

**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)**  
**Office of Acquisition and Logistics (OAL)**



**Denver Supplier Relationship Management Forum**  
**Detailed Report**

Submitted by:  
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Ambit Group, LLC, a Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business, is a results-driven, strategic management consulting firm. We draw on proven methodologies and a commitment to our client's success to provide services and solutions that deliver meaningful, measurable and sustainable results.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Morning Session.....	4
VA Executive Hosts .....	4
Introduction .....	4
Breakout Group Key Themes and Recommendations.....	7
Medical Equipment .....	7
IT Management and Broadcasting.....	7
Healthcare and Drugs.....	8
Management.....	8
Building/Construction/Engineering Group .....	9
VA Café .....	10
Set-Up.....	10
Roles.....	10
Mr. Jan Frye’s opening remarks.....	11
VA Café Station Follow-up Actions .....	12
Getting in the Door at VA .....	12
Requirements/RFP/RFQ.....	12
Modifications.....	12
FedBid .....	12
Construction.....	13
Appendix A. Agenda.....	17
Appendix B. Survey and Survey Tool Discussion – Results Statistic Graphics .....	18
Appendix C. Comment Cards.....	22
Appendix D. Attendee List .....	29
Appendix E. Focus Group Protocols.....	32
Appendix F. Acronyms.....	33

## Introduction

This report is a compilation of the detailed notes and feedback from five facilitated breakout sessions that occurred at the Supplier Relationship Management (SRM) Forum on Tuesday, March 6 in at the Westin Denver Downtown Hotel in Denver, Colorado. Seventy-six representatives from sixty-six companies participated in five breakout sessions. The breakout sessions consisted of the following groups:

- Medical Equipment
- Information Technology (IT) Management and Broadcasting
- Healthcare and Drugs
- Management
- Building/Construction/Engineering Group

## Morning Session

### VA Executive Hosts

Glenn Haggstrom (Senior Executive Service [SES])

VA Executive Director of Acquisition, Logistics, and Construction

Jan Frye

Senior Procurement Executive

Norbert Doyle

Acting Head of Contracting Activity for Veterans Health Administration

Maurice "Mo" Stewart (SES)

Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for Acquisition and Logistics Programs and Policy

Craig Robinson

Office of National Healthcare Acquisition

Tona Braithwaite

Director, Logistics Policy, Supply Chain Management

### Introduction

#### ***Mr. Stewart provided an update on the VA SRM progress***

We began SRM to improve VA's contracting business and better communicate our requirements with the Suppliers. This type of outreach initiative is one of the top five supply chain strategies. Several private companies have attempted to initiate similar SRM programs; however, they have not been able to sustain them. Some successful companies who have utilized this approach include: Walmart, Harley Davison, Proctor and Gamble, and Whirlpool; VA is of the first Public sector organizations to create and sustain an SRM program.

To make this program successful, there are three necessary steps:

1. There must be a mutual commitment by the VA leadership team.
2. There must be a mutual commitment by the customer and client
3. There should be visible improvement over time.

We have demonstrated improvement in very small steps. As VA is a large organization, this means change will not happen overnight.

The goal is to become your Customer of Choice. For example, if the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of Commerce (DOC), VA, and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) all have similar solicitations out for bid, and your company has limited assets, we want you to bid on ours. We want you to know that we listen to your concerns and address customer service issues. We know we need to define what Contracting Officers (CO) and Contracting Officer Technical Representatives (COTR) do. We want you to get the "best bang for your buck" with VA.

### ***How VA is transforming the Supply Chain***

Since August 2010, VA has sought input from our Suppliers in three different ways. Our aim is to better understand their concerns about working with VA and hear their recommendations for improving the acquisition process. These "Voice of the Customer" initiatives included:

1. Regional SRM Forums and the Federal Supply Schedule (FSS) Forums, which provide us with qualitative feedback on what is working and what still needs to be improved.
2. Supplier Perception Surveys, which provide us with quantitative data to measure our improvement.
3. The VA Industry Advisory Group, which provides us with detailed input on specific issues.

### ***VA's current state of management***

Acquisitions staff lack project management and analytical skills, as well as training and recognition. The procurement steps are inconsistent and processes are not well communicated. We have multiple contracting vehicles and we are not utilizing them to the full potential. Logistics personnel are not involved enough upfront and we need to move to a more integrated project team approach.

We are still using VA Acquisition Academy (VAAA) to train our procurement staff and a Senior Procurement Council was established to maintain a single voice throughout the organization. Mr. Frye and Mr. Haggstrom chair the council. To date, we have administered surveys to 15,000 people and stood up an advisory group to help transform VA's acquisition process.

Data management will adopt global data standards to generalize business metrics.

Because processes are fragmented, we will be doing more strategic sourcing to manage suppliers.

We are hoping to define our Customer Service metrics and improve customer service.

There have been 13 SRM forums to date. The Key Themes you have shared with us at these forums include:

- Communications: Communication and transparency surrounding the acquisitions process needs improvement, both internally and externally.
- Customer service: Enhance the level and quality of acquisition support – i.e., calls returned, modifications addressed in a timely manner.
- Teamwork: Provide clear definitions of the roles and responsibilities of the CO, the COTR, and the Program Manager in order to better differentiate among them.
- Contracting process: Suppliers want to provide VA with expertise during Requests for Information (RFI) to ensure VA is using the correct contract type and requirements definitions in order to give VA the best price and delivery. Suppliers also are concerned with use of FedBid reverse auction and impact on their profit margin.
- Performance: Suppliers would like a feedback system in place where they can offer suggestions and recommendations on requirements and the contract process.

### ***FSS Forums***

Two forums have been held to address FSS concerns. Mr. Robinson took those issues and did a great job satisfying many of the concerns and in 2011 we came back and discussed improvements and what still needed work. VA is very happy to say we have made many improvements.

### ***Survey***

Over 9,000 Suppliers have received surveys with a 19 percent response rate. We want to hear from more of you and more small business Suppliers. We see more opportunity to improve. If we can turn the neutral perceptions into positive perceptions, we will be well beyond the 70 percent satisfaction rating which is our goal in the short term. We will continue to work these surveys and identify areas to improve.

### ***Industry Advisory Group***

19 diverse Suppliers comprise our Industry Advisory Group with a goal to provide VA senior executives with specific strategies and tactics for process improvements. The group meets quarterly and will be presenting white papers to the upcoming Senior Procurement Council in May.

