

Another Warning of a Retiring Workforce

By Stephen Barr
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Crunch time for the federal acquisition workforce hits in 2015.

That's when 54 percent of contracting officers will be eligible to retire, according to a recently released report by the Federal Acquisition Institute. That is a sharp jump from fiscal 2005, when only 13 percent were eligible.

The loss of experienced officers could be severe at the Small Business Administration, where 81 percent of contracting officers will be eligible to retire in 2015, and at the Army, the Navy and the Energy, Homeland Security and Health and Human Services departments, where at least 60 percent will be eligible for retirement.

Dire retirement projections are not new. The Office of Personnel Management has repeatedly warned agencies this year that estimates show 40 percent of the federal workforce will retire over the next 10 years. Without adequate planning, some agencies may find it more difficult to deliver services and administer programs.

For federal procurement, however, a wave of retirements could be especially critical. Contracting officers oversee about \$350 billion a year in spending, and there are concerns that not enough mid-career professionals will be left to replace retirees because of budget and staff cuts in the 1990s that thinned the ranks.

Karen A. Pica, director of the Federal Acquisition Institute, said the report offers some hope that an exodus will not take place. In 2005, when 13 percent of contracting officers were eligible to retire, only 8 percent did so.

"We are retaining some of the knowledge base," she said.

Pica also noted that the report shows that some agencies have stepped up recruiting from colleges and the private sector. Newcomers to the contracting officer position -- the 1102 job series -- are 33.6 years old, on average. Overall, contracting officers are 45.8 years old, on average, according to the report.

The Federal Acquisition Institute was created by Congress in 1976 to provide reports and training for government employees in the contracting field. It partners with the Defense Acquisition University, which trains employees who support the armed forces.

The 2005 report focuses on contracting officers, who handle the business aspects of purchasing, and contract specialists, who are experts on federal buying rules and perform most contracting work.

In 2005, there were 27,589 officers and specialists, who earned an average of \$58,500 in base pay. About 60 percent were women, and about 69 percent were college graduates, according to the report.

As the purchase of goods and services has become increasingly complex, the government has expanded the list of occupations that make up the acquisition workforce. But there is no consensus on how to define it.

For its report, the Federal Acquisition Institute gathered data on seven occupations that make up substantial parts of the acquisition workforce and counted 125,779 federal employees as holding contracting and contract-related jobs.

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