

§125.5 What is the Certificate of Competency Program?

(a) *General.* (1) The Certificate of Competency (COC) Program is authorized under section 8(b)(7) of the Small Business Act (15 U.S.C. 637(b)(7)). A COC is a written instrument issued by SBA to a Government contracting officer, certifying that one or more named small business concerns possess the responsibility to perform a specific Government procurement (or sale) contract, including any contract deriving from a reverse auction. The COC Program is applicable to all Government procurement actions, including Multiple Award Contracts and orders placed against Multiple Award Contracts, where the contracting officer has used any issues of capacity or credit (responsibility) to determine suitability for an award. With respect to Multiple Award Contracts, contracting officers generally determine responsibility at the time of award of the contract. However, if a contracting officer makes a responsibility determination as set forth in paragraph (a)(2) of this section for an order issued against a Multiple Award Contract, the contracting officer must refer the matter to SBA for a COC. The COC procedures apply to all Federal procurements, regardless of the location of performance or the location of the procuring activity.

(2) A contracting officer must refer a small business concern to SBA for a possible COC, even if the next apparent successful offeror is also a small business, when the contracting officer:

(i) Denies an apparent successful small business offeror award of a contract or order on the basis of responsibility (including those bases set forth in paragraphs (a)(1)(ii) and (iii) of this section);

(ii) Refuses to consider a small business concern for award of a contract or order after evaluating the concern's offer on a non-comparative basis (e.g., a pass/fail, go/no go, or acceptable/unacceptable) under one or more responsibility type evaluation factors (such as experience of the company or key personnel or past performance); or

(iii) Refuses to consider a small business concern for award of a contract or order because it failed to meet a definitive responsibility criterion contained in the solicitation.

(3) A small business offeror referred to SBA as nonresponsible may apply to SBA for a COC. Where the applicant is a non-manufacturing offeror on a supply contract, the COC applies to the responsibility of the non-manufacturer, not to that of the manufacturer.

(b) *COC Eligibility.* (1) The offeror seeking a COC has the burden of proof to demonstrate its eligibility for COC review. (i) To be eligible for a COC, an offeror must qualify as a small business under the applicable size standard in accordance with part 121 of this chapter.

(ii) To be eligible for a COC, an offeror must qualify as a small business under the applicable size standard in accordance with part 121 of this chapter, and must have agreed to comply with the applicable limitations on subcontracting and the nonmanufacturer rule, where applicable.

(2) SBA will determine a concern ineligible for a COC if the concern, or any of its principals, appears in the "Parties Excluded From Federal Procurement Programs" section found in the U.S. General Services Administration Office of Acquisition Policy Publication: List of Parties Excluded From Federal Procurement or Nonprocurement Programs. If a principal is unable to presently control the applicant concern, and appears in the Procurement section of the list due to matters not directly related to the concern itself, responsibility will be determined in accordance with paragraph (f)(2) of this section.

(3) An eligibility determination will be made on a case-by-case basis, where a concern or any of its principals appears in the Nonprocurement Section of the publication referred to in paragraph (b)(2) of this section.

(c) *Referral of nonresponsibility determination to SBA.* (1) The contracting officer must refer the matter in writing to the SBA Government Contracting Area Office (Area Office) serving the area in which the headquarters of the offeror is located. The referral must include a copy of the following:

(i) Solicitation;

(ii) Offer submitted by the concern whose responsibility is at issue for the procurement (its Best and Final Offer for a negotiated procurement);

(iii) Abstract of Bids, where applicable, or the Contracting Officer's Price Negotiation Memorandum;

(iv) Preaward survey, where applicable;

(v) Contracting officer's written determination of nonresponsibility;

(vi) Technical data package (including drawings, specifications, and Statement of Work); and

(vii) Any other justification and documentation used to arrive at the nonresponsibility determination.

(2) Contract award must be withheld by the contracting officer for a period of 15 working days (or longer if agreed to by SBA and the contracting officer) following receipt by the appropriate Area Office of a referral which includes all required documentation.