### ***Upcoming OAL Outreach***

The third SRM webinar will be held on Monday, March 12, 2012. The following will be offered:

- VA acquisition leadership will brief Supplier participants on collective feedback from the Supplier community and internal VA Program Offices (PO) in the past year.
- VA will report a summary of findings from the feedback collection efforts and address what has been done, what is currently being done, and what VA will continue to do in the future to address this feedback.
- VA acquisition leadership will address specific issues and concerns expressed by the Supplier community.

### ***Closing***

Slides from this morning's presentation will be emailed out to everyone and will be posted on the SRM website.

The morning Supplier Survey will now be administered.

## Breakout Group Key Themes and Recommendations

### Medical Equipment

#### *Key Themes & Issues*

- There is a lack of consistency across CO's and VA facilities and Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN).
- There is a lack of awareness among purchasers about key purchasing requirements.
- Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB) requirements/certification process/set asides are unclear to suppliers.
- Suppliers have much confusion about the role of the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) in the procurement process.
- The timing for modifications and contract awards are still very long.
- It is still unclear whether/how the VA considers Total Cost of Ownership (TCO).
- It is still difficult for Suppliers to find out about new VA opportunities.

#### *Recommendations*

- VA should do a better job of monitoring Blanket Purchase Agreement (BPA) utilization.
- VA should exercise more authority over Veteran's Health Administration's (VHA) activities.
- VA should develop a better process for forecasting opportunities.

### IT Management and Broadcasting

#### *Key Themes & Issues*

- VA personnel are inconsistent in behavior and overworked.
- Suppliers see poor choices in contract vehicles, apparently made for convenience.
- Process issues affect the cost of doing business.
  - Time is lost bidding, submitting, and otherwise responding to RFPs which get cancelled.
  - Leadership and political changes often result in changed or canceled projects.
  - Budget pressure and appropriations problems affect projects.
  - All this cost is passed on to clients eventually.
- Suppliers have trouble contacting VA staff.
  - Email is more likely to get a response than voicemail.
  - VA feedback, review, and approval is often not forthcoming.

#### *Recommendations*

- VA should put a hard deadline on the RFP question and answer period, so as to not push back all the other milestones for the RFP.
- VA should improve publicity for Advanced Planning Briefings for Industry (APBIs) and Industry Days.

- VA should work to improve content in APBIs and Industry Days; Suppliers have not found enough value in the events as they are now.
- VA should provide a list of deliverables at kickoff.
  - Currently, Suppliers provide a list of deliverables to VA, which is backwards.

## Healthcare and Drugs

### *Key Themes & Issues*

- Suppliers see two “VAs”: Program Office and Contracting Office. They see limited communication between these two entities, and often the two have different goals and needs.
- Suppliers are concerned with the SDVO certification process. They feel that VA is evaluating for capability rather than socio-economic status.
- Suppliers recognize a conflict between various laws, mandates, executive orders, and existing business relationships.
- Suppliers feel that E-Buy forces them to “play a game within a game;” Prices must be negotiated two separate times.

### *Recommendations*

- VA needs to commit to relationships with suppliers from the top down.
- VA should make changes to the price negotiation approach, particularly regarding schedule purchases and E-Buy.
- Contracting Offices and POs must remain in regular communication throughout the procurement process (from requirement identification to contract closeout).
- VA should make the evaluation criteria for the Contracting Workforce transparent and should include input from the PO if this is not already considered.

## Management

### *Key Themes & Issues*

- What is the true role of procurement within the organization? Is it to prevent goods and services delivered and to put up road blocks? Or to enable an organization to provide better goods and services. The culture needs to change and VA should to prioritize what needs to be done.
- Veteran's First buying strategy vs. FSS schedule holders: how does the VA see that?
- COs and contracting officers should abide by law vs. suggestion.
- Standardization across agencies and regions creates a better experience for the customers. [For processes and training]
- Better communications is an underlying theme.
  - VA should better communicate what vehicles exist and the reason for choosing a particular contract vehicle.
  - What VA offices do what? There should be better communication around that in terms of who handles emergency acquisitions, technology only, etc.
- VA is a role model for veteran set-asides.



- Everything is decentralized within the different organizations. VA Central Office (VACO), Frederick, etc. - there is no consistent organization within VA. They need stronger standards and accountability. Relationships between program offices need to be improved.

### **Recommendations**

- Define the role of the procurement as it relates to mission and strategy. Procurement officers need to know their roles.
- Take that overall strategies and policies, make it executable and apply it VA wide.
- Veterans First: Get some answers and define the strategy. When should it be used vs. FSS?
- Pricing upload through the NAC should be standardized and communicated to the vendors.
- There should be mandatory vendor outreach in different regions to explore different vendor options. Many contracting officers don't do their research, and therefore are unaware who has what capabilities. (FBO, industry days, etc.)
- Suppliers would like to see younger COs. There seems to be no upward mobility within the contracting workforce.
- There should be more interaction during the response process. It is too formal and there is not enough opportunity for engagement. This is especially important for larger acquisitions.

### **Building/Construction/Engineering Group**

#### **Key Themes & Issues**

- COs lack understanding of what businesses experience and the challenges they face.
- The SDVOB verification process isn't transparent, takes too long, and does not have a reasonable appeals process.
- Contract awards take too long and are sometimes cancelled without an explanation.
- VA seems to prioritize price over value.

#### **Recommendations**

- VA should create a "Supplier internship" to give procurement staff private industry experience.
- VA should establish a standard length of time between proposal submission and award of contract.
- VA should scale the RFP requirements to the size and complexity of the project.
- VA should provide more training for procurement staff in project management.
- VA should better define who makes decisions.

## VA Café

There was a new agenda item added to the forums; VA Café. This new agenda item was added to the Denver SRM Forum Agenda. Scheduled for one hour at 11:00 am, its purpose is to provide participants with a well-organized opportunity to raise with VA leadership any “burning” issues they would like to discuss.

In previous forums, this same process has happened ad hoc during the breaks between sessions. Participants have crowded around one or more VA officials to ask specific questions and/or get redress for a particular challenge faced by their company. By structuring these conversations in the agenda, we gave suppliers the opportunity to raise special issues, and enable everyone to learn from the feedback VA officials provide.

The VA Café is modeled after a widely-used process called the World Café, in which stations representing various topics are established around the room, and the participants move around to listen or contribute to different conversations for as long as they choose.

