

**STATEMENT OF ROBERT PECK
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U.S. GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION**

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONTRACTING OVERSIGHT

**U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS**

TUESDAY, MARCH 1, 2011



Good morning Madam Chair McCaskill, Ranking Member Portman, and members of this subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today regarding public relations services for the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA). GSA manages a portfolio of more than 1,500 federally owned buildings. As the Federal government landlord, it is our job to ensure our buildings are safe, well functioning, and welcoming for all tenants and visitors. We have expertise in effectively managing building operations and responding to concerns of our occupants. One of our many responsibilities as property managers is conducting comprehensive surveys and testing to ensure that each Federal facility is safe for occupancy.

GSA strives to be open and responsive in our communication with both tenants and the public. When complex matters arise outside of our expertise, GSA may procure services from professionals with proficiency in that area. Public relations is one area in which GSA occasionally procures services from outside consultants, including the ability to procure contracts for crisis communications and emergency management.

GSA: the Government's Asset Manager

On a daily basis, GSA manages such building and tenant issues as fire and life safety and environmental issues. GSA conducts periodic surveys and assessments of our buildings to ensure facilities are well functioning and safe for tenants. As specific concerns arise from tenants, GSA assesses the true nature and scope of the problem, usually via studies or tests, and then addresses the problem as those assessments indicate is necessary. GSA often contracts with third parties to conduct these evaluations to ensure we receive independent assessments and we also often contract with third parties to carry out corrective measures. In fact, most routine mechanical maintenance and cleaning functions in Federal buildings are carried out by third party contractors, as well.

Some concerns we receive from tenants involve environmental and health issues. These concerns typically relate to drinking water, mold, and indoor air quality. After thoroughly researching issues, GSA openly communicates our findings to tenants.

If GSA determines that an environmental problem does exist in a facility, we immediately take corrective measures. Most of the issues that arise in our buildings never become a public concern because GSA's experts are able to collaborate effectively with the tenant to dispel concerns. GSA relies on our in-house communication experts to help manage the message.

One example of GSA's effective management of tenant concerns and communications is our response to a chemical-like odor in one of our buildings at Silver Spring Metro Center. GSA investigated the complaints and discovered that the odor was caused by a flaw in the concrete floor compound. To ensure minimal inconvenience and disruption to our tenants, GSA relocated building occupants while remedying the problem. GSA performed a variety of tests as the repairs were being completed, in addition to follow-up tests six months after tenants returned. During this time, GSA regularly

communicated findings, test results, and corrective actions to tenants through a variety of mediums, including discussion forums and meetings.

In addition to outreach to tenants in our owned facilities, GSA also supports tenant agencies when issues arise in leased space. We assist other agencies in pursuing investigations and provide our expertise to the lessor, advocating on behalf of the tenant agency. For example, GSA worked closely with the Department of Transportation to provide assistance during DOT's initial investigation of the air quality in the Nassif Building in Washington, D.C. GSA reviewed many interim reports and test results throughout the investigation and provided technical assistance, such as industrial hygienist services and building systems experts. GSA also helped communicate messages to tenants to calm fears and address concerns through periodic Town Hall meetings. When GSA determined there were environmental issues with the building, GSA assisted DOT by providing new temporary leased space until the problem was resolved.

As effective asset managers, GSA continually assesses the condition of our buildings. If tenants raise concerns, GSA promptly responds and investigates the claim. We communicate our findings to tenant agencies to ensure everyone has accurate and impartial information.

Procuring Public Relations Contract Services

GSA routinely manages complex communication issues and handles media inquiries on an in-house basis. However, GSA can seek the assistance of outside communications resources when we identify either a lack of capacity or expertise on a specific subject matter. Such resources can be helpful in developing crisis management strategies. GSA sought external public relations services in the case of the Bannister Federal Complex in Kansas City, Missouri. This situation became particularly volatile due to complex and voluminous information requests, media accusations, and concerned tenants who had questions regarding the safety of their workplace.

GSA was already working closely with tenants to understand and address their environmental concerns at the Bannister Complex. Over the years, GSA continuously monitored and evaluated conditions in the building, and communicated back to tenant leadership that these evaluations established and maintained that the building is safe for occupancy.

In late 2009, tenant and employee concerns escalated regarding perceived environmental risks at the Bannister Complex. At this time, GSA saw an increase in inquiries and requests for information related to these concerns. Initially, GSA was able to manage this on its own. However, as media scrutiny increased, some tenants and employees became extremely upset and concerned for their health. As Regional Commissioner, Mary Ruwwie will explain next, there was widespread anxiety about the safety of both the workspace and childcare center at Bannister, and several tenants

threatened to move out of the facility. Furthermore, protests were held at the childcare center amidst media reports that the building was unsafe.

Given the significant burdens on the GSA's Heartland Region public affairs office from the volume of inquiries, GSA sought assistance from a local public relations contractor, Jane Mobley Associates, Incorporated (JMA). JMA helped us develop a plan to handle the large number of communication inquiries and effectively communicate the complex and technical results of our many environmental studies assessing the safety of the building. This assistance helped us ensure that our response to the public and Federal employees was both accurate and understandable. This response reflected the results of numerous assessments: all testing to date indicates that no current health risk exists.

GSA Procurement Vehicles for Public Relations Services

Through our Multiple Awards Schedules Program, GSA offers Federal agencies a streamlined means of acquiring services in the areas of advertising, public relations, and web-based marketing, as well as market research, video/film production, exhibit design, conference planning, commercial photography, and graphic design. Prices for services on the Schedules have already been determined to be fair and reasonable, after reviewing prices offered to similarly-situated commercial customers.

As I mentioned previously, GSA may procure contracted public affairs services for additional, short-term resources or for assistance in matters outside of our field of expertise. Private sector public relations professionals can provide Federal agencies with such customized media relations services as development of media messages and strategies; preparation of media materials such as press releases, speeches, presentations, and press kits; and execution of media programs such as press conferences, distribution of press materials, and management of interviews. In broad terms, these tasks could include public relations and crisis communications; training of agency personnel to deal with media and media responses; media alerts; press clipping services; and other related activities.

Conclusion

We at GSA take our obligation seriously to provide safe Federal facilities for our employees, the employees of our tenant agencies, and the visiting public. We fully understand and are committed to effectively communicating with employees and the public about the steps we are taking to assure that safety. The urgency of this obligation necessitated that we seek additional resources in Kansas City to ensure we addressed the situation in a timely and accurate manner. Our response constituted neither propaganda nor puffery, and it was legal.

Madam Chair, Ranking Member Portman, and members of the subcommittee, this concludes my statement. I appreciate the opportunity to speak about GSA's use of public relations contracts, and am happy to answer any questions.