

**STAFF ASSISTANCE VISIT:  
BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN HEADQUARTERS AND  
THE OPERATIONAL CONTRACTING OFFICER**

Bernard Piper\*

**ABSTRACT.** The Staff Assistance Visit Program (SAV) is an important tool used by the Department of State's Procurement Executive since 1995 to support the Department's overseas contracting operations. The program is structured much differently from a formal contract compliance review. The SAV's purpose is to improve relationships between the field and headquarters. Also, the program provides hands-on expertise to improve operations. During the visit, the SAV team works to reinforce existing training, solve real problems, and improve communications with the contracting office and its clients. The program consistently demonstrates its value of assisting geographically dispersed contracting officers overcome the numerous contracting challenges that they encounter around the world.

**INTRODUCTION**

Large organizations must often face the issue of how to promote good working relationships between headquarters and field offices. The federal contracting world is no different. One way of bridging the gap between headquarters and field personnel is the Staff Assistance Visit (SAV). The Department of State has the widest geographic scope of any US Government agency. As a result, the Bureau of Administration, Office of the Procurement Executive (A/OPE) created a SAV program in 1995.

This article explores the development of the SAV program over the past ten years by discussing in details the program's objectives, unique qualities (compared to formal compliance reviews), and process. Finally,

-----  
*\* Bernard Piper is the Director of the Contract Policy Division at the US Department of State in the Office of the Procurement Executive.*

the program's benefits and application to other practitioners are discussed.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **Historical Development**

Large organizations must often face the issue of how to promote good working relationships between headquarters and field offices. The federal contracting world is no different. One way of bridging the gap between headquarters and field personnel is the Staff Assistance Visit (SAV). The Department of State has the widest geographic scope of any US Government agency. As a result, the Bureau of Administration, Office of the Procurement Executive (A/OPE) created its SAV program in 1995. The SAV was adopted from the Department of Navy's Military Sealift Command (MSC) program ten years earlier. The purpose of the MSC program was to supplement formal contract management reviews conducted on a three-year cycle. MSC procurement analysts would review the contracting operations of their field contracting activities in such places as Oakland, Bayonne, Naples, and Yokohama. In addition to being more informal than a typical contract management review, the MSC SAV would provide suggestions on best practices extending beyond a rigid compliance review and would occur midway between formal review events.

In contrast, State's system was not tied to formal management reviews. The first SAV at the Department of State was in February 1995. Two procurement analysts visited two African embassies: Harare, Zimbabwe and Lilongwe, Malawi. The program grew quickly in popularity. Before fiscal year 1995 ended, fifty (50) posts from around the world had requested SAVs through A/OPE. Unfortunately, the bureau did not have the resources to meet more than a fraction of the requests.

### **Reasons for SAV**

One of the unique challenges faced by the Office of the Procurement Executive is that its overseas contracting officers, unlike those in almost every other Federal agency, are not career contract specialists. Foreign Service officers serve as overseas contracting officers at the Department of State's diplomatic missions. The Foreign Service has a solid cadre of

intelligent, resourceful individuals, but they do not specialize in contracting. These officers are generally classified as generalists who are assigned a varied portfolio of responsibilities that change from assignment to assignment. Given the structure of the Foreign Service, it is highly unlikely that a Foreign Service Officer officer would be a contract specialist throughout his or her entire career. He/she may serve as a contracting officer during one tour, a consular officer on another tour, and then perhaps a human resources officer.

For example, a typical contracting officer in the Department of Defense or a US-based contracting officer at the Department of State receives almost 500 hours of training (not including periodic continuing education requirements within the field). However, an overseas Foreign Service Officer may receive a contracting officer's warrant with approximately 160 hours of training and in some circumstances may not even receive that much training. This imbalance in training obviously creates challenges to ensure properly run overseas contracting activities. The SAV is one of the tools A/OPE uses to help reinforce training and tackle operational problems that many contracting officers must face.

### **SAV PROGRAM**

The SAV is not just another acronym the contracting officer has to manage in an endless inventory of terminology. The SAV or Staff Assistance Visit is not a Procurement Management Review (PMR) or Contract Management Review (CMR). PMRs and CMRs are traditional compliance reviews conducted by a team of contracting experts who review a contracting operation. The SAV is a far distant relative of the dreaded PMR or CMR. An upcoming PMR usually results in contracting officers scrambling to tidy up contract files and sweeping the unmanageable ones out of sight, not unlike a wife preparing for a visit by a hostile mother-in-law. PMRs generally end with the reviewers generating a report listing the contracting officer's failures to comply with the regulations, operational weaknesses, and general criticisms. The reports may leave the contracting officer demoralized, not unlike the endurances suffered during the proverbial mother-in-law's visit.

SAVs, as practiced in the Department of State, are neither surprise nor mandatory visits. The SAVs are actually solicited by contracting

officers and not mandated by their oversight or headquarters office. At the Department of State's, Bureau of Administration, Office of the Procurement Executive, more SAVs are solicited every year by overseas contracting officers than can actually be provided because of the program's popularity.

### **Program Operations**

While everyone who has conducted a SAV usually acknowledges that each SAV is different, all SAVs include several consistent points.

#### ***Voluntary***

As previously stated, all SAVs are voluntary. Since the program's inception, the Office of the Procurement Executive consistently maintains a firm policy that the contracting officer must initiate the formal request for a visit. The visits are never mandated. These conditions establish an atmosphere for more productive and open exchanges of concerns than if the visits were structured as a mandatory compliance review.

