

WRITTEN TESTIMONY
Testimony of Suzette K. Kent
Before the Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Information Technology, and Government
Innovation
of the
House Committee on Oversight and Accountability
May 10, 2023

Chairwoman Mace, Ranking Member Connolly, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Information Technology, and Government Innovation, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on the Federal Legacy Information Technology (IT). It is an important conversation when members of Congress dedicate time to examining ways to drive progress towards modernizing the technology that runs our government and serves the people of our nation. This committee been unwavering in demonstrating bipartisan commitment to improving mission outcomes through better uses of technology.

It is also a vexing discussion because despite Congressional and Executive Branch directives, the creation of new funding vehicles and the ever-present urgent mission needs, some agencies have still struggled to make significant progress tackling technical debt and transforming their business processes and technology. Despite GAO reports spanning the last decade there are systems that remain multiple decades out of date.

My comments today reflect my experiences of over thirty years working with the largest corporations around the globe, my perspectives having served as Federal CIO being an advocate for Agency CIOs and aspiring to create policy to ensure our nation's government uses technology as a vehicle of service to our nation:

My understanding is that this hearing seeks to understand the dangers inherent in the continued operation of these legacy systems and to explore and ways to accelerate their overhaul.

This esteemed committee likely needs little reminders of the dangers as they are evident every day in both public and private sector – data stolen, travel disrupted, power grids compromised, people and businesses deprived of service, lives threatened and our homeland security impugned...and these dangers are like ticking time bombs becoming more severe as use of AI and the attacks on encrypted data become more sophisticated.

To make improvements, one must consider current levers available to drive change:

- **Strategic plan/Annual budget processes:** Major projects should be included in an Agency's strategic plan and their annual budget. Unfortunately, budget process is not nimble and legacy system transformations take many years. In almost all cases, there are increased costs before benefits are realized. But when I was Federal CIO, I was shocked to see that **most** Agencies technology budgets were largely flat YOY crossing multiple administrations. This leaves very little ability to take on major change initiatives.

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- The TMF: The Technology Modernization Fund was created to meet urgent needs that could not be anticipated in elongated budget process and to provide a multi-year vehicle, but leveraging the TMF relies on projects that have a cost savings element for payback.
- Working Capital Funds: This vehicle gives Agencies advantages more direct control of funds, ability to act in a timely manner and multi-year commitments, but not all agencies choose to leverage a working capital fund.
- Public Private Partnerships and grants: Although more specialized, these can also be used by agencies as the tip of the spear to understand and explore new technologies and develop strategies to aid adoption inside the government enterprise.

These tools have all yielded positive results, but not at the *pace* of technology change or at a *scale* that overcomes the technical debt.

Some areas for exploration that could accelerate overhaul of legacy systems:

- Signal **priority** via scorecard: Leverage the FITARA scorecard to measure progress exiting systems that have been sunset or are based on technology that is significantly outdated. There has long been ambiguity on defining “legacy” systems, but criteria should look at cyber security vulnerabilities, areas that significantly impact mission, support requirements, resource demands and cost savings.
- Enhance existing **processes** by mandating transformation plans with financial estimates: Legislation could be considered to direct agencies with significant technical debt to produce a plan for migration. The pace of technology change is extremely rapid and yet we attempt to effect change in government using processes that were designed when the concept of a computer was new, and the internet was non-existent. Mandate that plans be developed then confirm that those plans are incorporated into agency strategic plans and budgets. In this way, Congress is a key shaper of modern thinking in shifting the mind-set from expectations of immediate cost savings to understanding the implications of large-scale technology transformation. These efforts likely span administrations and may increase costs before benefits are captured so bipartisan support is critical. Industry partners have significant experiences transitioning from legacy systems that can be leveraged in government if the funding and process differences are neutralized.

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- Modernize **process** by expanding the business case metrics: Expand the measurement of project value and benefits recognition protocols to recognize things beyond cost savings such as reduction of risk, value to mission or improved resource availability (people and capability alternatives). We measure projects on cost savings, when not every project delivers a type of benefit that fits into the standard government equation of less software, less hardware, lower people expenses. Migrations from legacy systems are avoiding risk or catastrophe. Use of modern technologies allows for government to tap into a much wider pool of qualified resources or even find capabilities offered as a service.
- Modernize **workforce**: Accelerate the OPM director's commitment to transition to more skills-based hiring for technology roles for which there is industry certification. Agencies need people with current skills to use current technology. In some cases, even when a project is approved, the pace is hampered due to lack of people with needed skill sets.

Congress has multiple ways that it can accelerate overhaul of legacy systems because the technology capabilities are largely available and proven. Elevating better mission outcomes as a priority, improving funding and measurement processes and better aligning people with forward-facing opportunity are the areas where Congress can be the accelerator for modernizing the technology that runs our government and serves the people of our nation.

Respectfully submitted,

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