

# Easy, Efficient, and Modern: Insights from Alan Thomas, Commissioner, U.S. General Services Administration, Federal Acquisition Service

By Michael J. Keegan



U.S. federal agencies need to procure goods and services essential to meeting their various missions. The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) and its Federal Acquisition Service (FAS) provide those agencies with over 11 million different

products and services, while delivering over \$55 billion annually in federal procurement.

What is FAS doing to make its operations easy, efficient, and modern? How is FAS delivering best value mission support to customer agencies? What is FAS doing to promote smarter buying and the efficient use of technology across the federal government? FAS Commissioner Alan Thomas joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to share his insights on these topics and more. The following is an edited excerpt of our discussion, complemented with additional research.

## What is the mission of GSA's Federal Acquisition Service?

Acquisition is at the core of what we do. But as you know, acquisition, its support technology, and how we serve customers are all changing rapidly. FAS is the government's premier provider of acquisition and technology transformation solutions. We provide solutions to partner agencies throughout the entire acquisition cycle. Our work reflects a commitment to delivering service, innovation, and value through efficient operations, market expertise, and proactive partnerships with both customer agencies and private sector vendors.

In all of our core portfolios, FAS promotes smarter buying, the efficient use of technology, and reduced administrative

costs across the government. We run the Schedules Program. We run a number of governmentwide acquisition contracts such as Alliant, as well as governmentwide multiple award contracts like OASIS. We manage the GSA Fleet program, which provides leased vehicles. We also run the world's largest charge card program, the SmartPay Program.


## How is FAS organized to execute this mission?

FAS employs more than 3,000 people, spread across the U.S. in 11 different regions. About half of the FAS staff is located in the D.C. central office. We have 20 or so folks in Europe, another 30 or 40 people in Asia. FAS operates a number of support offices such as acquisition policy and strategic management, but the core portfolios are Assisted Acquisition Services, Information Technology Category, Professional Services and Human Capital Categories, Travel, Transportation and Logistics Categories, General Supplies and Services, and Technology Transformation Services.

## How do you lead FAS?

One of my most important duties is to inspire the people at FAS, give them a clear sense of direction, and focus our team on a few key goals that move our mission forward. From a leadership perspective, the three qualities that inform my leadership style are honesty, courage, and graciousness. As a leader, you want to be authentic. A successful leader has to be honest with themselves and their team. Often times being honest and delivering a tough message takes courage, but such a message must be delivered in a gracious way if you want people to listen to you. From my perspective, if people believe you're authentic and honest with them, they're more likely to listen to you, even if you're telling





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them something they don't agree with. An open, honest environment also fosters healthy debate and engagement, which can lead to better collaboration and the results you're looking for.

**What has challenged you most since taking the helm of FAS? What has surprised you?**



When I joined FAS I went on a listening tour, visiting all our regions in the field. Over five months, I met employees, I did town halls, I listened to those on the frontline. That process helped me identify our systems infrastructure as a top challenge.

We rely on technology to deliver services, and these systems are not up to par. My tagline is: the quality of our systems must match the quality of our people. I'm working with my colleague, GSA Chief Information Officer David Shive, and his team about how to modernize our business systems to better service customers and enhance the end-user experience. I've learned from my private sector experience that one way to take care of your staff is to put great tools in their hands. When you give them what they need to succeed, your team will take care of customers—and good results will follow.

During the course of my career, I came to know GSA from different perspectives—as a consultant, a federal employee at the Department of Defense, as a vendor. I helped get a technology company on Schedule 70. But as the commissioner, I have an entirely different perspective on the breadth and depth of GAS in general and FAS in particular. I have come to view FAS as a holding company composed of different subsidiaries. It has been a challenge to identify what we should be doing as an enterprise—and also, when to encourage individual business lines to act on their own to meet the needs of individual markets.

**Alan, FAS leverages the buying power of the federal government by negotiating prices on many products and services required by federal agencies to achieve their missions. To that end, would you outline your strategic vision for FAS and your key priorities?**



My vision is to make FAS easy, efficient, and modern. GSA's mission is to deliver value and savings in real estate, acquisition, technology, and other mission-support services across government. Our values are service, accountability, and innovation. In an effort to develop priorities that not only embody these principles but also resonate with our stakeholders, I spent my first five months on that listening

tour going to offices nationwide. My visits focused less on sharing what I wanted to do and more on hearing what my colleagues thought about where the organization has been and where we should be going. While on tour, I also visited with customers, such as the Departments of the Air Force, Army, Navy, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—as well as industry partners. What I learned helped me set the priorities to become a more efficient, modern service.

**What are you doing to make it easier to work with FAS?**



As outlined in my first blog as FAS commissioner, we're focused on improving the customer and supplier experience by making it easier to work with GSA. There is a lot that fits under this umbrella, including modernizing and simplifying our systems. Today, FAS helps our agency customers acquire \$50 billion worth of goods and services from more than 20,000 industry partners each year. I've asked the team to make it easier to write contracts, place orders, and manage our assets.

Also included in this “easy” bucket is streamlining and simplifying our internal and external acquisition processes. This will focus mostly on continuing the plans for improvement, as outlined in our current Multiple Award Schedules (MAS) transformation initiative program. GSA is committed to providing our stakeholders with a MAS program that addresses current market forces. This program also provides government with a streamlined, value-based contracting solution that will continue to save time and money well into the future.

