

Big A Acquisition Conference 2024: “Fostering Mission Success”

Director’s remarks as prepared for delivery

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INTRODUCTION

- Good afternoon, everyone. It’s an honor to be here with you today.
- Allow me to begin by wishing you, my fellow Department of Commerce employees, a very happy Public Service Recognition Week!
- One of the most rewarding roles is that of being a public servant.
- There’s nothing better than knowing that your work literally helps our great nation.
- When I think of all the DOC agencies that are represented here today and our collective bodies of work, I’m struck by how far-reaching our impact is on American life.
- As my Census Bureau colleagues will attest, I’ve said this many times: An agency needs a community-of-the-whole approach to accomplish its mission.
- And you know what? Acquisition professionals like you play a critical role in our mission success.
- Through the execution of acquisitions and contracts, it is YOU who enable the services and supplies that underlie so much of what we do in the federal government.
- So thank you for that!
- Y’know, for the most part, your work takes place outside of the public eye.
- And, yes, all-too-often, the thanks you receive are often not fully reflective of the huge demands we make on your time, or the importance of your contributions to our agencies’ functioning.
- So please know that we recognize and appreciate all the support you provide.
- We need your services to complete our mission.
- We are only as effective and efficient as you are in your daily work.
- So, thank you!

INTRODUCTION TO CENSUS BUREAU/DECENNIAL CENSUS

- Today, I’ll talk about how we prepare for a decennial census.
- <<story about Census contract>>
- But I’d also like to first provide a little context before diving into that.
- Many folks don’t realize it, but the U.S. Census Bureau conducts 3 censuses <mention them>.
- And we conduct over a 130 surveys, such as <<ACS, CPS, ABS>>.
- That means we’re constantly collecting data through the year, every year.
- It’s just that things get a bit more complicated as we approach a year ending in zero.
- All of this constant activity—collecting, processing, disseminating data—requires support well beyond what our current staffing allows.
- So we are in a constant state of securing additional services and materials through the use of acquisitions and contracts.

- Now, today I'll talk to you about contracts through the lens of the largest program we run: the decennial census.
- As the years in a decade approach zero, it becomes the tail that wags the dog.
- Our decennial census is a once-a-decade population and housing count of all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Island Areas.
- The impetus for the census is found in our Constitution, which mandates that an apportionment of representatives among the states must be carried out every 10 years.
- Census data serve as our nation's data backbone beyond determining the number of Congressional seats for each state and beyond drawing congressional and state legislative districts.
- Census data on demographics and housing are critical to understanding who we are as a nation.
- Those counts literally guide trillions of dollars annually in federal funds distributions to states.
- This includes programs like Medicaid, Head Start, block grant programs for community mental health services, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
- And in turn, the data inform tribal, federal, state, and local government planning decisions.
- The census counts help communities get their fair share for schools, hospitals, roads, and public works.
- They're also valuable to businesses.
- Business owners rely on these data to make decisions.
- That includes where to open new stores, factories, and offices; where to expand operations; where to recruit employees; and which products and services to offer.
- A decennial census is a big deal!
- That's why it's important that we get it right.

2020 CENSUS OVERVIEW

- As you can imagine, counting every person in the country once, only once, and in the right place is an enormous undertaking.
- Executing a census creates our nation's largest peacetime mobilization.
- It requires a decade of preparation.
- And the stakes are incredibly high!
- By the time the 2020 Census activities end this year, the total cost will be around \$13.6 billion.
- By the way, more than 80% of those funds spent in three specific areas:
 - Enumeration operations in the field.
 - Infrastructure.
 - Information technology.
- And guess what?
- The largest mechanism for fulfilling and enabling the 2020 Census mission involved contractual services . . . acquisitions.
- Collectively, these totaled just under \$6 billion.
- That's nearly 44% of the total cost of the census.
- Think about that the next time the topic of contract procurement and administration comes up!
- Let me give you the flavor of contracts involved in the decennial census.
- One area where we relied on substantial contractor support was preparing the systems and technology for the 2020 Census.
- It was contractors who developed several of the systems and components of our IT infrastructure.

