



Office of Audits  
Office of Inspector General  
U.S. General Services Administration

# Opportunities Exist to Strengthen the Federal Acquisition Service's Contracting Officer's Representative Workforce

*Report Number A130007/Q/A/P14006  
September 29, 2014*



Office of Audits  
Office of Inspector General  
U.S. General Services Administration

## REPORT ABSTRACT

### OBJECTIVES

To determine if: (1) FAS Contracting Officer's Representatives (CORs) are certified, designated, and developed in accordance with the Office of Federal Procurement Policy's Federal Acquisition Certification for Contracting Officer's Representatives program and applicable GSA guidance, and (2) the COR certification program is effectively managed to ensure consistency and transparency.

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### Opportunities Exist to Strengthen the Federal Acquisition Service's Contracting Officer's Representative Workforce

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### WHAT WE FOUND

We identified the following during our audit:

Finding 1 – FAS is not consistently implementing COR certification program guidance and stated best practices, possibly affecting COR foundational knowledge.

Finding 2 – FAS CORs are not being designated in accordance with COR certification program guidance due to decentralized management and limited system access.

Finding 3 – Lack of training alternatives and sufficient oversight result in underdeveloped CORs.

Finding 4 – Inadequate and unreliable FAS COR data hinders consistency and transparency.

### WHAT WE RECOMMEND

Based on our audit findings we recommend that the FAS Commissioner:

1. Implement a control to ensure that all FAS CORs are accounted for and registered in FAITAS.
2. Develop guidance to ensure the consistent implementation of the Federal Acquisition Certification for Contracting Officer's Representatives program as it relates to certifications, to include how regional CORs who report nationally should register in FAITAS.
3. Improve quality, use, and tracking of COR designation letters.
4. Develop a method to quantify and monitor COR workload.
5. Establish: (1) guidelines for evaluating training courses for credit towards CLP achievement requests, and (2) controls to ensure CORs complete FAS-required training courses.
6. Determine if restructuring the Central Office bureau would improve transparency and management of the FAS COR workforce.

### MANAGEMENT COMMENTS

The Commissioner of the Federal Acquisition Service acknowledged receipt of the draft report and plans to implement ways to strengthen the FAS COR workforce. Management's written comments to the draft report are included in their entirety as **Appendix B**.



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**Office of Audits  
Office of Inspector General  
U.S. General Services Administration**

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DATE: September 29, 2014

TO: Thomas A. Sharpe Jr.  
Commissioner, Federal Acquisition Service (Q)  
*Michelle Westrup*

FROM: Michelle Westrup  
Audit Manager, Center for Contract Audits (JA-A)

SUBJECT: Opportunities Exist to Strengthen the Federal Acquisition Service's  
Contracting Officer's Representative Workforce  
Report Number A130007/Q/A/P14006

This report presents the results of our audit of the qualifications of FAS contracting officer's representatives. Our findings and recommendations are summarized in the Report Abstract. Instructions regarding the audit resolution process can be found in the email that transmitted this report.

Your written comments to the draft report are included in **Appendix B** of this report.

If you have any questions regarding this report, please contact me or any member of the audit team at the following:

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On behalf of the audit team, I would like to thank you and your staff for your assistance during this audit.

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## **Table of Contents**

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<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Results</b>	
<i>Finding 1 – FAS is not consistently implementing COR certification program guidance and stated best practices, possibly affecting COR foundational knowledge.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Finding 2 – FAS CORs are not being designated in accordance with COR certification program guidance due to decentralized management and limited system access.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Finding 3 – Lack of training alternatives and sufficient oversight result in underdeveloped CORs.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Finding 4 – Inadequate and unreliable FAS COR data hinders consistency and transparency.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Recommendations. ....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Management Comments.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Appendixes</b>	
<b>Appendix A – Purpose, Scope, and Methodology.....</b>	<b>A-1</b>
<b>Appendix B – Management Comments.....</b>	<b>B-1</b>
<b>Appendix C – Report Distribution.....</b>	<b>C-1</b>

