



NEBRASKA AUDITOR OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Mike Foley
State Auditor

Mike.Foley@nebraska.gov
PO Box 98917
State Capitol, Suite 2303
Lincoln, Nebraska 68509
402-471-2111, FAX 402-471-3301
auditors.nebraska.gov

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State Auditor Mike Foley Exposes Serious Breaches by “Standing Bear” Film Production Grant Recipient, Leading to Suspension of Government Funding.

In a 45-page letter issued today to the Nebraska Department of Economic Development (DED), State Auditor Mike Foley has revealed the failure of a grant recipient to honor its contractual obligations after being awarded \$5 million in taxpayer funds. DED entered into the grant agreement in November 2023 with “I Am A Man” (IAAM), a limited liability company formed to produce a feature film on the life of Chief Standing Bear.

A Ponca tribal leader and prominent civil rights advocate from present-day Nebraska, Standing Bear won national acclaim for his role in an 1879 landmark court case that established the personhood of Native Americans under United States law, recognizing their right to sue for habeas corpus.

DED awarded the grant to IAAM to produce a film with, according to the funding agreement, a “total production budget of \$10 million USD,” using \$5 million in public funds from DED and an additional \$5 million in matching funds from a Hollywood financier known as WWPS.TV.

The grant application from IAAM contained an image of a Bank of America business account statement showing a balance of more than \$7 million and a letter from WWPS.TV supposedly indicating that the matching funds had been committed.

In December 2023, IAAM received an initial \$2.5 million payment from DED, followed by a stream of 25 monthly payments of \$67,576.57 each over the next two years – for a total disbursement of more than \$4.1 million in grant funds.

DED’s grant agreement with IAAM states unambiguously, “Documentation of matching funds must be provided contemporaneously with Recipient’s requests for payment from the Department, and within the Award Agreement term.” Nevertheless, DED failed to verify the availability of the matching funds claimed by IAAM and continued to issue regular grant payments through December 2025.

Investigating the information provided in IAAM’s grant application, Foley’s team searched unsuccessfully for evidence of even a single cent of the \$5 million in matching funds required by the agreement with DED. IAAM representatives admitted under subsequent questioning, moreover, that the promised matching funds have yet to materialize – leaving the grant recipient hoping for an amendment to the DED agreement to allow production of a film without the matching funds that were not only a fundamental prerequisite to the grant award but also misrepresented as having been secured already.

After reviewing a preliminary draft of Foley’s letter, which details numerous other failures by IAAM to perform in accordance with the terms of the grant agreement, DED issued a five-page “Notice of Suspension” to the chastened grant recipient on April 17, 2026. Noting therein that IAAM “has materially failed to comply with the Award Agreement,” DED declared a halt to all further funding under that unfulfilled grant award.

Among the concerns in Foley’s letter leading to the DED funding freeze was the simultaneous formation of two new corporate entities – both with the same ownership and office address – that shuffled large sums of grant funds between them, ostensibly in furtherance of the film’s production. “While all of this grant money has been flowing back and forth between companies,” Foley observed, “nobody has shown where any tangible progress has been made on the movie over the past couple of years.”

Additionally, some of IAAM’s monthly financial reports claimed that expenses incurred had been covered with the \$5 million in matching funds required under the grant agreement. By revealing those professed matching funds to be nonexistent, Foley’s team demonstrated also that, despite IAAM claims to the contrary, the costs could not have been incurred with those monies. The audit team obtained bank records to prove that tens of thousands of dollars of these expenses had actually been paid with DED funds – despite the award agreement’s express prohibition against using grant monies for such purposes.

“Besides misleading DED about having obtained \$5 million in matching funds, IAAM reported expenses paid with grant money, ignoring a prohibition in the award agreement against that very activity,” Foley explained. “This is quite problematic.”

The original purpose of the grant to IAAM was both to produce a Chief Standing Bear biopic and to serve as an economic catalyst to North and South Omaha, where the preponderance of the filmmaking is required to occur. Along with eliminating the unfulfilled matching fund requirement of the original grant agreement, however, IAAM is now seeking DED’s permission to allow filming in alternate locations, which would negate the inceptive regional development goal of the award.

Most of the issues addressed by DED in its “Notice of Suspension” letter to IAAM are clearly gleaned from the findings of Foley’s letter, including such matters as related-party transactions, misleading financial information, insufficient supporting documentation, and inadequate performance monitoring. The letter makes clear that failure to correct these deficiencies could lead to outright termination of the grant agreement, ending the present endeavor to memorialize in film the life of Chief Standing Bear.

According to Foley, “DED took the correct action in stopping the grant payments to IAAM until these concerns are rectified.” He concluded, “The final decision regarding the fate of this film project lies with DED, but my office intends to keep a close eye on what transpires to ensure that public funds are not squandered.”

Foley’s letter to DED can be found on the Nebraska Auditor of Public Accounts’ web page at <https://auditors.nebraska.gov/>.

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