### Set-Up

A facilitator set up the session and gave directions to the participants. five stations will be arranged in an adjoining room, each of which will have an assigned topic, a VA official, a facilitator, and a note taker:

Topic	VA Official	Facilitator	Note Taker
Getting in the Door at VA	Craig Robinson	Tallarico	Welty
Input on Requirements/RFPs and RFQs	Norbert Doyle and Danny Freeman	Krynicky	Rhea
FedBid	Jan Frye	Cooper	Palcic
Modifications	Delia Adams	Condon	Rebach
Construction	Thaddeus Willoughby	Black	Dunn

### Roles

- Participants
  - Participate at whichever stations are of interest for as long as they desire.
  - When a participant feels s/he has nothing to learn and nothing to add at a station, he/she should move on to another station.
- VA Official
  - Answer questions posed by participants.
  - Clarify the topic for participants, as needed.
  - Look for issues raised frequently or with great energy, and consider bringing these up during the Ask VA session later in the day.
- Facilitator
  - Welcome participants and explain the process: “At this station we’ll be discussing Topic X. It’s your chance as suppliers to raise challenges you’ve been facing and get suggestions

from VA officials and other suppliers for how to move forward. You can stay in this discussion for the whole hour, or move on to other stations whenever you like.”

- Facilitate the discussion, ensuring that everyone gets a chance to be heard. Encourage questions and comments. (NOTE that with participants arriving and leaving, duplicate issues may be raised.)
- (If time is available): Encourage discussion of best practices related to the topic, or other ideas suppliers may have to help one another.
- Note Taker
  - Capture the main threads of topics discussed, and record any follow-up actions.

### Mr. Jan Frye's opening remarks

- The forums are valuable to us as we are getting much information we did not know so we can now act.
- VA made a decision to shut down FedBid in VA for a short period of time to figure out how we dovetailed our system, figure out why schedule-holders are being treated unfairly. We are not opposed to it in principle, but opposed to not running it the way it should be run. This is a policy issue, or lack thereof.

## VA Café Station Follow-up Actions

During the café sessions, participants were able to ask questions specific to the topic and to their business. The detailed notes from the session are included in Appendix B. Below are specific follow-up items that VA staff agreed to address after the meeting.

### Getting in the Door at VA

VA Representative: Craig Robinson

Facilitator: Pat Tallarico

Note Taker: Jayme Welty

- Craig Robinson agreed to provide Ronnie Weiss and Crystal Pokorncy from The Conflict Center the best entry point for conflict and anger management services. Mr. Robinson will need to find the headquarters or central program director for this type of service. Ms. Weiss' email address is [Ronnie.weiss@conflictcenter.org](mailto:Ronnie.weiss@conflictcenter.org) and phone number is 303-433-4983.
- Mr. Robinson agreed to follow up with a supplier, Laura Tyson, on a central contact for mental health services. Ms. Tyson's email address is [laura@womenswilderness.org](mailto:laura@womenswilderness.org) and phone number is 303-938-9191
- One Supplier has a modification that has been at the NAC for four months. He asked about what he needed to do to get this modification through. Mr. Robinson asked that the Supplier send him the background information on this modification so that he can look into it.

### Requirements/RFP/RFQ

VA Representative: Norbert Doyle and Danny Freeman [VHA NCO 19: 6 Hospitals in the Region]

Facilitator: Leah Krynicky

Note Taker: Jennifer Rhea

- No specific follow-up items.

### Modifications

VA Representative: Delia Adams

Facilitator: John Condon

Note Taker: Ben Rebach

- VA will put a list of individual contact points for each regional contract office online.

### FedBid

VA Representative: Jan Frye

Facilitator: Paul Cooper

Note Taker: Daniel Palcic

- No specific follow-up items.

## Construction

VA Representative: Thaddeus Willowbhy (CFM) and Garry Harris (NCA)

Facilitator: Doug Black

Note Taker: Megan Dunn

- Unanswered questions included:
  - Is there a list of solar contractors, and is there a conference/convention that VA would attend to learn more about solar?
  - Published stats for review of past awards where it displays the actual best value in award versus delivery?

## Ask the VA: Question and Answer Session

The question and answer session begins with a few selected questions from the breakout sessions. After these selected questions, audience questions are taken and answered.

*Questions were answered by a panel of Glenn Haggstrom, the Executive Director of OALC; Jan Frye, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Acquisition and Logistics; Norbert Doyle, the Head of Contract Activity (HCA) for the VHA, Maurice Stewart, Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for Acquisition and Logistics Programs and Policy; Craig Robinson, Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary, National Acquisition Center (NAC); Delia Adams, Director, VHA, Service Area Office –West; Thaddeus Willoughby, Construction and Facilities Management (CFM); and moderated by Pat Tallarico.*

- Contract vehicles: How are they selected and why are they done open market vs. through a schedule, etc.
  - The FAR has a hierarchy for contractual instrument use. It starts with national contracts (a requirement is identified at a centralized level that can be ordered nationally through VHA to leverage volume), then BPAs leveraged against the FSS, VISN BPAs, local contracts, then Open Market.
  - Open Market is an item that is not available on a federal contract. Within the VHA, it is much lower on the list. VHA relies heavily on national contracts and the FSS.
  - The VA operates on a Best Value vs. Best Price comparison. With an overstretched workforce, it is difficult to document and prove best value so many choose best price. Best Value decisions tend to be protested because of the difficulty in proving something is the best value. When the lowest technically acceptable bidder is selected, it is difficult for other companies to contest that decision.
  - Given the breadth and depth of the VA locations that handle contracting, there are variations in enforcing supply chain hierarchy. The VA does conduct Risk Analysis on a regular basis but it is not an everyday activity.
  - The VAAA has been established and all new COs go through that training class. Existing COs are required to have 80 points in continual learning every two years and attending this academy helps towards meeting this requirement.
  - The VA panel did acknowledge that there is a lack of consistency in the way different COs do business. Internal VA customer satisfaction surveys show a similar frustration with the Contracting Office as a whole.
  - No Supplier should ever be left hanging. No matter the outcome, some kind of response should always be received.
  - The VA is looking to put together some kind of regionally located outreach program for communication with small businesses. The panel recommended that all those in the room consider attending the VA Small Business Conference in June in Detroit, MI.
- What supplier communication takes place prior to a solicitation coming out?
  - The VA holds APBIs prior to drafting a solicitation. For example, there were over 700 participants in several planned APBIs for the T4 contract. From all indications, many 'gray