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## Introduction

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Contracting Officer's Representatives (CORs) play a critical role in ensuring that the Government achieves the best value when acquiring goods and services. CORs ensure that contractors meet their contract commitments and are often first to recognize when a contractor or program is underperforming. To emphasize the importance of COR training and development governmentwide, the Office of Federal Procurement Policy established the Federal Acquisition Certification for Contracting Officer's Representatives program (COR certification program) that focuses on fundamental COR responsibilities. It is a risk-based certification program that establishes general COR training, experience, and development requirements and best practices for CORs. The COR certification program separates CORs into three categories: (1) Level I CORs serve on low-risk contract vehicles and are not required to have prior COR experience; (2) Level II CORs perform general project management activities and are required to have at least 1 year of prior COR experience; and (3) Level III CORs are assigned to significant program management activities and are required to have at least 2 years of prior COR experience. In addition to initial certification requirements, the COR certification program also requires CORs obtain recertification every 2 years through continuous learning points (CLPs). Level I CORs are required to obtain eight CLPs and Level II/III CORs are required to obtain 40 CLPs.

To improve COR management and oversight, the COR certification program requires all CORs to register in the Federal Acquisition Institute Tracking Application System (FAITAS).<sup>1</sup> When registering in FAITAS, CORs must self-select their FAITAS bureau. Within FAS, there are 12 FAITAS bureaus; one for each region and one for FAS Central Office. Each bureau has a Bureau Career Manager (bureau manager) who: (1) serves as the final FAS reviewer for COR certification requests in FAITAS, (2) is responsible for verifying the accuracy and completeness of certification requests, and (3) maintains COR certification records.

### Objectives

Our audit objectives are to determine if: (1) FAS CORs are certified, designated, and developed in accordance with the Office of Federal Procurement Policy's Federal Acquisition Certification for Contracting Officer's Representatives program and applicable GSA guidance, and (2) the COR certification program is effectively managed to ensure consistency and transparency.

The results of our audit are limited to information contained in FAITAS and/or FAS-provided data. Therefore, any CORs not registered in FAITAS and not identified in FAS data were not included in our audit testing.

See **Appendix A** - Purpose, Scope, and Methodology for additional details.

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<sup>1</sup> FAITAS is the official system of record for certification and training of all GSA acquisition workforce members (including CORs).

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## Results

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### **Finding 1 – FAS is not consistently implementing COR certification program guidance and stated best practices, possibly affecting COR foundational knowledge.**

When COR certification program guidance and best practices are not consistently implemented by FAS bureau managers, certified CORs are at risk of not possessing the appropriate skills, abilities, and competencies necessary to perform their designated duties. FAS bureau managers are responsible for reviewing COR certification requests in FAITAS and serve as the final FAS-approver for those requests. Although GSA's Office of Governmentwide Policy has final approval of FAS COR certification requests, bureau managers are in the best position to identify certification issues due to their familiarity with operations. COR certification program guidance is inconsistently applied during the certification process because the 12 bureau managers operate independently. Additionally, the lack of formal guidance provided by FAS and the Office of Governmentwide Policy contributes to confusion regarding requirements and best practices. This may result in underqualified CORs, which could affect their ability to effectively manage complex, high value contracts and ensure that contractors meet their contract commitments.

We analyzed the 52 COR certification requests approved in FAITAS from April 15 to July 15, 2013. Of those 52 CORs, 38 obtained a Level I or Level II certificate without any prior COR experience.<sup>2</sup> Of these 38 CORs, 31 did not receive their initial COR training in a classroom setting as recommended by the COR certification program guidance. In most cases, CORs took online training courses to satisfy their initial COR certification requirements. Furthermore, four of these CORs did not take any courses (online or in person) covering COR roles and responsibilities as required by the COR certification program guidance. Generally, these CORs took training courses related to acquisition workforce duties (e.g., green purchasing, contract pricing, managing projects, risk assessment); however, these courses do not address fundamental COR responsibilities. Since these individuals have no prior experience and may be assigned to complex product and service contracts, it is necessary that they obtain a solid foundation to build their COR knowledge.

