WRITTEN TESTIMONY
Testimony of Suzette K. Kent
Before the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability
Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Information Technology, and Government Innovation
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 regarding Federal Information Technology. I appreciate that this committee has been unwavering in demonstrating a bipartisan commitment to improving mission outcomes through better uses of technology.

My understanding is that this hearing seeks to understand the dangers inherent in the continued operation of outdated federal legacy IT systems and to explore ways to accelerate their overhaul.

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

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.

My comments today will draw from my personal experiences in three areas: 1.) over thirty years as a business professional working with the world's largest corporations to transform businesses using technology; 2.) having served as Federal CIO where I was an advocate for Agency CIOs; and 3.) creating policy to ensure our nation's government uses technology as a vehicle to achieve mission outcomes.

To target areas for improvement, one must first reflect on current levers available to drive change:

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

- The TMF: The Technology Modernization Fund was created to meet urgent needs that could not be anticipated within the elongated budget process and to provide a multi-year

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vehicle that addresses limitations imposed by the annual budget cycle. But leveraging the TMF relies on projects that have a cost savings element for payback.

- Working Capital Funds: This vehicle gives Agencies advantages of more direct control of funds, ability to act in a timely manner and to make 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 larger-scale 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:

- Establish legacy transition as a targeted Agency **priority** and update how outcomes are measured: Leverage agency directives or a scorecard to measure Agency progress exiting systems that have been sunset or that 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. Consider using the GAO reports of legacy systems with most significant risk to aim these priority directives.

- Enhance existing **processes** by mandating comprehensive transformation plans with financial estimates and timelines: 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. Congress could direct that transformation plans be developed, validate that those plans are incorporated into agency strategic plans and budgets, then support funding based on those plans. In this way, Congress supports the needed actions from end to end. These efforts likely span administrations and may increase costs before benefits are captured, so bipartisan support is critical.   Industry partners have significant experience transitioning from legacy systems that can be leveraged in government if the funding and planning processes recognize technology transition best practices.

- Modernize measurement **process** by expanding the business case metrics: Expand the measurement of project value and benefits recognition protocols to recognize things

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beyond cost savings such as reduction of risk, value to mission or improved resource availability (people and capability alternatives). Today, measurement of projects is centered on cost savings when not every project delivers a type of benefit that fits into the standard government equation of cost savings. For example, migrations from some legacy systems can avoid risk or catastrophe, but the baseline system cost may not decrease. Use of modern technologies also allows for government to tap into a much wider pool of qualified resources or even find capabilities offered as a service, yet these benefits are not considered in a technology benefits calculation.

- Modernize **workforce:** Accelerate the Office of Personnel Management Director's commitment to transition to more skills-based hiring for technology roles for which there is a recognized industry certification.   Agencies need people with current skills to use current technology (even if in some cases they lack traditional post-secondary academic degrees).   In some cases, even when a project is approved, the pace is hampered due to a lack of people with needed skill sets.

Congress has multiple ways that it can accelerate overhaul of legacy systems because the technology capabilities are 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.