Panel to consider system for permanent moves

By STEPHEN LOSEY

DALLAS —A panel of experts will study whether relocations can be made easier on the tens of thousands of federal civilian and military personnel who move each year because of their jobs.

The General Services Administration said June 21 it will form a committee of government and moving industry officials to review relocation allowances, reimbursements, best practices, and related policies.

The Governmentwide Relocation Advisory Board, which will be appointed by GSA Administrator Stephen Perry, will also review whether the administration of employee relocations can be automated. The board will meet monthly in Washington, beginning this summer, until July 2005.

Civilian agencies spend more than $2 billion a year to move about 40,000 employees; the Defense Department moves about 900,000 service members each year, said Greg McIntyre, president of mLINQS, a Fairfax, Va.-based software developer. The firm has developed an automated system to calculate reimbursements for employee relocations. Company representatives demonstrated the system at the National Travel Forum here June 29.

The Web-based program, called reloLINQ, is similar to the online travel-booking systems being developed by GSA and the Defense Department.

Tracking the costs of these moves is difficult with the paper-based relocation system many agencies use, McIntyre said. An automated relocation system would let the government collect data on how much it spends and use that to negotiate volume discounts with moving and storage companies, McIntyre said.

McIntyre said the government spends at least $50 million for administrative costs related to moving. He said an automated relocation system would let the government halve those costs.

The system would let clerks who process relocation expenses track what employees spend looking for new homes. That could include rental cars, air fares, temporary quarters, shipping, storage and other costs.

It can also track lodging and per diem payments for dependents.

MLINQS' system is now only for civilian agencies, since the Pentagon handles moves differently. For instance, civilians receive a 10 percent reimbursement on a house's closing cost; service members don't.

Two agencies — the Secret Service and the Bureau of the Public Debt — have already signed up for one-year contracts with mLINQS for its system.

Diana Bonnell, a travel service manager for the Bureau of the Public Debt in Parkersburg, W.Va., said her agency is impressed with the relocation system and has installed it. However, the bureau has not yet had time to learn how to use it. The bureau moves about 600 employees each year.

Tim Burke

Tim Burke, GSA's travel policy director, said July 1 he had not seen mLINQS' relocation automation program, but he lauded the private sector's initiative to develop new systems for agencies.

"We're very glad vendors are creating product on their own without the government asking," Burke said.

Burke said relocation services could conceivably be connected to the GSA's online travel booking system, called E-travel.

Air Force Col. Brandy Johnson, the program director for Defense's online travel system, said the Defense Travel System also could be expanded to handle relocations.