



# Telecom

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networks, and many different kinds of services available on one contract.

The new contract will enable agencies to migrate to fewer but more-capable networks, enabling them to own, operate and maintain less equipment. The contract also will enable agencies to fulfill their many-varied telecommunications needs — including niche services and systems — using a single vendor instead of many.

This could translate into big savings for many agencies, said Ray Bjorklund, senior vice president and chief knowledge officer at FedSources Inc., of McLean, Va., a federal market research firm and consultancy. Agencies will no longer have to knit together several contracts to create a network with wireless, terrestrial and satellite capabilities, he said.

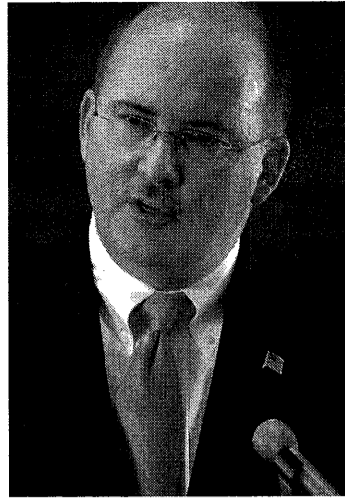
Agencies are already expressing interest. Deputy chief information officer Bajinder Paul said the Housing and Urban Development Department wants to use Networx to integrate its now-separate voice,

data and video systems. If all offices are using the same platform, it will be easier for them to conduct videoconferences and collaborate, Paul said. The new capabilities will also reduce travel expenses and free up managers' time, he said.

Networx will also offer agencies durable networks designed to hold up during disasters on the scale of Hurricane Katrina, observers said. Unlike FTS 2001, Networx Universal includes satellite and wireless communications systems under the same contract, allowing agencies to build more resilient and flexible telecommunications systems, said Tony Bardo, who chairs the Industry Advisory Council's networks and telecommunications interest group, which advises the government on technology and procurement matters.

Diversified systems will aid in emergency response by reducing the risk of total system failure if a particular structure is damaged. It will also enable managers to telework and keep in touch from remote locations, he said.

"We think we have everything government agencies need," said GSA's John Johnson, assistant



SHEILA VEMMER/FEDERALTIMES  
**GSA's John Johnson announces the award of the Networx Universal federal telecommunications contract March 29.**

commissioner for integrated technology services.

The overall price for services will be lower on Networx than agencies pay now, Johnson said. But agencies will have to wait at least a couple weeks to find out specific prices offered by each vendor.

### What now?

But to take advantage of the new services, agencies have to upgrade their systems and possibly change vendors.

"Agencies are going to have to go through a rather painful process," said federal telecom consultant Warren Suss, of Jenkintown, Pa.

Johnson said he couldn't gauge how difficult the transition would be, but he noted that most agencies will be able to apply lessons learned from their transition to FTS 2001, the current government-wide telecom contract, in 1999. At that time, widely used AT&T was not awarded the contract and most agencies were forced to switch to either Sprint or MCI WorldCom, which is now Verizon.

Although Sprint's loss with Networx could affect a third of the government's business, agencies may not experience the long delays and headaches that occurred during the FTS 2001 transition. At the time, agencies had not kept a good inventory of what needed to be transitioned, said Bardo, who worked for MCI WorldCom at the time.

MCI WorldCom won much of AT&T's old business. "Basically you had a lot of transition work in the lap of one principal new vendor," Bardo said. "And here the transition work could be spread out more among the three."

Veterans Affairs is one of those large agencies that may be forced to switch providers: Today, it is one of Sprint's largest government customers. But VA's telecom manager says the department now has the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, having been an AT&T customer before FTS 2001 forced the department to choose another provider, said David Cheplick, director of VA telecommunications operations management service. VA knows the challenges and had already planned for the possibility Sprint might not be offered a new contract, he said.

Sprint provides VA with a quarter of its telecom business, including voice and data infrastructure, calling cards and automated answering services for customer service lines, Cheplick said.

### Get the most out of competition

With three prime vendors and dozens of potential subcontractors, Networx is offering competition not seen in the previous two GSA telecom contracts, each limited to two prime vendors, Bardo said.

Each agency is required to use "fair opportunity," a process that will enable each vendor to compete for business. This competition will not only allow agencies to explore new technologies, but it will also help them get better prices and better solutions, experts said. While incumbents like Verizon, which today holds more than half of the government's telecom business, will always have an edge, "agencies will give fair opportunity a real shot," Bardo said.

The pressure will be on industry to keep current customers happy while growing business, Bardo said, and agencies should use that tension to find the best prices and services. Agencies should also keep in mind that they can still get different services from different vendors, observers said.

