to identify needs and barriers and provide policy recommendations to promote business startups and job growth.

Cost per tribal liaison is approximately $60,000 per year. Cost for Program Manager for tribal liaisons is approximately $80,000 per year. A minimum of 5 - 10 tribal liaisons are recommended.