(3) The COC referral must indicate that the offeror has been found responsive to the solicitation, and also identify the reasons for the nonresponsibility determination.

(d) *Application for COC.* (1) Upon receipt of the contracting officer's referral, the Area Office will inform the concern of the contracting officer's negative responsibility determination, and offer it the opportunity to apply to SBA for a COC by a specified date.

(2) The COC application must include all information and documentation requested by SBA and any additional information which the firm believes will demonstrate its ability to perform on the proposed contract. The application should be returned as soon as possible, but no later than the date specified by SBA.

(3) Upon receipt of a complete and acceptable application, SBA may elect to visit the applicant's facility to review its responsibility. SBA personnel may obtain clarification or confirmation of information provided by the applicant by directly contacting suppliers, financial institutions, and other third parties upon whom the applicant's responsibility depends.

(e) *Incomplete applications.* If an application for a COC is materially incomplete or is not submitted by the date specified by SBA, SBA will close the case without issuing a COC and will notify the contracting officer and the concern with a declination letter.

(f) *Reviewing an application.* (1) The COC review process is not limited to the areas of nonresponsibility cited by the contracting officer. SBA may, at its discretion, independently evaluate the COC applicant for all elements of responsibility, but it may presume responsibility exists as to elements other than those cited as deficient. SBA may deny a COC for reasons of nonresponsibility not originally cited by the contracting officer.

(2) A small business will be rebuttably presumed nonresponsible if any of the following circumstances are shown to exist:

(i) Within three years before the application for a COC, the concern, or any of its principals, has been convicted of an offense or offenses that would constitute grounds for debarment or suspension under FAR subpart 9.4 (48 CFR part 9, subpart 9.4), and the matter is still under the jurisdiction of a court (e.g., the principals of a concern are incarcerated, on probation or parole, or under a suspended sentence); or

(ii) Within three years before the application for a COC, the concern or any of its principals has had a civil judgment entered against it or them for any reason that would constitute grounds for debarment or suspension under FAR subpart 9.4 (48 CFR part, subpart 9.4).

(3) Where a contracting officer finds a concern to be non-responsible for reasons of financial capacity on an indefinite delivery or indefinite quantity task or delivery order contract, the Area Director will consider the firm's maximum financial capacity. If the Area Director issues a COC, it will be for a specific amount that is the limit of the firm's financial capacity for that contract. The contracting officer may subsequently determine to exceed the amount, but cannot deny the firm award of an order or contract on financial grounds if the firm has not reached the financial maximum the Area Director identified in the COC letter.

(g) *Decision by Area Director ("Director")*. After reviewing the information submitted by the applicant and the information gathered by SBA, the Area Director will make a determination, either final or recommended as set forth in the following chart:

Contracting actions	SBA official or office with authority to make decision	Finality of decision; options for contracting agencies
\$100,000 or less, or in accordance with Simplified Acquisition Threshold procedures	Director may approve or deny	Final. The Director will notify both applicant and contracting agency in writing of the decision.
Between \$100,000 and \$25 million	(1) Director may deny	(1) Final.
	(2) Director may approve, subject to right of appeal and other options	(2) Contracting agency may proceed under paragraph (h) or paragraph (i) of this section.
Exceeding \$25 million	(1) Director may deny	(1) Final.
	(2) Director must refer to SBA Headquarters recommendation for approval	(2) Contracting agency may proceed under paragraph (j) of this section.

(h) *Notification of intent to issue on a contract or order with a value between \$100,000 and \$25 million*. Where the Director determines that a COC is warranted, he or she will notify the contracting officer (or the procurement official with the authority to accept SBA's decision) of the intent to issue a COC, and of the reasons for that decision, prior to issuing the COC. At the time of notification, the contracting officer or the procurement official with the authority to accept SBA's decision has the following options:

(1) Accept the Director's decision to issue the COC and award the contract to the concern. The COC issuance letter will then be sent, including as an attachment a detailed rationale of the decision; or

(2) Ask the Director to suspend the case for one of the following purposes:

(i) To forward a detailed rationale for the decision to the contracting officer for review within a specified period of time;

(ii) To afford the contracting officer the opportunity to meet with the Area Office to review all documentation contained in the case file;

(iii) To submit any information which the contracting officer believes SBA has not considered (at which time, SBA will establish a new suspense date mutually agreeable to the contracting officer and SBA); or

(iv) To permit resolution of an appeal by the contracting agency to SBA Headquarters under paragraph (i) of this section.