- This included contracts for the IT platform we used to collect data from households responding to the census as well as for following up with households that didn't initially send in their form.
- The Census Bureau also relied on a contractor to integrate all key IT systems and infrastructure.
- This included evaluating systems and infrastructure.
- It included acquiring the infrastructure to meet performance needs.
- And it included the ability to size the systems to operational scale.
- We had contractors who were responsible for integrating all of the systems.
- They also assisted with technical performance, and scalability, as well as operational testing.
- We even contracted for staff training.
- Now, for the 2020 census, we staged one of the largest advertising campaigns in our government's history.
- It was designed to reach nearly all U.S. residents 40 times on average, using TV, radio, newspaper, online and outdoor ads.
- We aired more than 1,000 advertisements to communicate the importance of responding to the census.
- And we did this in English and in 46 other languages.
- All these campaign services were contracted out.
- As you can imagine, the contract for this campaign was extremely large and complex.
- So, why did we find contracting to be so valuable during the census?
- First, there was the ability to scale up and back down quickly.
- Now, a census lifecycle runs a decade.
- Yet, we expended more than 80% of total costs of the 2020 Census in just the four peak years.
- Second, contracts gave us the ability to bring on people with unique skillsets that we needed for the census.
- Those skillsets might not be easily recruited as Federal workers, especially on short-term, time-limited details.
- And lastly, in any census—but especially in 2020, as I'm sure you can imagine—adaptability was key.
- We often need to alter the size and composition of our workforce, or extend or change timetables—and we need to be nimble.
- In 2020, contracts provided that flexibility in the face of unexpected phenomena . . . like, COVID-19.

2020 CENSUS LESSONS LEARNED

- The scope of the 2020 Census posed several challenges that prompted us to alter our operational plans and timelines—not the least of which was a once-in-a-century global pandemic.
- The 2020 Census was planned and took place in the context of a constantly evolving technical and IT environment.
- That changing environment affected how we conducted the census and how we executed the necessary contracts.
- For acquisitions to be successful, we had to keep our ear to the ground to stay up to date so we could procure emerging products and technologies.
- We also dealt with political and budget uncertainty.
- Remember all that?
- They had the potential to affect the timing, the structure, and the implementation of how we phase contracts.
- And last but not least, there was the elephant in the room... COVID-19.

- As we all know, the pandemic challenged our society to its core.
- It impacted our most vulnerable people and communities.
- And, yes, it had a profound impact on the 2020 Census.
- When the pandemic's grip on society was strongest, we still had to deploy a field force of hundreds of thousands to knock on doors across our nation.
- In response to the pandemic and the public health precautions that came with it, we needed to pause, extend, and delay several 2020 operations.
- The ability to expand and adapt our communications and IT contracts was extremely important to ensure that we could complete the census in a manner that was safe and accurate.
- Think about it . . . we completed the job we set out to do before even the vaccine was widely available.
- Looking back, there are five lessons-learned from 2020 that we're using to prepare for 2030.
 - First, early engagement and planning is key to success; the program and acquisition offices need to engage from the earliest possible stages. This is important for effective pre-award research and planning, and for developing requirements and acquisition strategies that are timed to satisfy critical program needs.
 - Second, we must follow a disciplined acquisition management process that ensures that we have sufficient lead time to obtain needed products, materials, and services.
 - Third, we must include flexibility to appropriately-size contracts. This is particularly important to those contracts that are highly susceptible to changes in peak production scale.
 - Fourth, where possible, we'll leverage enterprise contract vehicles in lieu of decennial census-specific contracts.
 - And finally, our contracts will include program management reporting requirements; this will facilitate monitoring and integration with our other decennial census-related program work.

SMALL BUSINESS CONTRACTS

- OK, let's talk about small business contracts.
- Those contracts are pretty important.
- They play a role in all of our operations . . . not just in the decennial census.
- Now, the Census Bureau is committed to equity in all aspect of its operations, including acquisitions and contracts.
- And as part of that commitment, we've worked to remove barriers that prevent small businesses of all types from participating in our procurements.
- We've worked to increase the number of new entrants into the federal marketplace.
- So please indulge me for a moment.
- I'd like to brag a bit about how the Census Bureau helps DOC meet its small business goals every fiscal year.
- I'll start by giving a shout-out to the Census Bureau acquisitions team.
- The team is regularly bestowed a Certificate of Achievement for meeting our small business goals.
- So how do we facilitate small business participation and diversification of federal contracts?
- Well, let me tell you the ways.
- The first is by simply not gatekeeping knowledge, but instead spreading the good word on contracts.
- We communicate what it takes to compete and to earn federal contracts.
- This information goes to small businesses as well as targeted businesses from socioeconomic categories.