The COR certification program guidance states that all CORs would benefit from ethics training. For 22 of the 52 CORs, there was no evidence of ethics training in their FAITAS profile. Furthermore, there is a clear distinction between the FAS Central Office bureau and regional bureaus. Over 95 percent of the CORs without evidence of ethics training in FAITAS were attributed to regional bureaus. The COR certification program guidance and GSA Acquisition Letter MV-06-06 Supplement 4 require CORs to ensure their training data is properly entered into FAITAS. CORs and bureau managers are also responsible for maintaining certification documentation for quality assurance

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<sup>2</sup> Per the COR certification program guidance, "Levels I and II are not incremental. If a COR meets the requirements of Level II certification, (s)he can be certified at Level II without prior Level I certification."

purposes. Despite these controls, documentation of ethics training was lacking in FAITAS for these CORs.

The COR certification program requires Level II and Level III CORs submit experience documentation during certification. Level II CORs are required to have at least 1 year COR experience and Level III CORs are required to have at least 2 years experience.<sup>3</sup> Twenty-six of the fifty-two CORs obtained a Level II or Level III certificate; however five of these CORs submitted documentation that did not fully satisfy Level II or Level III COR experience requirements. The documentation detailed previous tasks performed and past experiences; however, it did not include the necessary timeframes to determine if experience requirements were met. Two CORs also submitted COR designation letters as proof of experience, but without designation start and end dates. When experience documentation does not contain timeframe details, it is not possible to determine if CORs met COR certification program experience requirements.

When approving COR certificates, bureau managers should strive to apply the COR certification program and GSA guidance consistently across all regions and portfolios. They should also take into consideration the best practices and recommendations included in the guidance to strengthen the COR certification program. Consistent implementation of certification guidance will provide CORs with a strong basis of knowledge to help GSA achieve best value for customer agencies.

**Finding 2 – FAS CORs are not being designated in accordance with COR certification program guidance due to decentralized management and limited system access.**

The decentralized management of COR workload and limited access to FAITAS information impacts the CORs' ability to assist contracting officers in managing their contracts. Generally, FAS does not track COR workload at the regional/portfolio level and relies on bureau managers for current COR certification information via FAITAS. FAITAS is structured in a way that only allows bureau managers and a COR's direct supervisor to view information in the system. In many instances, contracting officers must rely on the bureau manager or the CORs' supervisor to inform them of any certification status change (e.g., expired, revoked, current). This method of communication and relay of information could negatively affect the contract, the Government, and the management of FAS's COR program.

For instance, per COR certification program guidance, if a COR certificate lapses, the designation letter, which establishes a COR's authority to administer a contract, shall be revoked, in writing, by the contracting officer. As noted above, if the bureau manager does not notify the contracting officer of the change in status, the contracting officer has no way of knowing they should revoke the designation letter. When COR authority is not immediately revoked, it raises the probability that the COR will perform unauthorized

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<sup>3</sup> CORs applying for Level II or Level III certification can gain COR experience by performing acquisition-related activities, including, but not limited to performing market research, writing statements of work, and developing quality assurance surveillance plans.

tasks such as evaluate contractor claims and proposals that may increase the Government's risk for potential claims or other legal implications.

The COR certification program requires the contracting officer designate a COR, in writing. Likewise, Federal Acquisition Regulation 1.602-2(d) requires CORs be certified in accordance with the COR certification program and designated in writing. Of the 120 COR designation letters we requested from FAS, they could not provide 19. FAS noted that these letters could not be located for a variety of reasons (e.g., letters missing, letters lost in transition to digital files). Furthermore, 15 COR designation letters lacked contract-specific details, such as the date of designation.<sup>4</sup> Without specific details, such as the contract number and date of designation, it is not possible to determine what contracts a COR is responsible for and when authority was designated.

The COR certification program requires all CORs obtain a valid certificate within 6 months of designation. Internal workload reports showed 15 CORs that were assigned to at least one contract but we found they did not have a COR certificate. In each instance, we discussed this with FAS officials and they were unable to provide a valid certificate for the assigned CORs. We also identified nine CORs assigned to at least one contract that possessed an expired (or revoked) certificate. Further, two CORs obtained their certification more than 6 months after being designated as the COR to a contract.