#### ***Preparation***

There are always more requests within a year than can be honored. However, the cognizant, regional desk officer for each of the six geographic regions (into which the Department divides the world) will prepare a list of recommendations. The recommendations are generally limited to three diplomatic posts in one trip because of resource limitations. The desk officer will consider a variety of factors including problems identified by the contracting officer, size of the diplomatic post, and date of last visit. After a slate of posts is approved, a SAV team is created for the regional visit. The team includes the regional desk officer for that region and one of the other five desk officers. By traveling in pairs, the team can manage to meet with more individuals at the post, since these visits are limited in duration. Including the desk officer from the other region provides a different perspective on a particular diplomatic post's challenges and issues.

Once a team and date for the visit is selected, a survey is sent to the selected diplomatic post. The survey solicits a variety of information regarding the contracting operation at the post. This information allows the SAV team to assess the types of contracts performed and identify

potential problems before even arriving. Examples of such problems may be the observation of a large number of petty cash transactions. This type of observation would prepare the SAV team to investigate the feasibility of establishing local blanket purchase agreements (BPAs) or promoting greater use of the purchase card.

### ***Duration***

Because of budgetary concerns and the desire to minimize disruptions to contracting operational requirements, SAVs typically last two to three days. In that time, the content of each visit is different, but the structure shares several similarities.

### ***Structure***

When the SAV team arrives at the diplomatic mission's contracting office, the team typically starts by randomly reviewing all procurement files including large contracts, purchase orders, and blanket purchase agreements. This examination serves several purposes. Visiting staff can very quickly gain a basic understanding of some of the contracting operations including process flow ranging from requirements generation to acceptance of supplies or services. Also, a random review of the contract files inevitably reveals a consistent set of problems, rather than just an isolated incident. Examples include failures to record quotations or correct documentation when competition is restricted. This knowledge allows the team the opportunity to target these problems through discussion, remedial briefings, and even tutorials to reinforce the formalized training that is already available to the procurement staff through the Department's formal training programs.

### **Program Benefits**

#### ***Real Problem Solving***

The SAV team's task is not just to identify compliance failures but to provide practical solutions to those problems. For example, a contracting officer may have an established blanket purchase agreement with price lists, but the contracting officer is not competing large orders that require competition. The SAV team would explain that the BPA does not address the regulations' requirement to compete orders, since the original BPA prices are neither fixed nor competed when the agreement is signed. The team would then propose alternatives such as awarding an indefinite

delivery - indefinite quantity contract that would include competed, fixed prices. The team may also help the contracting officer start preparing the solicitation, and the assigned desk officer would then follow-up with the overseas contracting officer following the team's return to Washington.

Another example may be to help a contracting officer work through a festering problem that he or she is unable to solve, such as an unauthorized commitment. From personal experience, I have sat at a computer to guide the preparation of determinations and findings to resolve the matter while at the same time explaining to the contracting officer the required steps and rationale for the process. Also, the SAV team has provided hands-on assistance in the preparation of complicated modifications ranging from incorporating necessary changes in a construction contract to explaining the process for an economic price adjustment for local guard services.

By solving operational problems, the visit creates a new dimension of learning that contracting officers may not always grasp in the formal classroom. Plus, the overseas contracting officer doesn't have the luxury of on-the-job training as do many headquarters-based contract specialists. At most US-based contracting offices, groups of contract specialists and contracting officers work together. This arrangement affords the inexperienced contract specialists the opportunity of the guidance and on the job training of an experienced contracting officer. However, in the Department of State's overseas environment, the embassy or consulate contracting officer is often the only operational contracting officer. The SAV allows the contracting officer to interact in person with contracting subject matter experts, even if only for a short period of time.

### ***Advocate and Champion***

Since the post-contracting officer is often the only American who is responsible for directly enforcing contracting rules and requirements, the overseas contracting officer often experiences continuous opposition to proper job performance. During the SAV, the A/OPE team many times serves as an advocate for the overseas contracting officer by meeting with clients and post management. The visiting team can educate and, if necessary, serve in an authoritative capacity to make management and clients aware of the contracting officer's responsibilities to uphold statutes, federal regulation, and Departmental policies.

***Better Communications and Relationships***

The regional desk officers consistently attest that SAVs improve communications between the visited post-contracting staff and themselves in Washington. It is undeniable that a distinct value exists when regional desk officers have an opportunity to meet the operational staff at overseas activities. Because of the improved relationships the contracting staff is more willing to contact headquarters to request guidance and assistance beyond the regulatory requirement of getting Departmental clearance on procurement actions above the contracting officer's warrant limitation. The outcome is that the Washington-based desk officers are more aware of specific issues at the embassy or consulate and can often provide solutions to contracting problems before they emerge. This reduces administrative time for both the contracting office and A/OPE to correct problems.

**CONCLUSION**

Historically, the SAV program has demonstrated its ability to help cope with the long distances between the headquarters contracting office and geographically disbursed field contracting activities. At the Department of State, the program serves as an effective bridge to cope with such huge gaps, not just in geography but of wide differences in business practices associated with global purchasing. The gaps are definitely reduced by the noticeable improvements in communications between the overseas contracting officer and Washington-based personnel in A/OPE. For those contracting offices experiencing communications challenges, this program may help remedy those problems.

Furthermore, where concerns about reinforcing the effectiveness of formalized training exist, the SAV program may be of value. While SAVs are never meant to serve as a substitute to training, the visits have effectively supplemented training by applying concepts taught in the classroom in operational settings. When training opportunities are limited because of funding, geographic, and other resource constraints, the SAV has helped boost effectiveness.

Since the only constant in the contracting field is change, the Department of State's Procurement Executive must continuously help the agency's contracting officers successfully perform their jobs. The SAV program remains an invaluable staple of the Procurement Executive's

product offerings and will likely continue to be deployed because of its effectiveness and popularity among operational contracting officers.

#### **NOTES**

The views expressed are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the US Government.