Improving IDIS: Recommendations from NCDA and NACCED

The National Community Development Association (NCDA) and the National Association for County Community and Economic Development (NACCED) worked together to collectively poll their members (local government community development practitioners) on the Integrated Disbursement and Information System (IDIS). Out of approximately 350 NCDA members, 98 members (or nearly 28%) completed the survey. Out of approximately 160 NACCED members, 42 members (or nearly 26%) completed the survey. The survey was comprised of ten questions which gauged practitioner satisfaction with the system in the following areas: project set-up, funding projects, the drawdown process, creating reports, and overall experience of using the system. The results from this section of the survey are as follows:

(1)   How satisfied are you with the process of ADDING (setting up) projects/activities in IDIS? **59%**

(2)   How satisfied are you with the process of FUNDING project/activities in IDIS? **45%**

(3)   How satisfied are you with the DRAWDOWN process in IDIS? **49%**

(4)   How satisfied are you with the process of creating REPORTS in IDIS? **24%**

(5)   How satisfied are you with the OVERALL EXPERIENCE of using IDIS? **58%**

The survey respondents seemed moderately satisfied with the process of adding project/activities in IDIS along with the overall experience of using the system. On the other hand, they were lukewarm to the process of funding project/activities in IDIS and to the drawdown process. Most noticeably, they were very dissatisfied with the process of creating reports in IDIS.

If you selected "Dissatisfied/Very Dissatisfied" for any of the questions, why? What can be done to improve this?

Reports, funding, and the drawdown process in IDIS were the three areas where respondents seemed most dissatisfied, with the creation of reports being the area of highest dissatisfaction. Respondents were asked to comment on how the system could be improved in these areas. The following provides a consolidation of the responses.

CREATING REPORTS
Reports are difficult to download, export and print. The report module is hard to navigate and the report functions are confusing. The process is very slow and involves too many screens. Moreover, according to the survey respondents, it is difficult to go back and make corrections in reports. Many of the respondents commented on the fact that the act of printing a report takes too many steps and too many options that leave the formatting of reports daunting and cumbersome to users. For example, several respondents referenced the PR03 report as taking a lot of time to re-format to make it printable for the CAPER. Many respondents commented that the report function encompasses too many screens. Many other respondents commented that the

system should automatically pull-up grantee information in each report. Others noted that changes made to a report cannot be viewed until the next day and that it takes a lot of time to run a report, make corrections and wait until the next day to run another report and repeat the process. Many found the reports to be impossible to reformat for public information purposes and commented that HUD needs to change the system to allow grantees to create customizable reports. More importantly, most of the respondents commented that HUD needs to develop reports that grantees can print and put into the CAPER.

Other comments on Reports:
- The system times you out if you don't continue to refresh the main screen.
- Revisions are not accounted for accurately.
- PR03 and PR06 reports in BOSMAC were much more user friendly and easily adaptable.

Recommendations:
- Start with a better platform that can run parallel with testing to determine data quality and integrity.
- Simplify the report module.
- Provide real time reports.
- Allow grantees to customize reports.
- Make the reports easier to access and download. Make sure the reports capture the correct information. Put a field for the grantee's project/activity number on every report that lists activities and/or project. Develop reports that grantees can print and put into the CAPER so that time is not wasted on developing a narrative report on items that should be able to come directly off of IDIS.
- Allow the system to automatically pull up grantee information in each report
- Provide better instructions within the screen to walk new or occasional users through the process.
- Make the reports easier to access and download.

DRAWDOWN
Recommendations:
- Drawdown of program income in IDIS should be fixed to work like the legacy IDIS, so that it doesn't require revisions to activity funding for every program income draw.
- The drawdown process needs to be improved. As it stands revised vouchers still appear in the calculations of PR26 and therefore draw amounts are inflated.

FUNDING
Recommendations:
- Funding screen needs to include available balance and last draw date. The screen should automatically calculate the amount available to draw.
- Total draw amount should be on each voucher.
- Please make program income NOT activity specific. It used to be program specific so you could use it with different activities to draw down and use but this makes it difficult to "use program income first."

OTHER
Recommendations:
• 	Provide training on the system.
• 	Hire more staff at the Technical Assistance Unit to answer the phone lines.

What areas of IDIS do you find duplicative?

Respondents were asked to comment on areas of duplication within the system. The adding (setting up) of projects involved the most duplication of effort, according to respondents. Many respondents commented that in setting up projects in IDIS the system requires that they be set up as both a project and an activity, which causes double entry. The project and activity set-up screens often ask for duplicate information. This could explain the inaccuracy of the CDBG data at the national level. Others noted problems with data calculation and information input. For example, when adding program income to an activity, the system does not automatically sum the previous income and the new program income. It has to be manually added and entered into the system. Respondents commented that it would be helpful if the system automatically populated the screens (uploaded data) so that grantees wouldn't have to enter the data more than once.

• 	Having to save every screen is bothersome. Having to enter the information into the CPMP and in IDIS is duplicative. Allow grantees to upload the project/financial form from the CPMP project sheets and summaries.
• 	The questions/requirements of the Action Plan and CAPER are duplicative.
• 	The screens should be rolled into one.

Recommendations:
• 	Alignment of IDIS with the Action Plan and the CAPER, so when information is entered into IDIS, it is automatically populated within both documents.
• 	Create auto-fill functions to avoid grantees having to repeatedly enter the same data.

