

Linda Jacobs Washington

Assistant Secretary for Administration
U.S. Department of Transportation

By Lauren Kronthal

Supporting Mission-Critical Operations

The quality of our lives, the shape of our communities, and the productivity of our nation's economy rest on the existence of a safe, secure, and efficient transportation system. Today, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) stands at the forefront, promoting an efficient and interconnected national transportation system. The success of such a critical mission requires a department to effectively manage the administration of its resources and its workforce.

According to Linda Jacobs Washington, assistant secretary for administration at the U.S. Department of Transportation, "There's no citizen not affected by transportation. Everyone who takes a bus or a Metro, who buys groceries or drives on a highway, flies in a plane or rides a train, does so because DOT is doing its job." She describes the roots of the DOT, which was established in October 1966. "Our first secretary took office in January 1967, and the department's first official day of operation was April 1, 1967. We've just celebrated our 40th anniversary." She outlines its mission, which "is really pretty simple—we're charged with supporting a national transportation system ... the most complex and the best system in the world." The department pursues its mission with a budget of more than \$67 billion and a staff of about 54,000 men and women. "Most of those men and women are air traffic controllers. We're organized by modes, which is a great definition of the different organizations within the DOT, because 'modes' stand for the modes of transportation: planes and boats and trains and trucks, rails and highways and airways," explains Washington. "In fact, we have employees all over the world, including staff who are helping to rebuild the Iraqi transportation system."

"As the assistant secretary for administration, I manage all supporting infrastructure, except IT," notes Washington. "That includes human resources, procurement, security, printing and graphics, photographic services, transit benefits, facilities, and building management. It's my job to make sure

CAREER HISTORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation
- Director of Integrated Support Services, Library of Congress
- Chief of the Photo Duplication Service, Library of Congress
- Xerox Business Services, Xerox Corporation

that the heat and the lights are on, that the security guards are in place, and that staff in the buildings are safe. I have a staff of 212 who work with a cadre of contractors and a budget of a little more than \$400 million."

When asked about the challenges of this role, she observes: "The most difficult challenge had wonderful results. I was responsible for overseeing the construction, the build-out, and the employee move to our new facility—an 11-year project, over three years of construction, and an 11-week move period. Moving 5,600 people with all of their stuff over 11 weeks was no walk in the park. We met it. But it involved a lot of logistical planning and relationship building with our contractors to get it done." Washington points out that "we are in an election year and the huge challenge of what we call 'transition.' In less than [a year] we will have a new administration. We will transition outgoing and incoming leaders. While that may seem like an easy task, it requires enormous planning, logistics, teamwork, and diplomacy. But after building a cabinet-level headquarters building, I have to tell you, I think it's going to be a piece of cake."

As the federal government spends about \$300 billion annually on goods and services, agencies need to leverage spending to the maximum extent possible. Washington describes



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DOT's efforts in the strategic sourcing area and, specifically, the establishment of commodity councils to look at cross-modal or departmental requirements. “This is truly an initiative we believe in. Internally, we're using tools and techniques to help us buy more rationally. In the area of IT, we recently converted to a consolidated common operating environment utilizing an enterprise-wide contract. We use spend analysis to support our decision to centrally buy printers for the whole building. And we have taken a similar approach to the purchase of all furniture. We are truly committed to this and we plan to do more in the upcoming years.”

When asked about the use of shared services, Washington says: “We really embrace this idea. We're constantly looking for ways to save taxpayers money through economies of scale and shared resources to deliver the most efficient and cost-effective services. We offer a variety of shared services including human resources, procurement, mail, printing and graphics, photographic services, multimedia services, and a security guard force that protects all of DOT staff and facilities. When you can bring groups of people together to make a major buy, you can certainly save money. But it also helps you look at what the needs of the organization are, plan for those needs. That way, you avoid redundancy and save money.”

Given the evolution of the national transportation system, DOT's pending workforce retirement presents a real issue for Washington. When asked about DOT's plans to mitigate this challenge, she says, “Quite frankly, we're anticipating and preparing for our retirement tsunami. I think that adequately describes the scope of the problem. If the recent pattern of losses and gains continues, the total DOT workforce will decline by about 8 percent over the next four years, largely due to retirements. And the group that is most affected by the retirement tsunami are the senior leaders and program managers.” She continues: “So, a simple one-for-one replacement strategy doesn't make sense. We must work together to ensure we are hiring individuals with the right skills, but at the same time we want to make sure that we're

best utilizing the employees we currently have. We want a combined effort on both fronts: replacing the folks who are retiring by training internal staff, but also bringing in the best and the brightest.” She distills the DOT focus: “For 40 years, DOT has been helping build highways, bridges, and overseeing the highways and seaways, so one of our focus areas has been on engineers. But we want to attract all disciplines, from administrative positions to IT, from HR to security, from safety to procurement.”

“My vision is to support DOT by remodeling our HR systems to streamline hiring and recruit those with the right talent and skill. I want us to be more proactive. It's important that we help individuals, and make it easy for them, to come to work for the federal government,” maintains Washington. “If we bring in the best talent consistently, then we are certain to keep up with technology and DOT's needs. We are adding even more flexibilities to attract and retain employees—[providing] cross-training to every segment of our workforce.”

“Now, there are two things that will not change in three or five years,” asserts Washington. “The first is our commitment to, and investment in, our most vital resource: our people. And the second is our accountability to the American people.” ●

To learn more about the Department of Transportation, go to www.dot.gov.



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