

2011 could bring more training, IT support for procurement staffs

Source Federal Times

By TOM SPOTH and TIM KAUFFMAN | Last Updated: May 2, 2010

General Services Administrator Martha Johnson last week asked Congress for almost \$50 million to provide better training and information technology support for the federal procurement workforce.

Johnson said \$25 million will go toward training programs, mentoring and sharing of best practices for all federal procurement staffs. And \$21 million will go toward updating governmentwide IT systems that support procurement activity.

The programs are viewed as critical by GSA officials such as Houston Taylor, acting assistant commissioner of the agency's Federal Acquisition Service. GSA's contract officers are dwindling, he said, because they are "burning out at a rapid pace."

He blamed the problem on a persistent lack of training and support.

"We put a lot of young, sharp people in a position to fail if we don't put in place the right tools," he said at a conference sponsored by the Coalition for Government Procurement.

Johnson echoed that message to lawmakers last week.

"I come from the world of leadership development and talent development [and] I do believe that the acquisition workforce needs some real attention and some support," she said. "I think we do need to upgrade the curriculums. We need to create the communities where they can be working with each other. We also need to have an inventory so we know who they are, where they are, and be much more informed about it. I think this is driving us to data, better data, so we can manage it better."

But it's not at all certain Congress will support the request for the additional funding, which makes up the bulk of a 13.5 percent increase overall in discretionary spending for the agency — currently set at \$595 million — next year. That comes at a time when most agencies are seeing their budgets frozen or cut.

Rep. Jose Serrano, D-N.Y., chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee on financial services and general government, said the requested increase will need to be evaluated closely. "Given the president's freeze on nonsecurity discretionary spending, we will need to take a close look at all agency requests for increases," Serrano said.

Taylor said that in addition to the \$25 million request for government-wide training, GSA is working with the Federal Acquisition Institute to develop interactive Web-based training for GSA contract professionals.

The training will teach employees the fundamentals of GSA — or "How to Use Schedules 101," in Taylor's words — which they may never have learned because instruction is now done "anecdotally and with limited capacity," Taylor said.

And that training could help GSA's bottom line, Taylor said. A more prepared workforce could lead directly to better relationships with customers. Contract officers need to be able to explain GSA's products and services to other agencies, and to communicate effectively with contractors. Taylor said GSA has taken criticism for not reaching out enough to industry and agencies.

GSA has seen business on its contracts slow considerably in recent years, largely because customer agencies are opting to strike their own procurement deals with vendors.

Johnson told the House Appropriations subcommittee on financial services and general government that GSA must respond by seeking "a deep understanding of and resonance with our customers and their missions."

GSA needs to "get out there and meet with the customer, have a relationship ... and give them solutions" in order to convince other agencies that they don't need to go it alone, Ed O'Hare, assistant commissioner for the Federal Acquisition Service's integrated technology services portfolio, said at the conference.

O'Hare said rumors that GSA has been trying to get the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) to shut down acquisition contracts offered by NASA and the National Institutes of Health are "totally not true."

"There's plenty of space, plenty of work out there," O'Hare said.

However, he cautioned contractors in the audience that competing contracts usurp the time and money of government and industry.

"The government ends up with the same contract, the same customers, doing the same things we do today," he said.

Molly Wilkinson, general counsel for the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, said at the conference she gets "a litany of concerns" about such situations and suggested that OFPP could serve as a "traffic cop" to monitor potentially redundant contracts.

In the meantime, she placed the onus on GSA to eliminate the perceived need for agency-specific contract offerings. "People are not going to want to do their own [contract] vehicle if they have a comfort level with what they're getting," she said.

Part of the problem is a belief that each agency has its own requirements even in areas where they may not, said Mike Canales, a contract specialist in the Defense Department's Office of Defense Procurement and Acquisition Policy.

Officially, Defense encourages buying things through GSA or other agencies, Canales said, but that option is often not fully considered.

"Some organizations think we are unique ... that our mission is special," Canales said. "They're not embracing the vehicles that are available."

"We have a great working relationship with GSA," he added. "We need them."