But agencies will have to wait

before placing their orders. GSA plans to test the vendors' operating systems to ensure they're compliant before agencies can purchase them. This process could take as long as five months.

### Timing

And even when GSA is ready to give agencies the go-ahead, each agency transition will take time. Fair opportunity processes must be followed, and agencies must carefully evaluate each vendor's bid. Agencies can help themselves along by studying systems and soliciting bids during the testing process, so they can be ready to go when GSA gives the OK, Bardo said.

Verizon officials said they expect transitions to begin as early as this summer and to go on for two years. And some agencies will select new services on the contract before the year is out, they said.

But agencies may wait before upgrading their systems in order to let other agencies test out systems, observers said.

Agencies should be cautious about choosing new, untried technologies, FedSources' Bjorklund said. Internet voice systems "are not really ready for prime time," he said. "And here the transition work could be spread out more among the three."

The previous transition was plagued with headaches, service interruptions and lack of focus, observers said. Agencies were more focused on protecting systems from Y2K glitches than they were on transitioning to new systems, Johnson said. A former transition manager at the Defense Department, he said agencies have to learn from previous mistakes.

Most agencies have already begun preparing by analyzing their inventory and determining what capabilities they want to have under new contracts. They're learning about the fair opportunity process and coming up with detailed transition plans for how they will add Networx systems in the short run and how they want to enhance technology to meet their mission in the long run, agency and industry experts said.

In the end, agencies may stick with the vendor they know to ensure they don't experience disruptions in services, industry observers said. At some agencies, missions are so critical they cannot afford interruptions and would rather forgo the long-term savings for long-term security, he said.

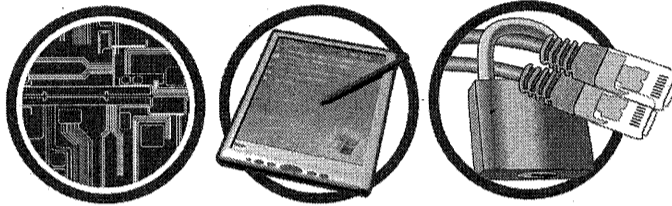
"Agencies can't have their operations interrupted during a transition," said Verizon Federal Vice President Susan Zeleniak. "You have to be respectful of their timing. The best transitions require a lot of upfront planning and solid communication."

Each agency has to make a decision on how it will transition, Suss said. They may decide to continue with the same technical design of the network and just hire a new vendor, or they may migrate to a whole new set of services. Lower-risk strategies have fewer benefits, but too much transition can cripple an agency if something goes wrong.

E-mail: MZHemingway@federaltimes.com; ecastell@federaltimes.com

## WHAT'S NEW UNDER NETWORK

Among the services the General Services Administration is seeking under Networx, the government's next telecom contract:



SERVICE	WHAT IT IS	ADVANTAGES TO AGENCIES
<b>TRANSPORT</b>		
Voice Over IP Transport	Real-time transport of voice service over Internet protocol network	Enables use of single network infrastructure for voice and data
Converged IP	Next-generation voice, data and video service	Integrates delivery of voice, data and video over single managed IP network
Content Delivery Network	Smaller-scale Internet infrastructure for domestic or global Web presence	Reduces current Internet infrastructure needs, guarantees 100 percent Web availability and improves citizen response time
Layer 2 VPN	New technology that encapsulates older data protocols into Multi Protocol Label Switching (MPLS) packets, which can be transported on modern, high-speed networks	Allows an agency to establish a high-speed, high-performance network with quality-of-service guarantees between multiple locations regardless of the connection technology used at the locations
<b>SECURITY</b>		
Managed Tiered Security	Four levels of bundled security features with price discounts	Provides appropriate, cost-effective security to handle up to top secret, sensitive compartmented information, and other extremely sensitive information
Incident Response	Planning and response to potential malicious cyber attacks	Complements in-house security expertise with forensics services to apprehend offenders
Secure Managed E-Mail	Proactive scanning of government e-mail traffic before it enters agency network	Provides complete, secure and fully managed e-mail security
<b>MANAGEMENT AND APPLICATIONS</b>		
Teleworking	Communications to systems and applications from remote location	Enables geographically dispersed staff and supports continuity-of-operations plans and disaster recovery
Customer Contact Center	Service via voice, fax and e-mail channels	Allows capabilities such as Web chat, e-mail response and Web page collaboration
Dedicated Hosting	Service for outsourcing of Web hosting operations	Provides complete support for hosting large software programs without capital or personnel investment
<b>WIRELESS</b>		
Cellular Personal Communications	National and international wireless service	Provides latest technology with built-in technology refreshment

SOURCE: General Services Administration

GRAPHIC BY BRYAN SMITH