

## Contractors upbeat about VETS prospects

**BY John Moore**

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A newly awarded General Services Administration government-wide acquisition contract should put more teeth behind a two-year-old directive to boost veteran-owned businesses.

That's the view of industry executives following the award of the Veterans Technology Services (VETS) GWAC. The vehicle, with a \$5 billion ceiling, is reserved for contractors owned by service-disabled veterans. The pact represents one response to President Bush's Executive Order 13360. Issued in October 2004, the document calls for the establishment of a GWAC for businesses owned by service-disabled veterans. Overall, the order seeks to meet the objective of at least 3 percent participation by service-disabled firms in federal contracts.

Frank Yahner, director of operations at Penobscot Bay Media, a Camden, Maine-based VETS GWAC contractor, said the company has not encountered many set-aside opportunities to date. The company has been a service-disabled veteran-owned firm for more than two years.

The service-disabled veteran preference "hasn't had the visibility we had hoped it would have," Yahner said. "Hopefully, this contract vehicle will let us do some more work."

VETS "certainly serves as a tool that the program and the contracts people can both use," said John Moliere, founder and president of Standard Communications, a Hume, Va., VETS GWAC contractor. "GSA has made a commitment to provide training such that program people as well as contracts people can understand the use of this vehicle."

Megan Gamse, manager of federal opportunities products at Input, called VETS a "step in the right direction" toward fulfilling the 3 percent goal. "Creating a goal and not having a mechanism like a GWAC to help agencies fulfill this goal is not productive," she said. "The creation of [VETS] can do nothing but help at this point."

Moliere said GSA has made progress in service-disabled veteran contracting beyond the VETS GWAC.

He cited GSA figures that show that the number of schedule holders with service-disabled status rose from 96 in May 2003 to 729 in September 2004. In addition, GSA reported that money spent on service-disabled schedule holders rose from \$120 million in fiscal 2004 to \$660 million in fiscal 2005. GSA expects the service-disabled schedule slice to exceed \$720 million in fiscal 2006.

### Tough task

Contractors described the VETS bidding process as arduous. The wide-ranging vehicle covers a litany of services under the headings of information security, information systems engineering and systems operations and maintenance.

"The [request for proposals] was extremely challenging," said Al Nardslco, president and chairman of Systems Made Simple, a VETS awardee in Syracuse, N.Y. "It's the largest and most extensive proposal we've ever written and the most costly."

VETS' scope made the RFP response challenging, Yahner said. Penobscot Bay Media, which specializes in geospatial information systems, is teaming with 17 other companies to provide the breadth of services the government required, he added.

Systems Made Simple, meanwhile, partners with 39 firms, which focus on areas including nanotechnology and network security. The company's main thrust is in custom software engineering and software development, but the team members will help the company expand its reach into other IT services," Nardslco said.

The 40-plus VETS contractors have yet to receive GSA's notice to proceed, which will officially open the vehicle. Another loose end appears to have been resolved: Mission Solutions was selected for VETS two functional areas, but the company's awards were contingent on a small-business determination, according to GSA.

"Mission Solutions appealed [a Small Business Administration] decision that they were not a small business," a GSA spokesman confirmed. But that appeal has been turned down, an SBA spokeswoman said. SBA's Office of Hearings and Appeals "denied the instant appeal and affirmed the area office's determination of 'other than small,'" the spokeswoman said.