- areas' were addressed in these sessions. Because of these sessions, the VA received a substantially fewer amount of inquiries to the final RFP.
- The VA believes this early communication is a great way to do business. They are looking at using the Wiki (which the GSA would manage) to post draft RFPs for external input.
  - Two new offices at the TAC were created: Advanced Rapid Response Office (containing COs, Systems Engineers, and Program Managers in place to help with the language) and the Program Advisory Office (to look at the large contracts to evaluate issues and begin to find solutions).
- The contracts hierarchy leaves out the priority for SDVOB and VOBs. There are some Contracting Offices that do put this preference into their solicitations while others do not. Has the VA considered a mandate to put in criteria even in the national contract for Veteran preference?
    - There is a law that requires a 3% set-aside. The VA leadership has put in even loftier goals of 10-12%. The VA has blown this goal away over last several years (upwards of 20%). This law does not pertain to FAR Part A. The requirement for set-asides is in Open Market. Through all of this, the goals are being out-done. The VA did almost ½ billion dollars in SDVOBs last year using the FSS.
  - Does the VA sponsor a mentor program?
    - The Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU) does have a mentor/prodigy program. There aren't many more specifics that the panel can provide. It was suggested that they go to the VA website for more information on this. The panel agreed to send out the link to the website to meeting participants.
  - What should one do if a CO punishes you for protesting a solicitation?
    - If you protest a solicitation and the CO comes after you because of it, you need to communicate that to the proper level because this should not be happening. No retribution or retaliation should be occurring. If you do not get what you feel is an accurate answer, you are permitted to go up the appropriate chain. They are working on a public VA website to provide the information on the chain of command. At the VISN level, they are working on having small business liaisons that are independent of the contracting office.
    - Craig Robinson stood up a Help Desk at the NAC with the senior COs. The VA panel would like to work on a way to get supplier contract questions answered, either a number to call or a website to visit. They reorganized the NAC to be set up by region so that it better aligns with the field areas being serviced.
  - How do we find out who our small business liaison is?
    - Search the Small Business Administration (SBA) for local office information. This is where the liaison would be located.
  - How does the VA handle large companies who subcontract an SDVOB to utilize their certification but then do not assign them the necessary percentage of work?
    - There is a lot of interest on Capitol Hill in large contracts that have subcontractors so that they can utilize the SDVOB certification.
    - There will be audits of the large firms to ensure compliance. The VA will be looking at the subcontract requirements and the amount of workload given to the SDVOB subcontract.

Appropriate action will be conducted should the large contract not be in compliance. The VA is going to make sure that the SDVOBs are not being used as a pass-through. As SDVOB needs to report this to their CO, should it be happening. If not nothing is done, then escalate to offices like Norbert, Jan, Craig, etc.

- Jan Frye thanked the suppliers for their participation. He believes this forum process is invaluable. If the VA does not do anything with this information then these forums are a waste of time and money. The VA intends to change the way they do business with Suppliers. Changes are difficult, but they are committed to moving forward. Over the next few years Suppliers should see a tremendous change in the contracting offices. There are a lot of young, energized, and properly trained people joining the contracting office workforce.

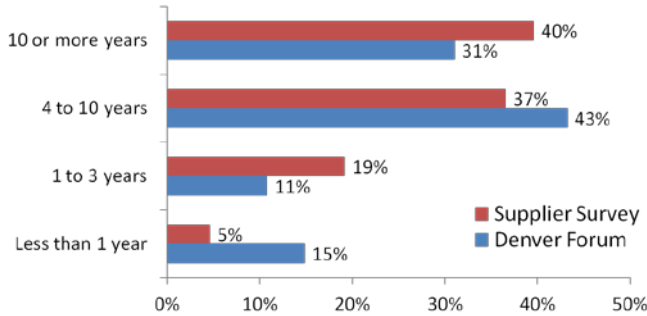


## Appendix A. Agenda

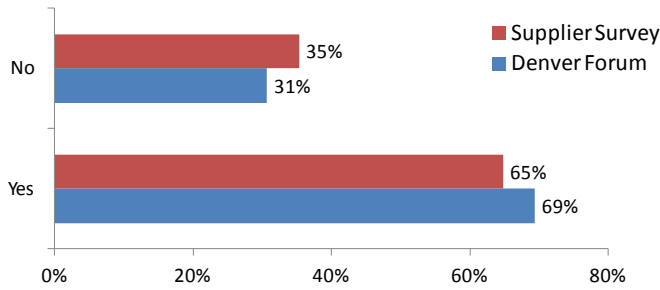
Time	Description
8:00 am	Registration and informal networking - Tabor Auditorium Foyer
8:30 am	Introduction - Tabor Auditorium
8:45 am	SRM/FSS Update - Tabor Auditorium
9:15am	Participant Survey - Tabor Auditorium Ambit will conduct a brief survey to assess participant demographics and perceptions: Facilitated by Pat Tallarico
9:30 am	Facilitated Breakout Session - Cook, Horace Tabor, Molly Brown, Tabor Auditorium & Larimer
9:45 am)	Facilitated Breakout Session Thoughts or impressions about working with VA
10:45 am	BREAK
11:00 am	VA Café - Molly Brown & Horace Tabor
12:00 pm	Networking Lunch - V's Lounge *for registered participants only Participants are encouraged to select seating based on suggested tabletop discussion topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longtime Suppliers Connecting with New Suppliers</li> <li>• SDVOBs Connecting with Large Businesses</li> <li>• Getting in the Door at VA</li> </ul>
1:30 pm	Breakout Groups Report - Tabor Auditorium Facilitators present themes and topics from the morning breakout
2:15 pm	Ask the VA - Tabor Auditorium Facilitated question and answer session with panel of VA leaders.
3:30 pm	Survey Results Report Out - Tabor Auditorium
3:45 pm	Winding Down - Tabor Auditorium
4:00 pm	Adjourn

## Appendix B. Survey and Survey Tool Discussion – Results Statistic Graphics

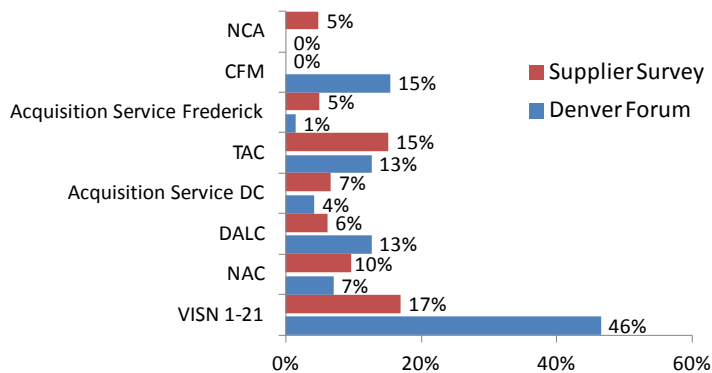
- How many years have you been a supplier to VA?



