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Statement of Chairman Daniel K. Akaka
“Strengthening the Federal Acquisition Workforce: Government-wide Leadership and Initiatives”
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce,
and the District of Columbia
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

August 5, 2009

Today’s hearing is a continuation of this Subcommittee’s oversight of acquisition management across the Federal Government. In particular, this hearing is focused on the shortage of acquisition professionals to manage and oversee Federal contract spending.

Federal spending on contracts has grown dramatically, exceeding \$500 billion in Fiscal Year 2008. At the same time, the size of the federal acquisition workforce has remained nearly constant; putting agency missions and taxpayer funds at risk. In addition, the Federal Government is facing a surge of expected retirements. The Federal Acquisition Institute reports that over half of the acquisition workforce will be eligible to retire in the next eight years, further eroding an already understaffed Federal contracting workforce.

Stories of contractor waste, fraud, and abuse, as well as ineffective government management of contracts, continue to dominate the headlines. From massive failed contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan to ongoing delays and problems with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) SBInet virtual fence, sensors, and cameras, it is clear that the Federal government must improve its contract management.

Understaffed and without adequate training, the Federal acquisition workforce is often at the center of the storm of blame. Augmenting the ranks and improving the skills of the Federal acquisition workforce is in the best interests of everyone involved: the Federal acquisition workforce, contractors, the Government, and taxpayers. This requires two areas of reform.

First, we must improve government-wide leadership and coordination of the development of Federal acquisition professionals. The agencies represented here today are playing important roles in shaping the acquisition workforce; however, I am concerned that they are not providing the necessary leadership and coordination. I look forward to hearing from the first panel about the steps they are taking to provide their expertise to agencies throughout the government and to hold agencies accountable for recruiting, training, and retaining highly qualified acquisition professionals.

In response to questions about leadership, we often hear that the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) is the government-wide leader. However, if OFPP is to lead these important efforts, then its role must be enhanced. OFPP does not have the authority or the resources needed to effectively lead or enforce government-wide requirements. Currently, OFPP lacks an Administrator and has only 12 of the 16 authorized positions filled.

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To address the need for coordinated acquisition workforce efforts, Congress created a new executive-level position at OFPP, the Associate Administrator for Acquisition Workforce Programs. Unfortunately, since its creation, this position has remained vacant. This is very troubling, and I hope to hear today what steps are being taken to fill this position.

Second, beyond leadership and coordination, we will focus today on the government's ability to recruit, train, and retain qualified acquisition workforce professionals. In particular, the recruitment of qualified acquisition professionals to the government has been a consistent problem. Candidates complain of complex, lengthy hiring processes and poor communication. This leads many of the best candidates to accept offers from other employers. My bill, which I introduced with Senator Voinovich, the Federal Hiring Process Improvement Act (S. 736), would help address this problem by streamlining the federal recruitment and hiring process. I am pleased to note that the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs approved the bill last week.

There are several new initiatives underway to improve the acquisition workforce. Some of these initiatives include: new mentoring and intern programs; the use of flexible hiring authority; increased college recruitment efforts; and improvements to the acquisition workforce career track. I look forward to hearing more about these efforts today.

Despite these efforts, agencies may not have the tools they need to hire, train, and retain the acquisition workforce necessary to achieve their missions. Some agencies, including two of those on our second panel, spend upwards of 90 percent of their budgets on contracts, thus underscoring the need for efficient contract management.

The new Administration is facing many dramatic challenges, and the American people expect strong leadership from the Federal Government. We must act now to ensure that mission-critical purchases are made and overseen by an effective acquisition workforce. We must bring in new talent; we must train and empower them; and, we must preserve institutional knowledge within our acquisition community.

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