

AF Leader Discusses Acquisition Focus Areas

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WASHINGTON (AFPN) -- People in the Air Force acquisitions office are focusing on the workforce, product improvement and acquisitions processes, said Sue C. Payton, assistant secretary of the Air Force for acquisition.

The acquisitions office is comprised of 24,183 people responsible for 127 major programs. They are working to improve training, depth and manpower for systems engineers, cost estimators and contracting officers, she said.

"We're working to ensure that we have enough people, and that they're trained for the right skills at the right time for the key leadership positions in acquisitions," Ms. Payton said. "We're also making sure that whenever we have a competitive source selection that our contracting officers are the interface between industry and the source selection teams."

Another focus area is product improvement, said Ms. Payton. "We're looking at the game changers; the key things that we can leave behind from this administration that will be a real disruptive technology to counter and surprise our adversaries, and to give our warfighters an advantage."

One way to accomplish this is through directed energy, she said.

"We are transitioning the technology and prototyping efforts that have been going on in the Electronic Systems Center at Hanscom Air Force Base, (Mass.), down to our Air Armament Center (at Eglin AFB, Fla.). The Airmen there are skilled in getting effects-based weapons systems on the battlefield that will cause our adversaries to think twice before they attack," said Ms. Payton. "We're investing in how to transfer directed energy into our warfighters' hands; to have the capability to employ a directed energy, like an advanced tactical laser, on a soft target in the future."

Other "game changers" discussed included open systems architecture and alternative fuels.

Open systems architecture refers to software, hardware, communications or other system architectures for which anyone can design programs that help build upon and improve the system. Understanding where open systems exist in weapons systems will give the Air Force the advantage of a more competitive environment.

"We think that open systems technology and open software methodology could be major game changers for our Air Force as we face some of the diminishing budgets that we're going to see in the future," she said.

"Another area we're really focused on is alternative fuels. We have certified a (synthetic) blend of fuel on the B-52, and we're starting the certification for the C-17 and B-1," Ms. Payton said. "If we can achieve a 50 percent blend of (traditional) JP-8 fuel to synthetic fuel, we could see a decrease in the amount of money we spend on fuel."

Ms. Payton stressed the importance of finding ways to use acquisitions funds more efficiently through opens systems technology and alternative fuels, to allow for the recapitalization of the Air Force's aging aircraft.

"We're between requirements that continue to go up, and a budget that is in effect going down," she said.

As far as processes, acquisitions is incorporating lessons learned from the combat search and rescue replacement vehicle, or CSAR-X, program.

"Probably one of the areas we could have done better in CSAR-X is to have a more thorough debriefing earlier in the cycle before the final proposals came in of where each one of the offerers stood relative to their cost and capabilities."

To rectify this, the acquisitions office will have several interim debriefs with all offerers so they know exactly where their strengths and weaknesses are, and exactly where they stand in reference to capabilities and cost at the time they submit final proposals, she said. "We are putting in many more continuous dialogue opportunities with all the offerers."

Acquisitions has also begun to have "industry days," where they meet with industry and customers to discuss acquisitions priorities, and document any questions and concerns to ensure they are addressed.

"We are making sure, through conversation and continuous feedback--for CSAR-X we'll meet with all offerers at least four times-- they understand their strengths and weaknesses. Not only are we talking more, we're documenting more."

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