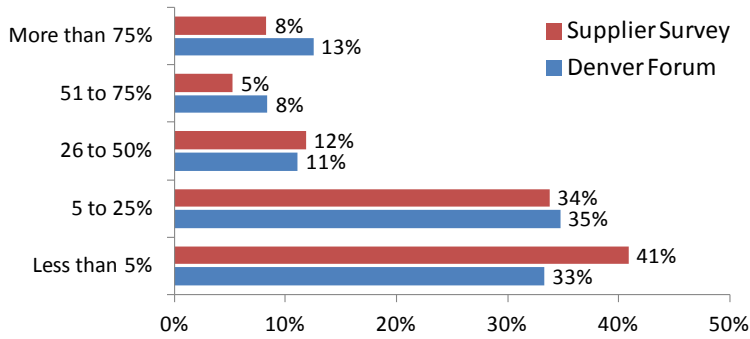
- Do you currently have an active contract with VA?



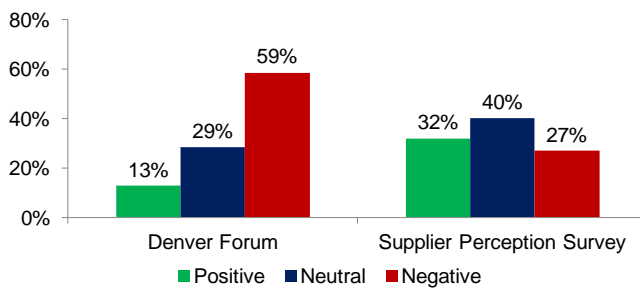
- Which VA contracting office do you work with?



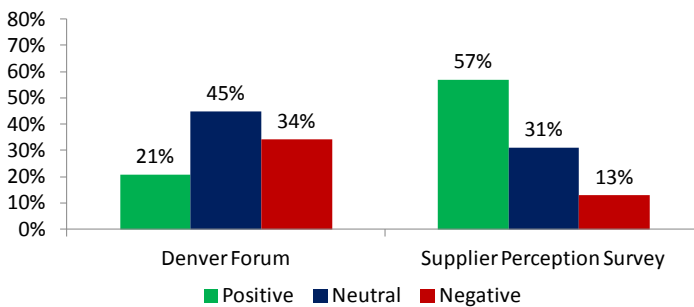
- What percent of your revenue comes from VA contracts?



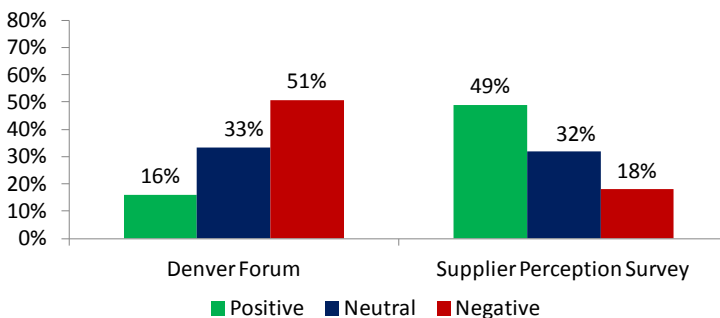
- How would you rate VA's processes to allow you to provide best value?



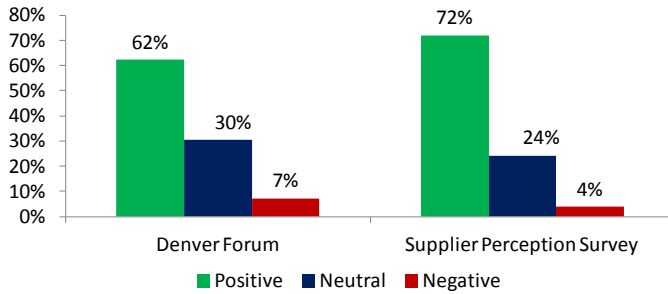
- How would you rate the overall quality of the working relationship between VA and your company?



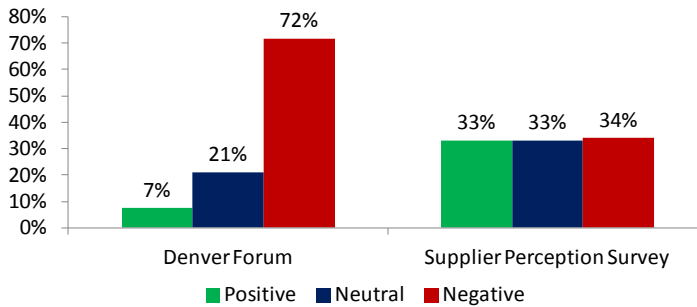
- How would you rate VA's commitment to you for a long-term business relationship?



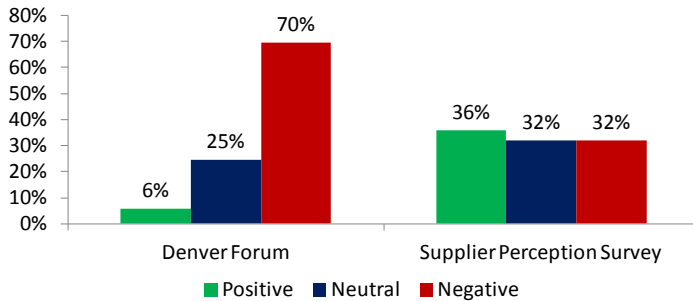
- How would you rate your commitment to VA for a long-term business relationship?



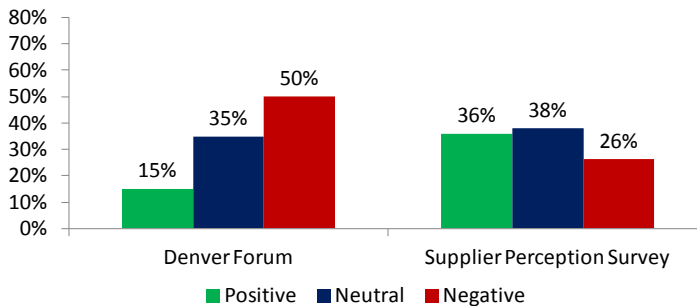
- How would you rate VA's overall procurement process?



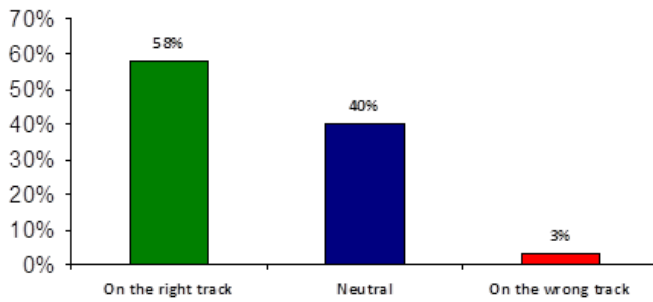
- How would you rate the extent to which VA makes it easy for you to succeed in effectively providing the goods and services they procure?