To that end, we expanded the IT Schedule 70 Plain Language Roadmap to the entire Schedules program—now the MAS Roadmap. We're continuing our Transactional Data Reporting (TDR) pilot program to simplify sales reporting. We're also being extremely thoughtful regarding the development of new Special Item Numbers (SINs) to reduce burden on industry, both of which you will hear more about throughout this year.

Additionally, we recently published two critical final rules that impact our stakeholders—Order-Level Materials (OLMs) and Commercial Supplier Agreements (CSAs). OLMs introduce a key flexibility into MAS, creating parity with other Indefinite Delivery, Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) contracts and reducing contract duplication. CSAs decrease the time needed for legal review prior to contract formation, reduce costs significantly to government and contractors, and clarify expectations for all parties. The first phase of the policy




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implementation will run through the end of 2018, with the official execution expected to start in 2019.

### **Would you tell us about your efforts to make FAS more efficient?**

 We are doing much work in the shared services space, including our Fleet and GSA SmartPay programs. It is important to recognize that the most efficient use of taxpayer dollars is developing and leveraging market-leading shared services. Reinventing the wheel is downright irresponsible. Our Office of Fleet Management manages about one-third of the federal fleet, roughly 200,000 vehicles. Our Purchase Card program provides over three million purchase, travel, fleet, and integrated charge accounts to over 560 U.S. government agencies and other authorized organizations. Both programs have been tremendously successful, and I’m looking to build on that success. We’re also going to explore additional innovative payment opportunities for SmartPay, such as cardless transactions. And we’re planning to invest in new shared services like payroll and time and attendance.

### **How are you working to modernize FAS for your staff and customers?**


 FAS is positioned as an enabler of IT modernization across the government. Internally, as I noted, we’re modernizing our internal systems that help us deliver our mission. For FAS, modern also means providing IT modernization expertise to enable agency transformation. The new GSA IT Modernization Centers of Excellence (COEs) will provide centralized expert advice, consulting, development, and support solution implementation for cloud adoption, IT infrastructure optimization, customer experience, service delivery analytics, and contact center solutions. It also means innovating. We’re leading on a number of key initiatives identified in the president’s report on IT modernization. GSA is named as the primary or supporting player in 25 of the 50 actions in the report, so we have a central role there. We’re also preparing to support the operation and administration of

the recently approved Technology Modernization Fund (TMF), which will help agencies transition from older IT infrastructure to more efficient and secure technologies.

My vision of FAS—as easy, efficient, and modern—complements nicely GSA Administrator Emily Murphy’s four operating principles: ethical leadership, increased competition, increased transparency, and reduced duplication. Let’s pick a few important things we want to do around those easy, efficient, modern priorities, and let’s focus 99 percent of our time and effort on getting those things done. That was a message that really hit home with people.

Also, one of the biggest changes impacting the way we do business is the pace of technological change. We rely on technology to deliver our services effectively. Integral to our focus on IT modernization is the need to shape and inform a 21st century workforce. For instance, the introduction of robotic process automation may help reduce the number of mundane tasks for line-level contracting officers. Doing this will free them to focus on value added and more strategic efforts.

### **Alan, would you give us a brief overview of the Modernizing Government Technology Act?**

 The MGT Act is a great example of bipartisan spirit. It focuses on modernizing government technology to serve citizens better and make the government more efficient and effective. This is an issue that brings everybody together. The most important component of the MGT Act is the Technology Modernization Fund and the associated Working Capital Funds (WCF). Both seek to better align how agencies buy technology and make investments.

The TMF board is chaired by Federal CIO Suzette Kent. There are six other board members and GSA Administrator Emily Murphy appointed me as a permanent board member. We’ve been running what I would call a “shark tank style” process, where we receive initial proposals, review those, and then

ask people to present more detailed proposals. To presenters, my advice is to get to the point quickly—three or four impactful sentences that talk about outcomes. Our mindset is to invest in things that will have a big impact on citizens and that other agencies can leverage and model.

On June 7, the TMF board selected three projects from the departments of Agriculture (USDA), Energy (DoE), and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), awarding \$45 million in total funding between the three agencies. USDA will receive \$10 million to aid the development of a customer experience portal on its Farmers.gov website, which connects farmers and ranchers to USDA resources. DoE will receive \$15 million to speed its enterprise cloud email migration. Cloud email is a priority that is also being pushed governmentwide through the President's Management Agenda. HUD will receive \$20 million to accelerate a mainframe application migration.

#### What advice would you give someone who is thinking about a career in public service?



Public service is a noble calling. In the public sector, you often can get more responsibility at a younger age than in the private sector. You also have the opportunity to tackle some interesting problems that only the public sector faces—for instance, when the government steps in for some sort of market failure. If you like that kind of environment, then the public sector is a good place for you. This is my third time working in government in my career. I would encourage those who have the passion for a particular agency mission to go for it.

To learn more about GSA's Federal Acquisition Service, go to [gsa.gov/about-us/organization/federal-acquisition-service](https://gsa.gov/about-us/organization/federal-acquisition-service)



To hear *The Business of Government Hour* interview with Alan Thomas, go to [businessofgovernment.org](https://businessofgovernment.org).



To download the show as a podcast, go to PodcastOne, iTunes, and [businessofgovernment.org](https://businessofgovernment.org).



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To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour* interview with Alan Thomas, go to [businessofgovernment.org](https://businessofgovernment.org).