

HHS is Transforming Acquisition with Automation

The department is looking for innovative vendors to streamline purchasing, eliminate redundant contracts and provide purchasers with real-time data.

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Fri, 02/01/2019 - 09:24



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The Health and Human Services Department is looking to improve its acquisition processes and redundancies in departmentwide contracting by putting emerging technologies behind its data and the \$24 billion it spends in goods and services each year.

That's according to Lori Ruderman, Buy Smarter initiative lead and senior adviser at the HHS Program Support Center. [Buy Smarter](#) is how HHS is reimagining and transforming purchasing by adopting tech like artificial intelligence and analyzing department requirements on spend data to achieve lower prices and consolidate

contract vehicles and requirements with HHS and, eventually, across the government.

“BuySmarter is an innovative opportunity for HHS to ... look at our category management, break down some stovepipes and consolidate our requirements across the board,” Ruderman said at the Jan. 29 AFCEA [Health IT Summit](#) in Bethesda, Maryland. Because within HHS, all its different operational and staff divisions buy many of the same items on separate contracts, duplicating efforts.

To consolidate these efforts and requirements, to achieve economies of scale and eliminate redundant contracts, Ruderman said the Program Support Center is looking to leverage AI, robotic process automation, natural language processing and machine learning to give its acquisition workforce real-time data and insight into departmentwide purchasing.

So, the Program Support Center posted the Intelligent Automation/Artificial Intelligence (IAAI) solutions, services and products request for proposal on [FedBizOpps](#) last month. This \$49 million, multi-award indefinite-delivery-indefinite-quantity contract ([meaning](#) it provides for an indefinite quantity of supplies or services during a fixed period of time) spans five years for a catalog of those emerging technologies listed above for acquisition reform.

And Ruderman said they’re using the term AI broadly. “What we’re expecting is a combination of lots of other components,” she said, including machine learning, blockchain, microservices, natural language processing and predictive analytics, all working together to take acquisition thinking to the next level and advance capabilities.

In the acquisition environment, for example, contracting officers have to deal with copying and pasting from 36 to 48 different systems, Ruderman said. The Program Support Center is looking to take advantage of RPA to prepopulate those systems, so that “contracting officers can use their brains to do what we’re paying them to do and not spend all their time copying and pasting,” she said.

According to the project description, the contract vehicle hopes to enable Program Support Center contracting officers to “rapidly obtain” innovative automation and AI solutions, services and products. The contractors chosen will support piloting, testing and implementing these technologies. Interested vendors must demonstrate successful previous experience via government contracts in the functional areas of

applied ideation and design support, engineering and process engineering support, systems design, and prototyping and model-making support.

"We are hoping to get a very large number of vendors who can provide these catalog services, not just for Reimagine-Buy Smarter," Ruderman said. "The contract is designed so it can be scaled and shared across HHS and potentially across the federal space."

Because the Program Support Center is a shared service provider and specializes in system acquisition departmentwide, Ruderman said the IAAI is a foundational contract with plans to establish a governmentwide acquisition contract for a much larger vehicle and attract an innovative vendor pool to work with the government.

"So this is just the jumping off point" before taking lessons learned to the Office of Management and Budget, Ruderman added. Buy Smarter will be one of the first groups to use it.

The goal is to ultimately provide purchasers and contracting officials with real-time data — like highest and lowest price paid, and terms and conditions for everything HHS purchases — so they can make data-driven and informed purchasing decisions.

Responses to the IAAI opportunity are due Feb. 8.

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