EMERALD
ONE

Committee on Oversight and Reform
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

September 22, 2020

Chairman Conolly and Members of the Committee,

Thank you once again for the opportunity to work with you and celebrate FITARA 10.
Below you will find my responses to your questions for the record following the
hearing. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have additional questions or areas
of interest. I wish you the best of luck as you move forward improving FITARA.

Sincerely,

LaVerne H. Council
Chief Executive Officer
Emerald One, LLC

LaVerne H. Council Responses to Chairman Gerald E. Connolly
Committee on Oversight and Reform

1. *Which of the FITARA Scorecard's metrics did you find most and least helpful for driving IT modernization at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and to your knowledge, at other agencies?*

I found the data center optimization metric most helpful. This metric provided an easily understandable way of quantifying the complexity of the environment and, by association, the overall risk to the enterprise.

I found software licensing least helpful as a metric. While important, it did not give our team the ability to measure modernization or overall operational risk.

2. *During your time as Chief Information Officer (CIO) at VA, how did you see the CIO's role evolve through the implementation of FITARA and the Scorecard?*

As we implemented the changes we needed to align with the law, the Office of Information and Technology, or OIT, became more visible at the Department level. The accountability of the IT organization and the CIO became more prominent, but it also became more understood. OIT was seen historically as a help desk or an "order taker," and the organization's accountability was tactical and held by OIT itself. We focused on governance, risk management, transparency, and security, and we established metrics that coincided with the FITARA scorecard and were meaningful to our daily operations. We reported on these metrics consistently, not just in concert with the FITARA reporting, and we used them to identify trends for improvement and remediation. We shared those plans and roadmaps so that all stakeholders understood our strategy and our progress as we moved forward. Explaining the role and importance of FITARA allowed us to ensure that our stakeholders felt invested in its success.

3. *In 2016, you said that if the VA could achieve all it was planning for that year, it would be the premier agency in FITARA. How should we envision "the premier agency in FITARA" today and what would its priorities be in IT investment and management? How could FITARA be reformed to guide agencies toward this model of success?*

First and foremost, today's premier agency in FITARA would be outcome-focused. Many of our government agencies are focused on activities rather than the needed outcomes. Supporting that agency would be a world-class project management organization and a roadmap aligned with a clear project portfolio. This premier FITARA CIO organization would be a strong, transparent communicator who understands how to leverage key components of FITARA to drive infrastructure changes and improvements.

The FITARA scorecard should become an agency-wide responsibility and metric. This would provide agency CIOs with the support needed to become the enabler of a critical agency asset. This is analogous to agencies' security postures—while the CIO enables this capability, the agency head is ultimately responsible. FITARA should be viewed similarly, with agency heads assuming more direct accountability for the health of their technology systems.

The scorecard should incorporate two additional metrics to enable this world-class stance. First, a metric that measures the agency's average technology lifecycle would be useful in understanding the risk of modernizing the environment. Second, a method to assess cultural readiness will provide insight so that agency heads and CIOs can understand their relative ability to drive user adoption. Organizational cultures must be prepared to adopt new technology, not just endure it. Organizational leaders must focus on user adoption by measuring and managing the culture's preparedness before modernizing technology.

4. *Based on your experience both as a CIO in the private sector and at VA, what are the top challenges facing federal CIOs? How do you suggest we address them?*

The short tenure of federal CIOs—and CIOs overall—precludes agencies from a sufficient planning cycle or vested leadership accountability to ensure plans are implemented and projects are completed as intended. You can see the impacts of this exact issue in the recent GAO report about VA OIT: https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-476T.

5. *If you were the federal CIO, what would your top priorities be?*

I would first emphasize the basics as outlined in my prior responses. Agencies must assume overall accountability and responsibility for technology as a mission enabler,

ensure that their program management capabilities are world-class, and learn how to report on meaningful metrics aligned to FITARA and agency goals.

For a more dramatic shift, I would establish a government-wide shared service organization. Because of the lack of tenure of CIOs and the hiring and resourcing challenges government-wide, I believe the government would be well-served through its own cloud. The US federal government is analogous to the largest corporation in the world, it can utilize its scale, scope, and capability to realize the cost benefits of such an endeavor.

These efforts haven't achieved their potential to date because the initiatives are focused at the agency level. By raising its profile to the full scale of the government and establishing a long-term strategic roadmap, such a shift could achieve cost avoidance and rapid modernization government-wide without suffering from the lack of consistent leadership.

6. *In 2019, you reportedly stated that 67% of CIOs felt the top factor of their IT performance was in cutting costs. What is the problem with agencies prioritizing cost savings above other factors such as successful execution, services delivery, and cybersecurity?*

The lowest cost rarely guarantees the best skills to achieve the desired outcomes in a complex environment. Proven skills with references should be prioritized, then price.

7. *What metric do you think would be helpful to CIOs today to allow them to use FITARA to leverage change at their agencies?*

Adding a metric dedicated to examining the average technology lifecycle. Understanding the average age of the technology infrastructure, and therefore understanding what is already in place, is a key element in modernization. The average age of an agency's infrastructure can have significant impacts on their ability to modernize, or their ability to modernize without encountering new issues shortly after the technology's implementation. That four-year metric of an average CIO's tenure is a lifetime in technology. By four years, both software and hardware are outdated even when routinely maintained. This metric is also based on age. It conveys information that a CIO knows to be complex in a way that is easily understood by stakeholders and agency leadership.