

Guide for Writing Social Disadvantage Narrative

Introduction

As of October 3, 2025, participation in the Iowa DOT's Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Program (DBE), requires a firm to be 51% owned and controlled by socially and economically disadvantaged individuals. The owner(s) who are claiming social and economic disadvantage must demonstrate social disadvantage by submitting a personal narrative that supports a finding of social disadvantage. There are no presumptions of social disadvantaged based on race or sex nor will race, or sex be considered in the certification process.

This guide will provide insight into what elements to include in demonstrating social disadvantage.

I. Determinations of Disadvantage

Determinations of social and economic disadvantage shall be made on a case-by-case basis and shall only consider factors based on the personal experiences of the applicant in American society. These experiences must demonstrate a chronic and substantial negative impact on the applicant's entry or advancement in the business world.

II. Key elements of a Social Disadvantage Narrative

To demonstrate social disadvantage, business owner(s) should include the following elements:

- a. An indication of the basis of the social disadvantage. The basis cannot be in whole or in part based on race and/or sex.
- b. Descriptions of incidents in which they were negatively impacted due to the basis of social disadvantage

III. Description of Incidents

An individual should typically provide descriptions of at least two incidents to establish social disadvantage. One incident may be enough to establish social disadvantage if it is pervasive or recurring. Iowa DOT recommends limiting yourself to no more than three examples to avoid unnecessary delays during the review process.

Experience(s) should be related to education, employment, and business history (including current or previously owned companies). Here are some broad types of experiences which may establish social disadvantage. These types of experiences are not exclusive and do not prohibit the applicant for submitted factors that were not listed.

- a. Education – Iowa DOT considers factors such as: denial of equal access to institutions of higher education; exclusion from social and professional association with students or teachers; denial of education honors rightfully earned; and social patterns or pressures which discouraged the individual from pursuing a professional or business education.

- b. Employment – Iowa DOT considers factors such as: unequal treatment in hiring; promotions and other aspects of professional advancement; pay and fringe benefits; other terms and conditions of employment; retaliatory behavior by an employer; and social patterns or pressures which have channeled the individual into non-professional or non-business-related fields.
- c. Business history – Iowa DOT considers factors such as: unequal access to credit or capital; acquisition of credit or capital under commercially unfavorable circumstances; unequal treatment in opportunities for government contracts or other work; unequal treatment by potential customers and business associates; and exclusion from business or professional organizations.

For each incident, please describe who, what, where, why, when, and how the incident occurred. Incidents are more readable if they provide information in the following order within the narrative:

When – Explain when the incident occurred. Exact dates, where available, are preferred but are not necessary so long as the incident provides a specific period. The incident could be from any period of your life.

Where – Explain where the incident occurred. The incident must have occurred in American society.

Who – Explain who committed the socially disadvantaging incident. This could include an individual, a group of individuals, or an institution. Individual names, where available, are preferred but not necessary so long as the incident provides a specific figure or organization.

What - Explain the conduct that occurred in the incident.

Why – Explain the reason(s) the conduct in the incident occurred and how it relates to your basis for social disadvantage. Without additional facts, a mere assertion that the action was the cause of your social disadvantage will not be sufficient to support your claim.

How – Explain how each incident impacted your entry into or advancement in the business world. These impacts should be tangible negative impacts. Offensive comments with no corresponding negative impact will be insufficient.