What data should be dropped from IDIS?

While most respondents did not mind collecting the performance measurement information, some questioned the effectiveness of the way the information is being reported. One respondent said the following, "The performance measurement data is canned – really what is a suitable living environment?" Otherwise, the survey respondents were fine with the data elements that are currently being collected within IDIS.

What data points should be collected in IDIS that aren't currently being collected now?

Some of the respondents suggested that the system should collect the following data elements.

• 	Overcrowded housing and poverty down to the block group level
• 	Matching/leveraging details for HOME
• 	The number of persons served in a household
• 	MBE/WBE and Section 3 information (to aid in eliminating extra reports)

- More visual elements such as photos or maps
- Track program income in IDIS

Are there any other comments or suggestions you would like to share?

Finally, the survey respondents were asked to provide any other comments or suggestions on the system. The following changes to the system were suggested.

- When setting up or funding an activity, if an error occurs, an explanation should pop up on the screen showing what is incorrect and how to correct it.
- It would be helpful to see the different amounts drawn down that make up the total drawn against the activity. Too much time is wasted running a report for just one activity.
- Prevent grantees from being timed out of IDIS when creating reports.
- Allow the passwords to remain active for a longer period and send a prompt notice a few days prior to the password expiration.
- Seek grantee input when creating/modifying canned reports.
- Modify project level report to include only open reports (e.g., omit closed projects)
- Provide HUD field office staff access to the same screens as the grantees.
- Navigating the tiers is confusing. Replace it with a drop down menu.
- Improve the capability of the system to put IDIS information into Excel.
- Improve the capacity of the system to cross check information.
- Keep the most current version of the IDIS manual prominently linked on each IDIS screen.
- The Save function should allow you to continue to other screen pages without taking you back to the initial/beginning screen.
- Get rid of the PR26 report where grantees have to enter some data but not all data. It skews the numbers.
- Provide a spell check function.
- In searching for an activity to fund, the summary list that currently shows program year, project number, activity number and name should also show the amount funded and drawn for each activity. That would make it a lot easier to see the status of each activity without either fully opening each one in IDIS or running a report for all projects.
- Closing out projects can be a real challenge (e.g., IDIS does not provide close-out fields for rental group homes). There's no way to input all the residents and their ethnic characteristics.
- Allow the system to upload the information on the CPMP tool (project sheets and summaries) to IDIS.
- Sub-funding and sub-grants are confusing in the HOME program. The amount of the available sub-funds are not included in the total HOME amount.
- More training on IDIS, both hands-on training (with participants sending in a list of their projects as samples for the training) and live webinars.
- The system should allow mapping of projects.
- The simple fact that there are 90 reports available in IDIS says it all.
- Instruction manual needs to be updated and made more clear.
- The timeout feature for running reports needs to be more flexible, so that when you are

running reports, the timeout does not constantly appear.

We ask that HUD use the recommendations made by the survey respondents in moving forward with changes to IDIS as soon as possible. We strongly believe the changes will make the system more reliable, easier to use, more efficient, and provide a better platform for collecting accurate data at the national level. In addition to the survey responses, we would like to call attention to the following comments made by our organizations on IDIS and forwarded to HUD's Regulation Division on May 2, 2011.

• The IDIS reports that must be pulled in connection to the CAPER are not understandable to the average citizen and make it difficult to invite public comment.
• Please return the capability for grantees to download IDIS reports into WORD. When IDIS was updated from the legacy system to IDIS Online the report function changed the formats in which reports could be downloaded by grantees. Format choices for standard reports are now limited to PDF and Excel. In the legacy system grantees could download reports and save them as WORD files. This permitted grantees to insert the IDIS reports in the CAPER file, thereby making it easier to save the entire CAPER as one electronic file (WORD and/or Acrobat).
• Further modifications of IDIS should include components that allow for the submission, importing and exporting of data related to Section 3, Contract/Subcontract, MBE/WBE Summary Reports, Semi-Annual Labor Standards Enforcement and the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act Sub-award Reporting System (FSRS).
• Permit grantees to upload Action Plan data directly into IDIS, as with Community 2020.
• The CAPER instructions appear to have been designed more to comply with a review checklist by HUD staff than to communicate to the public. Rewrite the CAPER instructions to help grantees produce a meaningful document that can be better understood by elected officials and the public. The CAPER should be more than a report on funds spent and persons served. It, and the Consolidated Plan, should be a seamless system to report on approved activities.
• HUD field office staff should be better trained on how to obtain IDIS reports from their grantees. It should not be necessary for grantees to print hundreds of pages of IDIS reports for submission to HUD. HUD should only require the submission of those IDIS reports that are essential to the review of the CAPER.
• The CAPER contains the original Annual Performance Report form and the Matching Funds Report form that were created by HUD before IDIS. Craft new IDIS reports that would provide this data to HUD and grantees. Matching funds information should be captured in IDIS in the same level of detail as is required in the HOME Matching Fund Report.
• The CAPER requires financial and services data for entitlement programs, but it does not provide a consistent format for the report of the data in the CAPER narrative. Extract the data from IDIS and produce these data for the CAPER via IDIS reports. CDBG and ESG now have a Financial Summary Report. Add one for HOME. Also, add a Matching Funds Report for ESG.