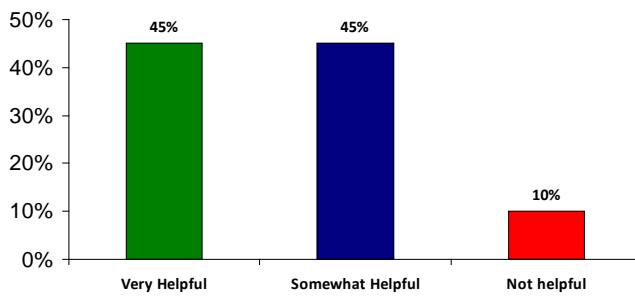
- How would you rate the extent to which VA provides an effective interface between its management and yours?



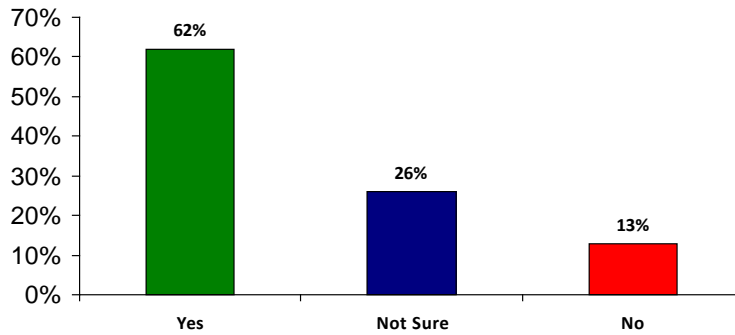
- I believe VA's supplier relationship management efforts are:



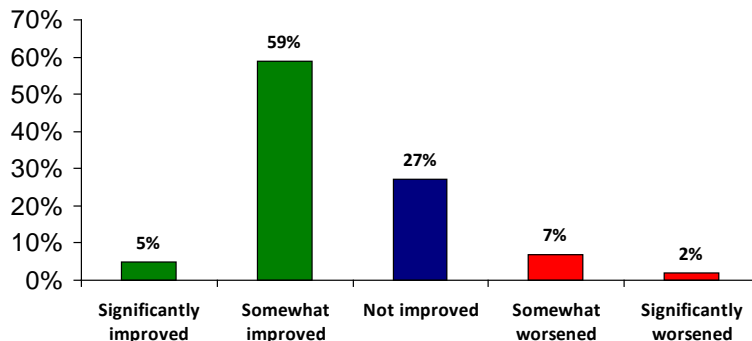
- How helpful has today's session been in your understanding of VA?



- Do you think that as a result of today's forum VA better understands your concerns?



- How has your impression of the VA's acquisition organization changed as a result of today's forum?



## Appendix C. Comment Cards

The following are verbatim comments made by Suppliers regarding their impressions of the SRM Denver forum. The comments are verbatim from the Supplier. They are grouped by **positive** comments and suggested **changes**. Under each category, feedback is grouped by topic.

### Positive

#### VA Leadership Presence

- There were 27 comments indicating that participants appreciated the presence and accessibility of the VA Officials. They particularly liked the openness of the dialogue during the “Ask VA” panel. A few participants noted that this indicated a commitment to change.
  - Leadership present makes it seem like change will occur.
  - Communication with officials.
  - Interacting and opportunity to interact with VA was excellent.
  - Good opportunity to meet VA leadership.
  - Having the right VA people available.
  - People who can help with this process were here.
  - Happy that VA is listening.
  - Access to people who can make change.
  - Open discussions.
  - VA personnel willingness to listen to industry’s concerns.
  - Access to leaders.
  - Panel input.
  - Access to key people.
  - Key people were very approachable.
  - Having VA executives “face the music” and express commitment to address issues.
  - Executive management presence, straight forward responses.
  - Open dialogue – no sacred cows.
  - VA Executives showed up and were accessible.
  - Honesty of the panel in recognizing the challenges.
  - Them asking us to contact them for follow-up.
  - Appreciated the openness of the meetings and Questions and Answer (Q&A)
  - Open discussion.
  - VA leadership availability.
  - Open communications.
  - Having SES answer questions in the panel illustrated to me sincerity in improving VA's procurement process.

- Learned points in VA to talk to.
- Problems on table.
- Access to personnel at VA.

### Sessions

- Participants liked the dialogue-oriented sessions, including the VA Café, the breakouts, the Q&A and the networking lunch. People found these opportunities for interaction important for building business relationships, understanding common concerns, and addressing issues. A few also noted that the morning presentations were informative.
  - Presentations by the VA – especially the first presentation.
  - Idea of the small group breakout sessions.
  - Did learn or became aware of 1 thing I did not know so was worth the time.
  - VA Panel.
  - Breakout session.
  - Learned more about RFPs and modifications.
  - Really liked the Q&A at the end.
  - VA Café.
  - Ask the VA.
  - Productivity lunch.
  - Café breakout.
  - VA open discussion.
  - Open questions.
  - Some information on procedures.
  - Lunch.
  - Enjoyed beginning of forum. Very informative.
  - Break outs were good.
  - Breakout sessions were very helpful.
  - Breakouts were good for dialogue.
  - Breakout sessions – but need to break out into individual rooms.
  - VA Panel – ask VA.
  - VA Café.
  - Breakouts
  - VA Question panel.
  - The organizational challenges that the leaders of the VA Acquisition process have to overcome to make changes.
  - Insight into the education and training the VA puts into their staff to perform their assigned tasks.

- Great to network with other suppliers.

### Surveys

- Six participants liked the surveys and a few explained that the surveys helped them understand the concerns of the people in the room and the varying perspectives of participants.
  - Survey and results.
  - Like the use of clickers.
  - Survey to help understand concerns of all present.
  - Forum setup – surveys.
  - Survey process.
  - Surveys to help us baseline our perspective within the group.

### Information Exchange

- Exchange of experiences.
- Being able to address a pressing issue.
- Opportunities to interact and potential partners at lunch.
- Networking with other people.
- Opportunity to expand business.
- Nice to hear similar feedback/experiences.
- Seeing others having the same issue.
- Group interaction.

### Logistics, Planning, and Facilitation

- Most respondents felt that the meeting was well planned and well executed – both from a content and logistical perspective. Some participants called out the quality of the Ambit team.
  - Forum was very well organized – give Meghan a raise!
  - Great facility and agenda.
  - Facilitators did a good job.
  - Well orchestrated.
  - Location – good city, good hotel.
  - Good facilitators.
  - Liked the café setting.
  - Good facilitators.
  - Clarify of understanding even if not positive.
  - Format of forum.
  - Nice hotel.
  - Good food event.
  - Well run.



