

Congress directs Defense to use commercial data centers

Congress has thrown a roadblock into the Defense Department's plans to consolidate many of its data centers into facilities operated by the Defense Information Systems Agency or the military services.

In the [fiscal 2012 Defense Authorization Act](#) passed last week, lawmakers directed Defense Chief Information Officer Teri Takai to develop a plan to use commercial cloud computing services instead of DISA's. Language tucked into the military construction section of the act asked Takai to submit a plan by April 1, 2012, for "migration of Defense data and government-provided services from department owned and operated data centers to cloud computing services generally available within the private sector."

The Pentagon in November announced it had adopted a "[DISA first](#)" strategy for data center consolidation, which it expects to generate \$680 million a year in savings starting in 2015. Defense shuttered 55 data centers at the end of September -- three more than planned -- and the Army expects to close 185 data centers by 2014.

In a related development, the authorization act zeroed out the Army budget to consolidate its enterprise email with DISA until the service examines alternatives.

The language on use of commercial cloud computing services assumes "the private sector provides a better capability at a lower cost with the same or greater degree of security."

This April, Takai told [a hearing](#) of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities that the "paramount" goal of ensuring effective security in a cloud computing environment is best achieved through an internal, private Defense cloud. Takai added, "there will be instances where we [can] use commercial cloud providers . . . [if] they meet our standards." She did not specify what type of applications Defense would host on a commercial cloud.

Bernie Skoch, a retired Air Force brigadier general who did a tour at DISA and has extensive security experience, said in an email, "once elements of protected information are distributed in a cloud, the challenges of protecting that information grow . . . The more places at which you store and from which you transmit information the bigger your security challenges."

Skoch added that a switch from Defense to commercial data centers carries risks beyond security. Defense will face financial and programmatic challenges, he said. In addition, migration plans will need to be developed and officials must identify vendors with suitable security accreditation. The acquisition strategy should include small and women- and minority-owned businesses, and funds must be converted so they can be spent on services. "Those are not trivial challenges in any program, and they are particularly [difficult] when secure seamless integration of data is the cornerstone of a program," Skoch said.

Vendors will assure Congress and Defense that they can do this as well as DISA, Skoch said. "But few of them understand the very real synergy DISA brings in harmonizing security, interoperability

and best value," he said. "Few people truly understand that there remain unique aspects of DISA's mission."

Defense's cloud computing demands could be complex for the private sector to grasp, Skoch said. "DISA needs to extend its cloud from the Pentagon to the cockpit and the foxhole."

The Army had requested \$84.5 million for its DISA hosted enterprise email project in 2012, and planned to migrate 1.4 million unclassified email accounts and 200,000 secret email accounts by the end of 2011.

The authorization act zeroed out that funding, designated the Army enterprise email a formal acquisition program under the oversight of the Army acquisition executive and directed the secretary of the Army to examine other, unspecified alternatives.

The authorization act report said lawmakers were cutting funds for the continued migration of Army email users but not for the sustainment and maintenance of the accounts of those who have already switched over. Lt. Gen. Susan Lawrence, the Army CIO, [told an AFCEA conference](#) in Washington last Thursday that the service already had transferred 300,000 email users to the new DISA system.
