

Procurement chief: Measure contractor performance

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By JIM McELHATTON

Joe Jordan, the top White House procurement official, recently told a gathering of government officials and contractors how he and his wife sometimes travel to New England and look for places to stay along the way. He wasn't giving travel advice, though.

The remarks, delivered at an acquisition conference in Washington, aimed to highlight a way the government can improve how it does business.

"It really bothers me at a personal, visceral level that when I look for a bed and breakfast because my wife and I are going away for the weekend, I have vastly more descriptive information ... about the quality of bed and breakfasts within a three-hour drive of D.C. than what many agencies have when they answer to a \$20 million IT services contract," Jordan said. "That's ridiculous."

Jordan, administrator for federal procurement policy at the Office of Management and Budget, said in a subsequent interview with Federal Times that too often, contracting officials across government don't have the data on contractors' past performance they should have when making contract award decisions.

Jordan instructed agencies in a memo last month to improve the quality and quantity of information used to assess contractor performance. The memo said the underreporting of past performance data leaves the government vulnerable to poor acquisition outcomes.

But for contracting officials, assessing and relying on contractors' past performance can carry a risk, too. Losing bidders could challenge past performance assessments in bid protests, and contracting officials then could find themselves wrapped up in months or years of post-award litigation.

Still, Jordan said beefed-up past assessment reports need to be part of a larger cultural shift in the government acquisition workforce from one that's been averse to "smart risk taking."

In his March 6 memo, Jordan said chief acquisition officials also need to better motivate employees to provide more relevant information on contractor past performance.

"Recognizing good performance and holding contractors accountable for poor performance is critical to delivering value to taxpayers," he wrote.

Michael Fischetti, executive director of the National Contract Management Association, agreed with Jordan on the need for fuller assessments, but he said the government needs to stand by those who provide that data in the face of protests and disputes.

“They need to stand by the contracting official and support what they did,” Fischetti said in an interview.

Jordan also is pushing for a government “pay portal” where agencies can check to see how much they’re all paying for the same items.

He said the biggest surprise he’s had in his job since his confirmation nearly a year ago is the fact that agencies often do not know what other agencies are paying for the same things.

Jordan said the changes he’s seeking aren’t ones that would require major statutory or regulatory shifts.

As for the impact of the sequester on the federal contracting industry, Jordan said nobody in Washington thinks the sequester is a smart idea. But he said contracting officials should be looking to see how to turn the sequester crisis into opportunities to “buy smarter.”

“We really do have a bright spotlight on all of our spending and all of our outcomes right now,” he said.