

Achieving Excellence in Procurement in Bernalillo County, New Mexico

By Hannah Wolford

Since 2006, the purchasing department for the county of Bernalillo, New Mexico, has received the “Achievement of Excellence in Procurement” award from the National Procurement Institute (NPI). Only 43 counties in the United States and only 2 other government agencies in New Mexico received the award in 2013. The award application process is a points system where you must satisfy the criteria for at least 50 percent of the points to be eligible for the award. According to NPI, “the criteria are designed to measure innovation, professionalism, productivity, e-procurement, and leadership attributes of the procurement organization.” So what has the Bernalillo County purchasing department been doing that they have received this award for 7 consecutive years?

CASE PROFILE

Bernalillo County, New Mexico

Population:
673,460

Square miles:
1,161

Median household income:
\$48,231

Form of government:
Commission / manager

Continuous process improvement

The purchasing department mission states that

“Bernalillo County's Purchasing and Inventory Department continuously strives to deliver the highest level of customer service to user departments and vendors while ensuring purchases are in alignment with state statutes; that stocking levels are kept accurate and able to satisfy the needs of user departments; that signage for traffic, facilities and construction are precise; and that solicitations are transparent, fair and competitive while providing the utmost value to maximize public funds.”

The department has taken a number of actions that demonstrate its commitment to these values.

To confirm efficient delivery, performance measures are tracked and reported each year including:

- Average process time of purchase orders issued
- Average process time for Request for Bids
- Average process time for Request for Proposals
- Percent of protests sustained

These measures are used to ensure that the department is meeting yearly targets and identify any concerns or improvements. Additionally, the purchasing department conducts customer surveys of both end users (jurisdiction staff) and vendors. Those involved in some aspect of purchasing or procurement are asked how they rate the county purchasing department on the quality, timeliness, professionalism, and overall satisfaction of the service provided. The feedback received is reviewed and used to improve service performance. For instance, in previous years end users had commented that there was a lack of consistency or continuity across purchasing staff and purchases. This prompted the department to hire an outside consultant to document all of the procurement processes. Using InProcess software, the consultant flow-charted every procurement process. The Purchasing Department then reached out to the larger county departments for a focus group on the results. During the focus group, departments were made more aware of the procurement processes and could recommend changes. The focus group eliminated unnecessary steps, increased county staff buy-in, and reduced confusion around the

procurement processes. The documentation and focus groups were a six-month endeavor that was finalized on January 2nd, 2014, and the full description of each procedure was posted to the internal county website. However, the department has already received positive feedback from senior management and focus group participants.

Transparency

Another priority for the Bernalillo County Purchasing Department is transparency. Everything from vendor forms to awarded contracts is posted online to provide convenient and consolidated information to vendors and end users. The Electronic Vendor Registration System (eVRS) allows vendors to register online with the county. Registration benefits include the ability to download request for bids (RFBs) and request for proposals (RFPs), automated e-mail notifications when addendums and updates are posted, and online viewing of RFB and RFP opportunities and results. This feature includes all “intent to award” sole source contracts thirty days prior to award. This provides an opportunity for vendors to protest the award if they were previously unaware of the RFP.

Residents of the county also benefit from the online portal. The website can be used by county residents to see which vendors the county is using, and where their tax dollars are going. And in accordance with New Mexico state law, public citizens can view all campaign contributions made to any county public official by any county vendor online.

Training

Training is an essential part of an effective department. Bernalillo County processes cannot function properly without well-trained end users and vendors. The department hosts trainings for the two different groups involved. Internal users are the jurisdiction staff persons who require purchasing services for their departments. External users are the vendors hoping to do business with Bernalillo County.

The county human resources department maintains an electronic calendar that lets staff know of training opportunities. With the newly documented processes, the purchasing department will be hosting roughly five training courses per month, which staff can sign up for online. The topics vary from a procurement overview training course, to specific trainings on specification writing and the request for proposal process. These trainings have received positive feedback and help with consistency and understanding among staff.

The external user trainings are advertised on the website and in the local newspaper. The trainings cover how to do business with Bernalillo County for new and existing vendors. Staff members communicate changes in state law, recent or upcoming vendor opportunities, and the mandatory requirements for conducting business with the county. Over the past couple of years, the purchasing department has noticed that companies that normally deal exclusively with private industry have had to extend into the public sector due to the economy. These trainings are a valuable part of introducing these companies to the public sector as well as the vendor guide which is posted online in both Spanish and English. The vendor guide supplements trainings with information regarding registration, invoicing, and insurance.

One activity that the department hopes to include later this year is a “How to Do Business with Government” fair. The fair would involve representatives from local public schools, local municipalities, and the county of Bernalillo. Vendors would be able to learn of opportunities within each of the organizations all in one place.

Conclusion

As Purchasing Director Lisa Sedillo-White said, “What makes our purchasing department a successful organization is a commitment to customer service.” This dedication has spurred the department towards continuous process improvement, increased transparency, and numerous training opportunities. The goal is to make sure that everyone involved in the procurement process has a satisfying experience. In Bernalillo County, nineteen employees are responsible for all department purchasing. Therefore, the purchasing department is connected to and can have an effect on all jurisdiction services. By keeping the big picture in mind, the Bernalillo County Purchasing Department has achieved excellence, and has been nationally recognized for doing so.

For more information on Bernalillo County’s purchasing processes, please visit www.bernco.gov/purchasing.