- Ambit does a nice job.
- Variety of venues to work in – breakout sessions, lunch, etc.
- Promise to receive an email with the forum information.
- The phone call to encourage our company to participate in the Forum.
- Good content.
- Great venue.
- Excellent facilitators (Ambit).

### General

- A few participants also expressed general appreciation to VA for holding the Forums and for the work that VA does for veterans.
  - The fact that it happened – shows VA's interest in improving.
  - Continue the process.
  - Thank you for doing this.
  - Thank you so much for all you do for America's Vets and allowing us to work with you on contract to serve them too!
  - I have only recently won several VA contracts (in IT) and now have a better understanding of the process and mechanisms available to help improve it.

### Changes

#### Café and Breakout Suggestions

- Although many respondents liked the discussion-oriented sessions, they suggested they could be improved by ensuring that participants at table top discussions can be heard, allowing more structured time for people to talk, and providing more anonymous or private forms of interaction.
  - Small group sessions did not allow for everyone to speak. In order to get the information you need, written surveys should be given out.
  - The VA Café should be more 15 minute sessions with VA representatives and individuals then rotate to each table after 15 minutes rather than a "free for all."
  - Allow for anonymous VA concern presentation then discuss as a group. It is uncomfortable and/or potentially dangerous to speak of a firm's concerns.
  - Discussion group difficult to hear all comments in discussion.
  - Felt uncomfortable sharing too much information in the breakout group with direct competitors present.
  - Would like the café session changed to have VA staff positioned around the room with title and role. Then allow each vendor to move around so desired and allowed to meet with VA staff 1x1 for 5 minutes on any subject.
  - Would like to speak more one-on-one.
  - VA café was not as informative as expected.
  - Breakout too difficult to hear.

- Wasn't able to have my question addressed.
- Do more anonymous on answer.
- Clearer answers.

### Demonstrating Results

- Several participants suggested that VA spend more time talking about changes that have been made as a result of Forum input.
  - Have a process for change.
  - Come with tasks/actions for change and get feedback.
  - Show what has changed from previous forum.
  - Show more results.
  - Could you report on progress made on issues raised in past (minutes show same old issues).

### Planning and Logistics

- There were a few suggestions on logistical changes, including extending the Forum to two days, including facilitators at the networking lunch, and improving notification for the event. Two participants suggested that allowing for early submission of participant concerns (e.g., in the registration process) could help facilitate more solution-oriented discussions at the event.
  - A few more breaks.
  - Better notification of forum events.
  - Extend to 2 days.
  - Serve snacks and breakfast.
  - Hold one in Omaha. We will sponsor and save VA facility and AV costs – Call Andy 4025546253 @ UNO.
  - Have facilitators at lunch table.
  - Would have preferred lunch with VA personnel.
  - Allow for early submission of concerns and then use forum as a brainstorming session for solutions.
  - Release participant contract information to participants.

### Small Business/Veteran-Owned Business Focus

- There were mixed suggestions related to the conversations about the veteran certification process and the emphasis on small businesses. Some participants felt there was a heavy emphasis on small and veteran-owned business, while others wanted more discussion on these topics. This may speak to the need for tracks at future Forums (e.g., Large Business, Small Business, VOSB).
  - CVE is broken.
  - Continued problems/delays at CVE are jeopardizing my ability to represent my firm as an SDVOSB – wish there was a mechanism to communicate with the evaluator (help desk & web site don't provide any details of the delay).
  - Many questions/comments had to do with vet-owned business, which we are not.

- The executives are not pro-SDVOSB program.
- More explanation of Veteran owned business protocol and verification.
- IMO the CVE certification process works and we are better off with it than without it.
- Talk about SABLO's
- Eliminate CVE.
- It was very disappointing to see the VA executives throw CVE under the bus.
- The seminar focused on VOSB

### VA Participation

- A few participants suggested that having more of a local VA presence at the event would be helpful, including contracting officers.
  - Involve VA Program Mangers and what their perspective is.
  - Have more local representation to hear issues first hand.
  - More access to panel.
  - More procedural experts.
  - Have some CO's present.

### Suggestions for Sessions/Resources

- Participants provided specific suggestions for sessions or resources that would be helpful. Some of these suggestions included more detailed discussions on national vs. VISN-level contracting, contract or industry-focused sessions, involving suppliers on panels to provide their perspective, and information on how to communicate with VA effectively or how to deal with problems.
  - Go outside the government and see how the best do it.
  - More information on "how" to deal with Cos.
  - More detail on national vs. VISN contracting.
  - Perhaps it is too general – need more specific answers to my particular contract/section of the contract.
  - More specific to my industry and process for working with the VA.
  - More specific talks about VISN-BPA.
  - Too many one-way conversations – the dialogue should be more two-way. VA should describe change initiatives
  - Have a vendor and VA panel address one issue and to propose a solution.
  - Define acronyms from the onset.
  - Education on how to work with or communicate with VA.
  - Show org chart or people to talk to one on one.
  - Some questions too closed in (i.e., when did you quit beating your wife?)

### Specific Substantive Suggestions for VA

- Participants also provided suggestions on their cards for things that VA needs to be doing differently. This included obvious things such as improving the procurement and contracting process to ideas raised at the meeting such as improving the web site and implementing the Internship in Industry idea.
  - Improve communications both internally and externally.
  - Improve the web site in a timely basis. Make more intuitive.
  - The internship idea – make it happen.
  - Procurement process.
  - Offering a contract.