- Those socioeconomic categories include small businesses owned by women, veterans, HUBzone, disadvantaged businesses and 8a businesses.
- We provide resources, like:
 - Biweekly, one-on-one tag-up sessions to learn about small business capabilities and how they align with forecasted requirements.
 - We Explain the acquisition process and the mechanisms that Census uses to solicit and promote competition.
 - We help vendors find opportunities through the Commerce Business Opportunities Tool and the Government Point of Entry.
 - We provide instructions to how to register in the System for Award Management and other databases.
 - And we refer vendors to the National Customer Service Center at GSA; this helps with the enrollment and on-boarding process of the Governmentwide Acquisition Contract and Multiple Award Schedules.
- Here's another way we help.
- We find ways to increase opportunities and remove barriers for small businesses.
- For example, our procurement process supports the inclusion of small businesses in all socioeconomic small business categories.
- We review our small business set-aside decisions to ensure that everyone is given equitable consideration.
- And we assist with vendor engagement sessions to identify and motivate all types of eligible small businesses.
- Actually, encouraging small business participation in our contracting process was something we gave a lot of thought to in preparation for the 2020 Census.
- This included refreshing our Small Business Opportunity webpage to indicate how to connect with Census Small Business Specialists and to share capabilities or to inquire about opportunities.
- Such efforts were met with great success.
- For instance, one of the largest contracts in support of the 2020 Census was valued at over \$1.4 billion.
- It was the Technical Integrator for the census, and it was awarded to a small business.
- This small business was responsible for design, development, maintenance, and oversight of the hybrid-multi-Cloud computing environments that hosted the online response portal for the census.
- This included overseeing the integration and testing of all components of the census.
- The award was instrumental in DOC substantially exceeding its HUBZONE goal in successive fiscal years.
- We're very proud of that.
- We also have a long-standing business relationship with Ability One, and provide opportunities to vendors within the program.
- In the summer of 2020, we successfully leveraged the Ability One program to obtain the personal protective equipment that kept our decennial field operations going.
- That was a big deal.
- It proved essential for mobilizing our enumerator workforce in the midst of a pandemic.
- We worked closely with Ability One on flexible product specifications and delivery schedules.
- That, in turn, allowed them to maneuver within a squeezed market with tight supply chains.
- The result was that they secured mass quantities of masks, gloves, hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes that were needed by our enumerators.

- And as a result, \$27 million in personal protective equipment was acquired in short order
- More importantly, our field operations were able to proceed.

2030 CENSUS

- Now, as I mentioned earlier, planning a census takes a lot of time.
- So, we're already well underway in preparing for the 2030 decennial count.
- We're committed to planning a well-managed, well-formulated, and well-designed 2030 Census.
- We're making sure to take the lessons we learned in 2020, and apply them to our 2030 acquisition strategy.
- A key takeaway is thinking clearly about the scope of our contracts and building flexibility for when the unexpected occurs . . . and it always does.
- It also means meticulously developing contracts that are more likely to avert protests... or other issues that can impede implementation.
- Note that this planning needs to be done early enough to give us time to work through protests without slowing down implementation.
- Our top priority has been careful planning lifecycle operations, requirements, and program architecture to facilitate - among other things - our acquisition strategies.
- Such planning allows us to manage major contracts that deliver well-integrated technical solutions that are within cost, scope, and schedule.
- We'll need large-scale information technology and business solution contracts to achieve our mission.
- Currently, we expect to use almost a dozen major contracts for addressing various census operations.
- Here are a few to give you a flavor of their breadth:
 - A fully integrated Census System-of-Systems that scales, performs, is secure and meets the 2030 Census business objectives.
 - A re-engineered data quality program which consolidates various data quality systems into a Data Quality ecosystem.
 - An integrated solution that provides mobile devices and services to support the 2030 Census planning, testing and field operations; and
 - An enterprise human resource solution, which includes recruiting, hiring, onboarding, fingerprinting, training, time and expense, and payroll.
- That's quite a list and there are many more besides these!
- To meet our objectives, a focus for 2030 will be that of robust program management.
- For example, for several of our major acquisitions, we've started conducting pre-solicitation activities.
- We're doing this much earlier in the program lifecycle than previously.
- This will buy us enough time to overcome whatever roadblocks arise.
- And it will allow for more robust solution development, testing, and integration before we start scaling systems to production levels.

CONCLUSION

- These efforts are just some of the ways that we're striving for excellence in planning for the 2030 Census.
- In the bigger picture, we as an agency are implementing a community-of-the-whole effort to accomplish our mission.

- We're working hand-in-hand with stakeholders, researchers, community partners, the corporate world, elected officials—everyone—to achieve our mission to provide quality data on our nation's people, places and economy.
- And acquisitions professionals are an important, critical part of our community.
- Their invaluable work helps us to be innovative and creative . . . and ultimately it helps us meet our mission.
- That's why it's been an honor to speak to you today.
- We so much appreciate the acquisitions and contracts staff at the Census Bureau and throughout DOC.
- I know that the work you do at your agencies is just as critical to fostering mission success as it is at ours.
- Thank you for all your efforts on behalf of our nation.