

Changing the Way Justice Manages its Mission: Insights from Jolene Lauria, Deputy Assistant Attorney General/Controller, U.S. Department of Justice


By Michael J. Keegan



Fiscal austerity is an enduring challenge for the foreseeable future, and federal agencies have a greater incentive to rethink traditional approaches to mission support and service delivery. Government executives can harness


major technological shifts and adapt proven public sector and commercial best practices to make their agencies both more efficient and productive. With the implementation of its Unified Financial Management System (UFMS) on time and within budget, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) continually seeks ways to operate more efficiently and cost effectively. UFMS has identified and standardized common business processes across the department, leveraging best practices to improve financial management and reporting, and providing the department with leadership with real-time financial data. What are DOJ's Office of Controller's key priorities? What are the key challenges being faced by the DOJ Controller? What has made the UFMS implementations so successful? Jolene Lauria, Controller, U.S. Department of Justice, joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to provide her insights into these questions and more. The following is an edited excerpt of our discussion complemented with additional research.

What does the mission of the U.S. Department of Justice mean to you? How passionate are you about it?


 **Jolene Lauria:** I live by a simple but powerful phrase: If you wish for peace, work for justice. Earlier in my career I received a mug, which remains in my office today, that has this phrase on it and I remind myself of it every day, because it characterizes everything that I do at DOJ. Every day at Justice, I know that we're forwarding a more peaceful society. I want to work for an organization with that mission and that seeks to

make vision a reality. We—me and the other 114,000 employees in the Department of Justice—are privileged to serve its mission and work in a department that has as its core value: justice! We don't produce a product or widget. We don't make a profit, but we're here to make communities in this country safer, more just, and better. We uphold the constitution; we safeguard the country's rule of law.

Would you give us a sense of the scale of the department's budget and operations?

 **Jolene Lauria:** The department's geographical footprint spans the globe with a budget of \$27.3 billion and 75 percent of those resources are in four key areas: 31 percent is spent on the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 30 percent of our resources go to prisons and detention, 7 percent to DEA, or drug enforcement and activities, and 7 percent to the U.S. Attorney's office. You often hear the Justice Department being the largest law firm in the country, but over 60 percent of the resources go to the FBI and the prisons and detention areas. Continuing, 19 percent of the budget goes to other law enforcement, about 11 percent goes to the litigating components, while 2 percent goes to management and technology mission support activities. Finally, 8 percent of DOJ's budget is spent on grant activities. Given its breadth and depth, the department may be more than the public generally knows.

What does the controller at DOJ do?

 **Jolene Lauria:** My office is within the Justice Management Division (JMD). Formally, the Justice Management Division, under the direction of the Assistant Attorney General for Administration, provides advice and assistance to senior management officials relating to basic department policy for budget and financial management, personnel management



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and training, facilities, procurement, equal employment opportunity, information processing, records management, security, and all other matters pertaining to organization, management and administration. In a nutshell, we actually help make the missions of the department happen in many ways. You need operational experts on the ground to do their job, but you also need the infrastructure and program support to allow them to do that job. In the simplest form, you need money to put gas in agents' cars and contracts and procurement mechanisms that provide and maintain those cars. You need contracts to hire linguists, translators, and IT specialists. Who helps make this all happen? The budget and financial analysts that work in my office make sure that program owners get the resources they need to meet their respective missions.

I serve in the management arm of the Department of Justice. It's one of the highest career executive positions in the department, responsible for the entire department's budget and finances. I advise the Assistant Attorney General, the Deputy Attorney General, and the Attorney General on various issues related to the financial operations of the department. It's a unique position. On one level, you inform the big picture while also advising senior leadership on key issues affecting the department. You then need to take that big picture—that strategic vision—and make it operational. It's always about focus on both the big picture and little picture. It could be anywhere from the types of appropriations you can use to purchase a sandwich to how you run a large-scale operation. It's anything from the very smallest item to the very largest item. I have the functional responsibility to make sure that happens.

Regarding your responsibilities and duties, what are the top three management challenges that you face in your position?



Jolene Lauria: The challenges facing me today are somewhat similar to what I shared with you when I was on the show in 2009. I'll briefly outline those challenges:

- **Hiring the right people and retaining them.** Given budget constraints, it has become very difficult to get people in, hire them, train them, and retain them. Ask any of my service directors, and they will agree that hiring talented people has to be our number one management challenge. It is people, people, people—finding, hiring, and keeping them.
- **Keeping up with technology.** The second management challenge I face involves technology. It is a twofold issue: (1) keeping up with technology, given scarce resources,

and (2) being able to use the wealth of data collected by technology to better inform decision making. For example, we implemented the Unified Financial Management System (UFMS) across the department over a number of years. Almost immediately, we have to update and upgrade the system, when we barely have the resources and money to actually implement it in the first place. The second part of our technology challenge is making sure we can use it as a tool so we can perform the analytics and use the data to do our jobs better.

- **Unfunded mandates.** I think this challenge hasn't changed since the day I started in the federal government. There's a lack of requirements analysis or good financial sense for when a law is passed or when a new requirement is laid upon a department. The key question: does the department have the right resources, tools, and people to get the job done? You would never start a business without this support function. You would never start a business without financial capital, but we pass laws that don't have money behind them. They come with requirements that I'm referring to as unfunded mandates. It is a huge management challenge for us.

Frankly, in the end, the budget is the biggest management issue we face today in the federal government. Not knowing the resources that may be coming to us, constantly planning on either shutdowns or sequesters—the budget stressor for us—and managing through that is a big challenge.

