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Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Correa, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about our company's support to the Department of Homeland Security. My name is Brandon LaBonte, and I am the President and owner of ArdentMC, a small business started in 2006 with a primary focus on providing technology and Geospatial solutions to the Department of Homeland Security. Much like many small businesses who focus on homeland security, ArdentMC is driven by a desire to advance the use of tools and technologies in the detection and deterrence of terrorist activities, help response and recovery to natural and man-made disasters, and support our law enforcement and security efforts around the country. ArdentMC has employees in 14 states and the District of Columbia supporting mission programs across every DHS operational and support component except TSA and FLETC. While I will speak today about our company's perspective in particular, I believe our experiences are representative of the many small businesses supporting DHS.

In the summer of 2016, I had the privilege of joining representatives from the DHS Procurement Department and the Personnel Security Division (PSD) for an Acquisition Innovation Roundtable (AIR) on the contractor fitness process. While fitness determinations are a challenge for both industry and the government, the AIR allowed a better understanding of opposing viewpoints. For example, the AIR revealed that DHS was unaware that industry was hiring employees on the contingency of their fitness determination, and that recruiting costs were lost when excessive delays meant a contingent employee decided to take another position.

Given the monumental challenge faced by DHS, and the ever-increasing volume of fitness requests submitted, I would respectfully submit three recommendations to increase both the efficiency of the department's fitness efforts and the level of support for the mission:

First – DHS components should permit reciprocity of fitness determinations.

We hired an employee that had supported a DHS client for over three years. We submitted his fitness request on November 4, 2015, expecting a quick result and good continuity due to his longstanding work in the program. His fitness was approved, but not until March 3, 2017, about fifteen months later. In the meantime, he took a different job rather than wait. While differences in the way some components utilize reciprocity are understandable, our experience is that reciprocity is rarely honored between, or even within, components. This results in uncertainty for the contractor and fitness delays. ArdentMC's average fitness determination time across all our pending requests, as of last week, is 213 days. A uniform approach to already approved contractor employees would increase predictability for contractors and mission support for DHS.

Second – DHS should increase industry collaboration and partnership in the fitness process.

On February 22nd of this year we received an email from a DHS component security office in response to repeated requests for help with a delayed fitness submission. The employee, it turns out, was approved to work on 6/22/2017, yet the component did not convey this information. This results in less support to the mission, and over \$120,000 of lost revenue, a significant amount for a small business, which multiplies as the number of impacted employees increases. Today, unlike DoD, DHS will not communicate with employers about employees submitted for fitness. This results in excessive delays and miscommunications (or no communications) between DHS and the employer. DHS should open communication directly to the employers about the status of their employees in consideration for fitness.

Finally – DHS should leverage industry’s government approved security officers.

ArdentMC’s corporate security officer (known as a Facilities Security Officer, or FSO) works closely with DoD on submitting and monitoring the status of our employees in the security clearance process. In fact, DoD provides training, access and authorization to handle sensitive personal information. While the security process at DHS is distinct, the type of information is the same. Industry provides over 13,000 certified security officers today, all trained and approved to handle the same type information used in the DHS fitness process. DHS’s workforce could be augmented at no cost to the agency, while also providing visibility and transparency by utilizing these FSOs to open communications with DHS.

As a company that began its mission support at DHS and has continued to work for DHS for over a decade, we believe we bring some uncommonly deep insight into these challenges. We continue to hope to work with DHS and to be part of the solution. Thank you for the opportunity to provide my testimony, and I’m happy to respond to any questions.