



Agencies Need Rules before Bringing Jobs In-House

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Congressman Darrell Issa wants to make it clear: he isn't against bringing jobs back into the government - commonly known as in-sourcing.

The California Republican says he just wants agencies to do that with all the facts, and it starts with the definition of what an inherently governmental job is.

"Right now it appears lots of positions are being noticed and moved in house without a clear definition," says Issa. "So my hope is that we get that clear definition that we should not be growing the federal workforce for the sake of growing the federal workforce but grow it smart and grow with the kinds of people that can leverage the private sector more effectively."

The Obama administration is developing a new definition of what are inherently governmental jobs, but Issa says agencies already have brought in 130,000 new positions over the last year without the much-needed clarification.

"We realize inherently governmental can be defined narrowly or broadly; I define it sort of in-between," says Issa during a speech at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington Wednesday. "Every fiduciary of the federal government should be a government employee. If you are going to sign on behalf of government and commit the government, you should be a government employee. On the other hand, if you are doing the accounting and preparation of the sheet that I sign, as long as I have the expertise to read the sheet, I don't need to have everyone who rolls up the information be a federal worker. That is a balance we need to get to."

At a meeting on contracting reform last week at the General Services Administration, Office of Management and Budget executive associate director Jeff Liebman says the administration is looking for guidance on what inherently governmental means.

"When is outsourcing not appropriate?" he asks. "How about the idea of jobs not inherently governmental, but still need to be done in the government? We need help understanding the answer to these questions."

The Defense Department, for instance, issued guidance for in-sourcing late last month. Few other agencies have done something similar.

Getting this definition nailed down, Issa says, will help agencies solve some of their major acquisition challenges.

Issa, the ranking member of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee, says one major problem is agencies do not do a good job writing contract requirements.

The solution, Issa says, is third party companies such as universities or non-profits that have no desire to compete for the contract. He calls these entities middleware.

"Some of these could be operated by private contractors, but their charter is for the public good," he says.

"Some of the models at the Energy Department are excellent. You can recruit some of the finest minds either adjacent to universities or sometimes in little unmarked buildings that no one knows about where you have all these PhDs helping us in the [intelligence] world. That model is a good model."

Issa adds he's talked to some universities and other non-profit organizations and they are interested in participating in these types of agreements.

"The most common middleware you can think of is an ad agency," he says. "Even if they helping you develop your strategy, they are not per se a vendor outside. I think it's important that we view that as every chance we can to have high powered professional organization to work for us as long as it doesn't create that conflict where they are writing a spec and ultimately may be compromised by private sector contracts in other areas."

The other major problem Issa points to is the workforce.

But instead of focusing on hiring more acquisition workers, Issa says retention of senior officials is key.

"We need to change the whole incentive plan for the federal workforce," he says. "Make it a longer plan, an escalating plan that holds senior staff longer."

Issa says too often the government's retirement plan pushes federal workers to leave and get a job with the private sector.

"We need to change that message," Issa says. "That would help us retain employees longer and retain more senior staff."

Issa admits his two ideas will not fix all that ails the acquisition process, but believes it would help dramatically.