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Service awards give partnerships their due

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By [Stan Soloway](#)

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The annual Service to America Medals, or Sammies, were awarded Sept. 16, and once again, the awards' sponsor — the Partnership for Public Service — succeeded in proving that the civil service continues to produce exceptional leaders doing exceptional work, despite the rhetoric to the contrary and the many obstacles in their way.

The awards are given to civil servants in a wide range of fields — including health, law, technology, security and the environment. They come at a particularly important time. Even as the presidential candidates talk passionately about the need to enhance the national commitment to volunteer and career service, the federal workforce faces enormous challenges.

Demographic trends remain deeply troubling, and few efforts of real, sustainable value are being undertaken to empower or enable employees to pursue innovation or move aggressively to address the problems the government faces.

That challenge is borne out in the Professional Services Council's biennial survey of federal acquisition leaders, which will be released in late October.

Many of the same issues highlighted in the 2006 survey have emerged again: workforce capacity, lack of employee development and strong concerns that risk and innovation are being inhibited rather than fostered in government. The Sammy winners' ability to accomplish all that they have in this difficult, often harsh environment offers an even greater testament to their achievements.

The Sammies also offer a valuable lesson about government. One of last year's winners, Frazer Lockhart, the Energy Department program manager who led the cleanup effort at the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant in Colorado, referred to his team's achievement as "an example of what happens when you put the best of government together with the best of industry." Again this year, a number of the winners led critical initiatives that delivered important and valuable results in partnership with the private sector — from tackling global warming to preventing



infection, from improving medical care for returning veterans to enhancing opportunities for women in Afghanistan.

The winner of the 2008 Federal Employee of the Year Medal was Richard Greene, the U.S. Agency for International Development official responsible for leading the Bush administration's anti-malaria initiative, which is being implemented by a diverse array of government, industry and nongovernmental entities. The initiative offers yet another validation of Lockhart's observation about the power of public/private partnerships.

We should continue to pay close heed to that lesson. Most discussions about the current or future state of the government are binary: We have too many contractors or we don't have enough.

The Sammys remind us that the real question is far more nuanced: How do we build the most effective organization that has the right mix of contractor and federal resources and the right management and leadership to achieve the government's many missions? Answering that question requires realistic assessments of a program's needs and challenges and an equally realistic assessment of the availability of and competition for scarce workforce skills. In other words, the role of the private sector is not an either/or question. It is one of balance.

It's time to go beyond the debates of yesterday and focus on the realities of today. The face of government has changed and will continue to evolve. The Sammy winners deserve the country's thanks for what they have done and continue to do. Their accomplishments are truly exceptional. And in many ways, they underscore the need for more, not less, partnership.

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