

EPA center saves money, reduces paperwork

By MARYANN FROEHLICH
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A lot of work goes into the federal relocation process. Travel regulations, authorizations, expenditures, internal agency policies, new appointees, transferee appointees, political appointees. Relocations can take agencies up to two years to complete and are often an administrative paperwork nightmare. That's why the Office of the Chief Financial Officer at the Environmental Protection Agency decided to try a new approach.

In fall 2006, EPA piloted a project to centralize the management of all the agency's relocations. The idea was to create an expert staff capable of tracking travel regulations, managing service provider contracts and complying with the reporting requirements for each federal move. Using information compiled from the General Services Administration's Government-wide Relocation Advisory Board Report, EPA began to solicit feedback from the more than 100 agency employees involved in relocations. It quickly became clear that a centralized process could manage relocations more efficiently and, significantly, with fewer staff hours.

After this preparatory work, EPA in March 2007 launched the Federal Employee Relocation Center, housed in EPA's finance center in Cincinnati. The launch followed EPA's Working Capital Fund Board's unanimous approval of the business plan for the consolidated relocation services. The immediate goals were improvements in four areas: increased consistency, decreased administrative costs, reduced paper processing, and accurate measurement and reporting of costs. Next, and equally important, was to enable specialization and a high level of customer service among the handful of EPA employees tasked to manage relocations.

The results met and exceeded our expectations. We estimate the consolidated services save the agency several hundred thousand dollars per year — not a trivial amount for a small agency. This figure is achieved through a streamlined operation that involves fewer EPA employees. In addition, the center is able to contract directly with multiple carriers for relocations, saving 10 percent to 15 percent on average in the cost of shipping and storing household goods.

We also have the opportunity to make a direct contribution to our own environmental mission with this service. Through the use of electronic relocation expense management software, we have reduced our paper consumption by distributing electronic documents to our customers while still meeting government reporting requirements. We are working on new procedures that will enable a paperless approval system, further reducing paper consumption.

All around, everyone wins. Employees receive full support from a relocation counselor, and the agency is able to complete new appointee relocations within two to three months and transferee relocations within six to eight months on average, avoiding costs incurred due to process inefficiency.

So successful has this venture been that we decided to extend its benefits to the wider federal community. In August 2007, EPA signed an interagency agreement with the Homeland Security Department's Transportation Security Administration. EPA now provides relocation services to its own employees and those at TSA; both agencies benefit from economies of scale and the expertise of EPA's relocation center staff. Moving forward, we are expanding the center to allow us to serve other agencies. Our Web site, www.relocatefeds.gov, provides information to employees who are in the process of relocating and to agencies that may be interested in using EPA's relocation services.

The CFO community has a lead role in improving business practices within agencies, increasing administrative efficiencies, and ensuring the highest quality financial management of taxpayer dollars. We're proud to have effectively applied private-sector methods to a public system, freeing dollars for our agency's environmental programs, supporting the president's efficient government goals, and giving federal employees a hassle-free moving experience.

Maryann Froehlich is the acting chief financial officer at the Environmental Protection Agency.