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Congress' acquisition priorities include GSA oversight

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The General Services Administration can count on continued scrutiny by the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, while the Defense Department can expect the House Armed Services Committee to try to improve the acquisition process, according to two congressional committee staff members who spoke to an Industry Advisory Council audience Jan. 24.

"We'll continue to look at GSA issues," said Teddy Kidd, a member of the reform committee staff. "We'll continue to monitor Networkx and Alliant," GSA's most high-profile new contracts. The emphasis on oversight is evident in the committee's new name, which incoming chairman Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) bestowed. Previously it was the Government Reform Committee.

Kidd said GSA had recently briefed the committee staff on the agreement it struck with the Treasury Department to induce Treasury to kill its Treasury Communications Enterprise contract and use Networkx instead. However, he declined to comment on the merits of the arrangement.

Andrew Hunter, a member of the House Armed Services Committee staff, said DOD's acquisition process should be tweaked in a way that will "squeeze more juice out of the lemon."

The committee could examine the requirements drafting process the department uses, a preliminary step that influences the contract over its lifespan.

"Many of the problems that affect the acquisition process live outside of the acquisition process," Hunter said. "One thing I feel absolutely confident of is that no matter what we do, we can't make it worse."

The acquisition workforce is another area that needs attention, Hunter said. However, despite a common belief that the government needs more well-trained acquisition professionals, it may not happen. "It's not so easy to do in reality," he said.

Under critical questioning from John Moliere, a business owner and advocate for service-disabled veterans in government contracting, Hunter said Congress can try to find more effective ways of using existing programs to make better use of service-disabled veteran-owned businesses.

When asked about the adoption of commercial acquisition practices, Hunter said DOD is not likely to move quickly in that direction. Stung by past acquisition scandals, DOD officials are suspicious of the potential for commercial practices to lead to more abuses, he said.