When COR workload and designation letters are not adequately monitored, it is difficult to determine which CORs are responsible for certain contracts. CORs serve as the contracting officer's official representative and are granted specific contractual authority. Typical COR responsibilities include monitoring contractor costs, evaluating contractor performance, and inspecting contract services and deliverables. If a COR certificate expires, is revoked, or not obtained within 6 months of designation, it is necessary for the bureau manager to know which contract(s) the COR is assigned to in order to notify the appropriate contracting officer. If the contracting officer is unaware of certificate status changes, there is a possibility that uncertified CORs will be responsible for inspection, acceptance, and rejection of contract services.

### **Finding 3 – Lack of training alternatives and sufficient oversight result in underdeveloped CORs.**

Based on our analysis of CLP achievement requests, FAS CORs are meeting the number of CLPs as required by the COR certification program; however, we question the quality of the training received. Many are taking duplicative or non-applicable training courses and some are earning an implausible number of CLPs in a time period. This may be happening because bureau managers are not identifying duplicative and non-applicable training courses as recertification issues during their review of CLP achievement requests.<sup>5</sup> Another cause may be a lack of suggested training

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<sup>4</sup> Eleven of the fifteen were from the same portfolio which only issues generic COR designation letters.

<sup>5</sup> Once CORs have met the CLP requirements for their certification level, they submit CLP achievement requests for bureau manager review within FAITAS.



alternatives, which GSA informed us would be addressed through an update to General Services Administration Acquisition Regulation Part 501.

FAITAS reports indicated FAS bureau managers approved 133 CLP achievement requests in the 15 months prior to September 19, 2013. We analyzed a judgmental sample of 46 CLP achievement requests from this time period. While all 46 CORs met the required number of CLPs, for 15 CORs the hours were obtained using duplicative, non-applicable, and/or unsupported courses. For example, one COR obtained 44 CLPs but took one of the training courses twice.<sup>6</sup> Removing the duplicative CLPs results in the COR not meeting the recertification requirements. Other CORs took training courses relevant to the employees' work but unrelated to COR responsibilities or competencies (e.g., Google Analytics and AdWords). In other cases, CLPs were unsupported as CORs did not provide documentation to confirm completion or the number of CLPs were overstated based on the documentation provided. Of the remaining 31 CORs, 26 obtained all CLPs by one method. To ensure that CORs are well-rounded, the COR certification program encourages CORs to achieve CLPs by a variety of methods; including, but not limited to training, attending seminars, and mentoring.

In addition, we found six CORs earned an implausible number of CLPs within a given time period (e.g., one COR obtained 32 CLPs on the same day). The Federal Acquisition Institute's guidance on CLPs generally provides for one CLP per hour of instruction or activity. Thus, although there is no regulation prohibiting the achievement of 32 CLPs in one 24-hour period, we argue that it is unreasonable. FAS explained a potential cause could be a data input error. If this is the case, bureau managers should address these errors at the time of CLP achievement approval to ensure information within FAITAS is accurate.

FAS has identified required training courses to enhance the knowledge of the acquisition workforce. FAS Instructional Letter (IL) 2012-10 required existing CORs complete *Basic Contracting for GSA Schedules* by June 25, 2013, and new CORs complete it within 1 year from entrance into the acquisition workforce. Similarly, FAS IL 2012-10 Supplement No. 1 required the completion of five courses by November 19, 2013.<sup>7</sup> However, many CORs are not completing FAS required training courses. Based on our analysis of CLP achievement requests, 18 CORs did not meet the respective deadlines to satisfy FAS IL 2012-10 and 19 CORs did not complete all of the courses required by FAS IL 2012-10 Supplement No. 1.<sup>8</sup> FAS informed us that IL 2014-04, issued on November 15, 2013, supersedes both of the aforementioned letters and extends the deadline for completion to May 16, 2014.<sup>9</sup> We re-evaluated the 19 CORs

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<sup>6</sup> This COR was required to obtain 40 CLPs for recertification.

<sup>7</sup> This IL also required the completion of an additional course for CORs involved in IT acquisitions.

<sup>8</sup> While we analyzed 46 CLP achievement requests, two were for one COR. Thus, the universe for our analysis of FAS IL 2012-10 is 45. Further, one COR retired before the deadline established by FAS IL 2012-10 Supplement No. 1, resulting in the universe for our analysis of this letter to be 44.

