

Service on the move

Local EPA office rolls out relocation program across all federal agencies

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The local office of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has found a tree-hugging way to relocate its workers, and now the whole federal government can get in on it.

The Cincinnati division of the agency in the fall launched a national, online service that handles every line item of its employee moves, from the sale of real estate to tax issues. The program was adapted at the urging of the government to save time and money, and it did. In its first few months, the EPA figured it could reduce its annual paper consumption for relocations by 95 percent and expenses by 15 percent to 20 percent.

Now the government has cleared the EPA to sell the service to all U.S. federal agencies, exposing it to a potential market of more than 30,000 workers who are relocated annually. So far, the local office has entered into a letter of intent for a November contract with a division of the Department of Homeland Security. All would be handled from its Norwood office, which also is home to one of the EPA's three national finance centers.

"We dropped the pen and paper and said we can do it electronically," said Patrick Griffis, activity manager for relocation at the EPA. "We can do more employee relocation activity with much fewer people than any other federal agency in the market."

Depending on the number of contracts the EPA lands, the program could translate to business opportunities for locally based companies that handle national relocation services.

And while the EPA is limited to selling to government agencies, the program has captured the interest of the private sector: One unnamed Fortune 50 company is coming to visit the Norwood EPA office to observe how the program works.

Moving workers can be expensive, after all. It can cost up to \$75,000 to relocate a government employee, Griffis said. When the program the government uses is decentralized, the cost goes up because there is no consistent strategy across the board.

Such was the case until the U.S. General Services Administration in 2005 issued several recommendations for reforming relocation practices. Griffis took on the challenge for the EPA, and in 2006 it was one of the first agencies to act, consolidating all of its relocation strategies to one office in Norwood. By March, the EPA was granted the authority to sell the service to all other government agencies, based upon Griffis' work here.

The service is built upon a software program called moveLINQ, which was launched by the firm mLINQS of Fairfax, Va., in March 2004. Greg McIntyre, president of mLINQS, spotted the opportunity for the software during his 15 years working as a contractor for the federal government.

"It's a lot more detailed in the government because it's taxpayer money," McIntyre said. "They're more likely to track reimbursements to a fine detail."



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EPA employee Marie Nichols-Johnson recently moved to Cincinnati from Minnesota. Her fourth government move was eased by the program spearheaded by Patrick Griffis.

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For instance, the government offers its relocating workers different entitlements depending on marital status, children, the age of the children, the area the worker is moving to and whether the employee is a new hire or a transferee.

With the EPA's program, an employee can call the office and provide all details. That information is downloaded in real time into the program, which is constantly being tailored to suit EPA practices, and assessed. In minutes, the employee will receive an e-mail detailing exactly what is expected and how much can be spent, down to the penny. The program also will handle the sale and purchase of homes, take care of tax liabilities, provide information on schools and communities and, for international moves, offer language translation devices.

Because the Norwood EPA office operates a federal payment center within the finance center, its local staff can disburse treasury funds, saving workers the rigmarole of going through Washington.

"That by far is one of the biggest selling points," Griffis said. "Under the old process you may be faxing and mailing documents back and forth for weeks."

So far, the EPA has relocated 84 of its employees, including Marie Nichols-Johnson, who is in the process of moving to Cincinnati from Duluth, Minn.

This is Nichols-Johnson's fourth move as a federal employee. The new program has allowed her to settle into her position faster and has eliminated many tasks she used to have to handle, such as selling her house. Reimbursements also are faster, she said, coming in a few days instead of up to two weeks.

"You had to keep a written log of all your expenses, wherein now you can do it electronically," she said. "It's really taken the stress off of me, and it's given me more time to focus on my new job."

The EPA relocates roughly 200 people a year, less than 5 percent of total relocations under the federal government. But other agencies offer greater growth potential. The Department of Agriculture moves about 4,000 people a year, or about 12 percent of total relocations, and the Department of the Interior, a smaller organization, moves 8 percent of the federal work force each year, or 2,400 people.

At maturity, Griffis expects the EPA to handle 20 percent to 25 percent of the federal market. Twenty percent would translate to 6,000 moves a year.

But that doesn't mean the EPA will be rolling in the money generated from its newfound endeavor. It is actually operated like a nonprofit, generating just enough to reinvest in the service.

The benefit, Griffis said, will be in reduced stress to the environment, and to people.

National Focus

- The local EPA office has introduced a program that uses software to quickly streamline agency employee relocations.
- The government has OK'd the EPA to offer the service to all federal agencies, not just EPA agencies, across the country.
- While the agency, which functions like a nonprofit, won't get rich on this, it is expected to save paper and stress.