What has surprised you most in your current role?



Jolene Lauria: I was reflecting on this question, and I was surprised that this surprised me. I'm known in the department as the champion for change. I've implemented a unified financial management system across the enterprise. I'm doing a DOJ service review that's making everybody look at what they do and identify possible changes in how business is done. What has surprised me the most has to be the unwillingness of most people to embrace change. Now, I keep broken-in shoes forever and I am comfortable in my old jeans. I totally appreciate being comfortable in your setting or in your personal life and the things that you do. I've been very surprised by how difficult it is to get folks to embrace change in the workplace and how reluctant people are to explore new ways of doing things.

What can you tell us about your leadership style?



Jolene Lauria: Everyone that works for me knows my priorities and passions. They even know my favorite color. I

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have people every day who know what my hopes and dreams are. It's not a secret; it's open and transparent. They subscribe to it and we execute it together. I have a couple of principles that I've managed to live by. These may not sound like management principles to management geeks, but I subscribe to them and they have both personal and professional application. I love with all I have and I give it all away. I go there every day to work as hard as I can and I love what I do and I give it away. I do that in my personal life and I do that in my professional life. Therefore, my first principle of leadership is that if people don't know who you are and what your passions are, they don't know who they're following. My second principle is live like there's no tomorrow. What this means professionally is work with a sense of urgency. I never leave my office without clearing my desk. You don't know what the next day offers you. So it's important for imparting that sense of urgency, living like there's no tomorrow in everything you do. It may be tiring in the end, but it's also very rewarding. My third principle is give thanks and praise often and with sincerity. I can't stress this enough that leaders should express thanks and appreciation to those who work with them.

I also want to stay on point. During the early implementations of UFMS, some folks on the project were trying to explain to me why we had gone off the schedule. I just stopped the meeting and said I just don't have time for these "stupid time-wasters." The stupid time-waster costs us time and money. People learned that they don't come to me with stupid time-waster explanations. I do subscribe to lead, follow, or get out of the way. If you're not willing to lead the change, and you're not willing to follow the change, then find another place to work. I'm not a micromanager. I'm more of a free spirit that tells you where I want to go and we all get there, though we don't get there in a sequential line. I need people that know when it's time to rock the boat, because we have to move forward. Sometimes you have to rock the boat to save the passengers.

What are your key priorities?



Jolene Lauria: We have to finish what we started. We are getting ready to embark on the final frontier for UFMS. My

staff knows it affectionately as Unified-Topia, "U-Topia." We're getting everybody aboard the starship to U-Topia. When we're there, we're going to be in financial nirvana. The second priority is saving money in everything we do, because of the federal budget realities. We saved hundreds of millions of dollars in small initiatives. From printing on double-sided paper to consolidating contracts, these efforts saved millions to date. We have to save every penny that we have, because we need to re-invest in the important missions of the department. We can't waste money on small things because there are big things and unfunded mandates that we must pursue. My third priority is asking and getting the right resources and allocating it to the most important department missions.

Would you tell us about UFMS and its implementation?



Jolene Lauria: The Department of Justice has initiated an effort to implement a unified system that will improve the existing and future financial management and procurement operations across DOJ. The department will address these needs via the implementation of the UFMS, which planned to replace seven core financial management systems and multiple procurement systems currently operating across DOJ. With the implementation of UFMS, the department's financial management community has integrated procurement activities, centralized redundant activities, achieved economies of scale on credit card and payroll processing, and given departmental leadership real-time financial data for use in quickly and accurately providing an assessment of the department's status of funds. In addition, UFMS has identified and standardized common business processes across the department to leverage best practices to improve financial management and reporting.

Key to the success of the UFMS implementation is our resiliency. We always stayed focused on our UFMS vision and kept front-and-center the value and benefits this new system will bring once implemented. In the beginning of the implementation, everything was very rigid, but as time went on, we recognized that being more iterative in our process and more resilient in our manner has been a secret to our success. I would be remiss in not highlighting the importance of the strong executive leadership commitment to the

project from the beginning. For a project of this magnitude to be successful, it is essential to have executive sponsorship. This project spans multiple administrations, different leaders, Republicans and Democrats, and we never slowed down our vision, our path, our reality. It's why we're embarking on the final path to U-Topia, as I described earlier. The project has celebrated numerous successes along the way including being recognized with two Federal 100 Awards, a 2015 Attorney General Award, and many other recognitions from the federal community.

Given OMB/Treasury's focus on the four federal shared service providers, can you talk about how DOJ fits into that landscape? Do you anticipate Justice becoming the fifth shared service provider?



Jolene Lauria: I not only anticipate it, but I welcome it. I talked about U-Topia as that final frontier for the UFMS implementation. So, now that we've built this amazing system, why not become a shared service provider? Why not take what we've learned and what we've perfected and then service other federal agencies who wish to use our product? I anticipate it; I see it as the next step. We are actively

engaged with OMB and Treasury on becoming a shared service provider, but first we have to finish what we've started and fully implement UFMS across the Department of Justice. That said, we know how to implement a system with common, consistent processes, and configure it so it works for the user. ■

To learn more about the U.S. Department of Justice, go to www.justice.gov/jmd/about-division#761.



To hear *The Business of Government Hour* interview with Jolene Lauria, go to the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org.



To download the show as a podcast on your computer or MP3 player, from the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org, right click on an audio segment, select Save Target As, and save the file.



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