<sup>9</sup> IL 2014-04 supersedes both previous ILs; however, it does not impact the findings under IL 2012-10 as the required course completion date was June 25, 2013, and IL 2014-04 did not go into effect until November 15, 2013.

who had not completed the courses required by IL 2012-10 Supplement No. 1 to determine if they met the extended May 2014 deadline and identified 12 did not. This further indicates that FAS does not have adequate controls in place to ensure CORs are completing required training.

All CORs in our CLP achievement sample obtained the required number of hours; however, based on our findings, improvements can be made. Additional efforts by FAS bureau managers could improve the quality of the training CORs receive. Specifically, bureau managers should ensure that CORs meet the CLP hour requirements without the use of duplicative, non-applicable, or unsupported courses and that CORs are completing all FAS-required training. In turn, FAS CORs will more likely possess the necessary competencies to assist in the administration of FAS contracts and protect taxpayer dollars.

#### **Finding 4 – Inadequate and unreliable FAS COR data hinders consistency and transparency.**

Unreliable and limited data make it difficult to effectively manage the COR program to ensure consistency and transparency within FAS. Relevant, reliable, and timely communication is essential for an organization to manage operations. We found instances in which program data was incorrect, unavailable, and/or inaccessible, which compromises management decisions.

#### **FAITAS Data Issues**

FAITAS is meant to enhance FAS's ability to manage the COR workforce and provide internal controls for the certification and recertification processes. However, FAITAS user profiles are sometimes created in ways that negate these benefits. We identified the following data issues:

- One instance where two CORs selected one another as supervisor. One of these CORs also serves as the supervisor for another COR of a higher grade.
- Eight instances in which CORs self-selected the wrong bureau.
- CORs who report nationally, but are located in regional offices, inconsistently register under either regional or Central Office bureaus.

Additionally, due to the structure of FAS's bureaus in FAITAS, managers do not have complete visibility of the COR workforce for their portfolios, as they can only view and access information for CORs under their direct supervision. Further, all CORs in Central Office are in a consolidated bureau and the Office of Acquisition Management performs the bureau manager function (*i.e.*, Central Office Bureau Manager). This arrangement puts a large oversight burden on the Central Office Bureau Manager; which, as of July 2013, was responsible for 240 CORs while the next largest bureau manager had only 42. This disparity between the Central Office and regional bureau managers should be evaluated to determine how the structure of the Central Office bureau impacts the success of the COR program.

### **COR Workload Data Issues**

FAS does not have a reliable method to track COR workload. When we requested workload information, FAS often provided manually-collected data. We found that the CORs for 16 contracts were misidentified in internal FAS workload reports. When we inquired about discrepancies, FAS frequently informed us that the workload data was wrong. Given this, FAS's current method of tracking workload is ineffective.

### **Recommendations**

Based on our audit findings we recommend that the FAS Commissioner:

1. Implement a control to ensure that all FAS CORs are accounted for and registered in FAITAS.
2. Develop guidance to ensure the consistent implementation of the Federal Acquisition Certification for Contracting Officer's Representatives program as it relates to certifications, to include how regional CORs who report nationally should register in FAITAS.
3. Improve quality, use, and tracking of COR designation letters.
4. Develop a method to quantify and monitor COR workload.
5. Establish: (1) guidelines for evaluating training courses for credit towards CLP achievement requests, and (2) controls to ensure CORs complete FAS-required training courses.
6. Determine if restructuring the Central Office bureau would improve transparency and management of the FAS COR workforce.

### **Management Comments**

The Commissioner of the Federal Acquisition Service acknowledged receipt of the draft report and plans to implement ways to strengthen the FAS COR workforce. Management's written comments to the draft report are included in their entirety as ***Appendix B***.

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## ***Conclusion***

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We identified several instances in which FAS CORs were not certified, designated, or developed in accordance with the Federal Acquisition Certification for Contracting Officer's Representatives program requirements and best practices. The COR certification program was developed to strengthen the COR workforce and ensure that CORs obtain general training, experience, and development requirements that reflect the various types of contracts they manage. To ensure that CORs are in the best position to help GSA achieve best value, FAS should strive to fully implement all elements of the COR certification program guidance. In addition, FAS should develop a consistent approach that focuses on essential core competencies and training programs that promote growth.

