

HEARING ON IMPROVING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF FEDERAL
CONTRACTING DATABASES
September 29, 2009

Senator McCaskill's Opening Statement

We're here today to discuss the future of the federal government's contracting databases.

This is not an exciting topic. We don't have television cameras or eager crowds lined up to see what happens at this hearing. The idea of spending a few hours talking about FPDS, ORCA, CCR, PPIRS ("Peepers"), and the IAE is enough to send most people screaming for the exits.

But these acronyms are fundamental to the way the government does business. In 2008, the federal government spent over \$500 billion in contracts with thousands of different companies to acquire everything from pens to planes to people.

Electronic systems and databases are used in every phase of the contracting process. Government employees use these systems to solicit requirements, review offers, evaluate vendors, and create and administer contracts. Companies use the systems to find and register for opportunities, track what and how the government is acquiring goods and services, and view their own performance. And the public uses these systems to understand what the government is doing with the taxpayers' money.

There are now more than a dozen federal databases and systems with information relevant to federal contracting. They are managed by at least five different agencies and supported by at least eight different contractors.

In recent years, these systems have been the subject of criticism from federal auditors, members of the public, and Congress for being difficult to use; containing incomplete records; for not being available or accessible to the public; and for not containing the timely, accurate information necessary to the government and vendors. In the last two years, the government has even created a whole new system – USAspending.gov – simply to translate information contained in older databases to make it accessible to the public.

To address many of these problems, the federal government has moved forward with the creation of the Integrated Acquisition Environment, or IAE. The IAE brought together eight systems under management of the IAE program management office at GSA.

This has already had significant advantages of streamlining – for example, the IAE has already brought all the helpdesk services together under a single contractor.

The government now plans to award a contract, called the Architecture Operations Contract Support contract, or AOCS, to begin to consolidate these different databases into one system.

When implemented, the AOCS contractor will be responsible for designing a new "enterprise architecture" and then gradually moving each of the databases into the architecture. Vendors and the government will access all the different services from a single entrance point. Members of the public will be able to access the system using a password.

The AOCS contract does NOT include improvements to the underlying database systems. Instead, the government will also award multiple contracts to improve and enhance the software throughout the life of the AOCS contract.

The AOCS contract was supposed to have been awarded at the end of September; last week GSA pushed back the award date to the end of October. So we're still at the very early stages of the development of this project. Now is the time for us to look forward, to ask tough questions before the government gets embroiled in a costly contract that may not be the best way forward.

We're here today to learn from representatives of the key users of these systems – industry, the public, government – what the consolidated contracting system of the future should look like. We will also hear from Vivek Kundra, the President's Chief Information officer, about whether and how the new "Integrated Acquisition Environment" will improve the quality, transparency, and usability of acquisition information.

And we will discuss barriers to achieving a unified, simplified, publicly accessible contracting system, like the technological hurdles presented by migrating legacy systems onto a new architecture and the government's byzantine management structure for the project.

I look forward to a constructive discussion of these questions today.

I would also like to take this opportunity to welcome Senator Bennett, the new Ranking Member of the Subcommittee. I now yield to Senator Bennett for his statement.