Other

- Keep up the effort.
- I don't know if it is federal law related problem, but VA pays more and gets less than other health care organizations for design and construction.
- Where are the large suppliers? Demographically it has to be 90% small business

## Appendix D. Attendee List

Last Name	First Name	Organization or Agency
Abo	Ronald	The Abo Group
Alexander	Andy	Nebraska Business Development Center
Baker	Jack	tw telecom
Barrow	John	Herman Miller Healthcare
Bixenman	John	Accessible Systems Inc
Brown	Stacey	Myraid Genetics
Bullman	Art	Stanley Access Technologies, LLC
Bundy	Robert	AlloSource
Clay	Frank	The ClayGroup
Davis	W. Celeste	Kiewit-Turner A Joint Venture
Davis	Jack	Computer Assicate System
Desjardins	Pete	PricewaterhouseCoopers
Drake	Steven	Veterans Evaluation Services
Ellison	Tami	Bronner Group
Eskridge	Robert	Eskridge Enterprises LLC
Fairey	John J D	Centretch Healthcare Systems Management Services, LLC
Finter	William	Spiral Solutions and Technologies, Inc.
Fuller	Gary	Flatirons Solutions
Gonzales Jr	Ricardo	Gonzales Consulting & Engineering, LLC
Graham	Andrew	Veterans Evaluation Services
Grubbs	Julian	Shelby Distributions Inc.
Hall	Kevin	AllCom Global Services, Inc.
Hall	John	THORNTON WHEELCHAIRSPLUS
Helming III	Frederick W (Bill)	PricewaterhouseCoopers
Hollenbach	David	DSoft Technology
Johnson	Philip	craftsman window coverings
Johnson	Karen	CareTek Resources, Inc.
Jones	Ryan	Buffalo Supply, Inc.
Kent	Steven	Academy Medical, LLC
Kerlin	Juliet	It's Never 2 Late

Kirkland	Renee	SW Lift Installation,LLC.
Larsen	Kent	TSP
Leavitt	Renee	Access Products, Inc.
Lynn	James	Jacobs
McCaffery	Michael	Amramp
Meier	Justin	Freedom Healthcare Staffing
Milewski	Lech	Millann LLC
Miller	Neal	Jubilant Cadista Pharmaceuticals Inc.
Mills	Mark	GCS, LLC
Moncada	Alex	ECOLAB
Murphy	Carrie	Veterans Evaluation Services
Nicholson	Dale	It's Never 2 Late
Norten	Len	Performance Mobility
Ogle	Hal	M.E. Group
Ostler	Russell	AES Group, Inc.
Palmer	Skip	Blackhorse Worldwide LLC
Pisko	Carole	Bayaud Enterprises
Pokorney	Crystal	The Conflict Center
Regalado	Eligio	
Regalado	Kalee	Service Plus
Richard	Morgan	Data Networks Corporation
Rine	Clyde	Omaha ambulance Service,Inc.
Roth	Rick	THORNTON WHEELCHAIRSPLUS
Rzonca	Tad	V3Gate
Salamaha	Richard	Furniture Resource, LLC & R.C. Smith Company
Samples	Larry	Trans-Tel Central, Inc.
Sciantarelli	Dan	American Trainco
Spohn Lillo	Barbara	Prosthetic Illusions Inc
Stamp	Cathy	Kimball Office
StLeger	John	Marathon Medical Corporation
StLeger	Lyn	Best Medical LLC
Sullivan	Dennis	Ernst & Young LLP
Summers	Mike	AES Group, Inc

Swegarden	Jon	Precision Diagnostic Services, Inc.
Testa	Wesley	ID Edge, Inc.
Tholen	Eric	EFT Architects, Inc.
Thomas	Stephanie	Access Products, Inc.
Townsend	Thomas	Omaha Ambulance Service, Inc
Tyson	Laura	
Van Veen	Mary	AllStaff Medical Resources, Inc.
Ware	Christine	Sunrise Medical (US) LLC
Waters	David	The Arcanum Group, Inc.
Weiss	Ronnie	The Conflict Center
Winkler	Chrissy	North Highland
Wittman	Leon	
Wolstenholm	Colleen	Aspen Seating

## Appendix E. Focus Group Protocols

### Facilitated Breakout Session (75 minutes)

- Welcome (10 minutes)
  - Preview agenda
  - Roles and expectations
  - Introductions
- Quick Feedback (10 minutes)
  - How would you characterize your current working relationship with VA? What's going well? What's going poorly?
- Reaction to VA Initiatives (25 minutes)
  - What are your reactions to these VA initiatives? With each, what have you seen getting better? What have you seen getting worse?
  - VA's ability to present a "one face" to suppliers across functions has been criticized both in forums and in the surveys. What do you think VA does that prompts this criticism? What are the key things they should be doing to improve in this area?
  - The VA Acquisition Academy opened in 2008 and many VA contracting staff have gone through that program since it started. Are you noticing improvements in the quality of Cos and others involved in contracting process/ If so, in what way do they seem to be getting better? If not, what still needs to be improved?
  - Sharing risk, making decisions based on total cost of ownership, and concern for supplier profitability continue to rank the lowest on VA's supplier surveys. What do you think is behind these ratings and how can VA improve in these areas?
- Quick feedback on the Procurement Process (25 minutes)
  - What are the pain points? What could be made better?
  - RFI/RFP
  - Bids and proposals
  - Contract award and kickoff
  - Delivery
  - Modifications
  - Closeout
- Final thoughts (5 minutes)



## Appendix F. Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
ANC	Arlington National Cemetery
APBI	Advanced Planning Briefings for Industry
BPA	Blanket Purchase Agreement
EDI	Electronic Data Interchange
CAO	Chief Acquisition Officer
CDC	Center for Disease Control
CFM	Construction and Facilities Management
CIO	Chief Information Officer
CO	Contract Officer
COTR	Contract Officer's Technical Representative
CRR	Contractor Certification Registration
CVE	Center for Veterans Enterprise
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOC	Department of Commerce
DoD	Department of Defense
FAR	Federal Acquisition Regulation
FBO	Federal Business Opportunities / FedBizOpps
FSS	Federal Supply Schedule
GSA	General Services Administration
HCA	Head of Contract Activity
IDIQ	Indefinite Delivery/Indefinite Quantity
IFF	Industrial Funding Fee
IPT	Integrated Product Team
IT	Information Technology
LPTA	Lowest Price Technically Acceptable
NCA	National Cemetery Administration
NAC	National Acquisition Center
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
OSDBU	Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization
PCH	Purchase Card Holder
PO	Program Office
POC	Point of Contact
RFI	Request for Information
RFP	Request for Proposal
RFQ	Request for Quote

RTLS	Real-Time Location System
SAO	Service Area Organization
SAO	Systematic Analysis of Operations
SBA	Small Business Administration
SDVOSB	Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business
SES	Senior Executive Service
SEWP	Solutions for Enterprise-Wide Procurement
SKU	Stock-Keeping Units
SOW	Statements of Work
SRM	Supplier Relationship Management
T4	Transformation Twenty-One Total Technology
TAC	Technology Acquisition Center
TCO	Total Cost of Ownership
VA	Veterans Affairs
VAAA	VA Acquisition Academy
VAAR	Veterans Affairs Acquisition Regulation
VACO	Veterans Affairs Central Office
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VHA	Veterans Health Administration
VISN	Veterans Integrated Service Network
VOSB	Veteran-Owned Small Business