We also found inadequate and unreliable COR data maintained by FAS and within FAITAS. To effectively manage the COR workforce and mitigate risk, FAS should develop controls and procedures to ensure COR data is accurate, reliable, and relevant.

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## **Appendix A – Purpose, Scope, and Methodology**

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### **Purpose**

This audit was included in the General Services Administration Office of Inspector General Fiscal Year 2013 Audit Plan.

### **Scope**

The audit focused on data contained in FAITAS, as it is the official system of record for all GSA CORs. We reviewed all FAS COR certification requests approved in FAITAS between April 15 and July 15, 2013. Additionally, we analyzed a judgmental sample of COR continuous learning point (CLP) achievement requests approved in the 15-month period prior to September 19, 2013. Our audit testing included all 11 GSA regions and five FAS portfolios.<sup>10</sup>

### **Methodology**

To accomplish our objectives, we:

- Reviewed the Office of Federal Procurement Policy's Federal Acquisition Certification for Contracting Officer's Representatives;
- Reviewed Federal Acquisition Regulation, FAS policies, and Office of Governmentwide Policy guidance regarding CORs and acquisition workforce training requirements;
- Examined Federal Acquisition Institute guidance addressing COR competencies and CLP requirements;
- Obtained access to FAITAS and queried reports to identify all FAS CORs registered in the system;
- Examined FAITAS reports, internal FAS COR rosters, and workload reports to obtain a universe of approximately 450 FAS CORs;
- Compared FAITAS reports to internal FAS rosters and workload reports to identify CORs not registered in FAITAS and CORs not accounted for by FAS;
- Reviewed COR certification requests and a judgmental sample of CLP achievement requests for compliance with the COR certification program and FAS guidance; and
- Interviewed FAS employees from regional offices and central office portfolios, including but not limited to bureau managers and regional management officials, to gain an understanding of how CORs are certified, designated, and managed.

We conducted the audit between April 2013 and November 2013 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a

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<sup>10</sup> FAS portfolios reviewed include: Acquisition Management, Assisted Acquisition Services, Travel, Motor Vehicle & Card Services, Integrated Technology Services, and General Supplies & Services.

reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

### **Internal Controls**

The scope of our work was limited to addressing the objectives of this audit. Thus, our assessment and evaluation of internal controls was restricted to those issues identified in the Results section of this report.

### **Report Qualification**

Our audit results are limited to the information contained in FAITAS and/or FAS-provided data. Therefore, if a COR was not registered in the system and not identified by FAS internal data, we were unable to include them in our audit. We identified discrepancies between the two data sources and brought them to FAS's attention for immediate correction. Ultimately, we were unable to verify the completeness of the FAS COR universe.

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## Appendix B – Management Comments

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GSA Federal Acquisition Service

MEMORANDUM FOR Barbara E. Boudin (JA-A)  
Program Director  
Acquisition Programs Audit Office

FROM: THOMAS SHARPE, JR. *TS* 19 SEP 2014  
COMMISSIONER  
FEDERAL ACQUISITION SERVICE (Q)

SUBJECT: Draft Audit Report – A130007, Opportunities Exist to  
Strengthen the FAS' COR Workforce

Thank you for the opportunity to provide additional input to Draft Audit Report A13007. The Federal Acquisition Service does not have any further comments beyond those provided on June 23, 2014, to Michelle Westrup, Lead Auditor – In- Charge.

FAS looks forward to receiving the final audit report and to begin implementing ways to strengthen the FAS COR Workforce.

If you have any questions, please contact Lisa Grant, Deputy Assistant Commissioner, QV at 703-605-3589.

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## ***Appendix C – Report Distribution***

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Commissioner, Federal Acquisition Service (Q)

Deputy Commissioner, Federal Acquisition Service (Q1)

Chief of Staff, Federal Acquisition Service (Q0A)

Controller, Federal Acquisition Service (BF)

Assistant Commissioner, Office of Acquisition Management (QV)

Branch Chief, GAO/IG Audit Response Branch (H1C)

Assistant Inspector General for Auditing (JA)

Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Investigations (JID)

Director, Audit Planning, Policy, and Operations Staff (JAO)