(i) *Appeals of Area Director determinations.* For COC actions with a value exceeding \$100,000, contracting agencies may appeal a Director's decision to issue a COC to SBA Headquarters by filing an appeal with the Area Office processing the COC application. The Area Office must honor the request to appeal if the contracting officer agrees to withhold award until the appeal process is concluded. Without such an agreement from the contracting officer, the Director must issue the COC. When such an agreement has been obtained, the Area Office will immediately forward the case file to SBA Headquarters.

(1) The intent of the appeal procedure is to allow the contracting agency the opportunity to submit to SBA Headquarters any documentation which the Area Office may not have considered.

(2) SBA Headquarters will furnish written notice to the Director, OSDBU or OSBP of the procuring agency, with a copy to the contracting officer, that the case file has been received and that an appeal decision may be requested by an authorized official. If the contracting agency decides to file an appeal, it must notify SBA Headquarters through its Director, OSDBU, within 10 working days (or a time period agreed upon by both agencies) of its receipt of the notice under paragraph (h) of this section. The appeal and any supporting documentation must be filed within 10 working days (or a different time period agreed to by both agencies) after SBA receives the request for a formal appeal.

(3) The SBA Director, Office of Government Contracting (D/GC) will make a final determination, in writing, to issue or to deny the COC.

(j) *Decision by SBA Headquarters where contract value exceeds \$25 million.* (1) Prior to taking final action, SBA Headquarters will contact the contracting agency at the secretariat level or agency equivalent and afford it the following options:

(i) Ask SBA Headquarters to suspend the case so that the agency can meet with Headquarters personnel and review all documentation contained in the case file; or

(ii) Submit to SBA Headquarters for evaluation any information which the contracting agency believes has not been considered.

(2) After reviewing all available information, the AA/GC will make a final decision to either issue or deny the COC. If the AA/GC's decision is to deny the COC, the applicant and contracting agency will be informed in writing by the Area Office. If the decision is to issue the COC, a letter certifying the

responsibility of the firm will be sent to the contracting agency by Headquarters and the applicant will be informed of such issuance by the Area Office. Except as set forth in paragraph (l) of this section, there can be no further appeal or reconsideration of the decision of the AA/GC.

(k) *Notification of denial of COC.* The notification to an unsuccessful applicant following either an Area Director or a Headquarters denial of a COC will briefly state all reasons for denial and inform the applicant that a meeting may be requested with appropriate SBA personnel to discuss the denial. Upon receipt of a request for such a meeting, the appropriate SBA personnel will confer with the applicant and explain the reasons for SBA's action. The meeting does not constitute an opportunity to rebut the merits of the SBA's decision to deny the COC, and is for the sole purpose of giving the applicant the opportunity to correct deficiencies so as to improve its ability to obtain future contracts either directly or, if necessary, through the issuance of a COC.

(l) *Reconsideration of COC after issuance.* (1) An approved COC may be reconsidered and possibly rescinded, at the sole discretion of SBA, where an award of the contract has not occurred, and one of the following circumstances exists:

(i) The COC applicant submitted false or omitted materially adverse information;

(ii) New materially adverse information has been received relating to the current responsibility of the applicant concern; or

(iii) The COC has been issued for more than 60 days (in which case SBA may investigate the business concern's current circumstances and the reason why the contract has not been issued).

(2) Where SBA reconsiders and reaffirms the COC the procedures under paragraph (h) of this section do not apply.

(m) *Effect of a COC.* By the terms of the Act, a COC is conclusive as to responsibility. Where SBA issues a COC on behalf of a small business with respect to a particular contract, contracting officers are required to award the contract without requiring the firm to meet any other requirement with respect to responsibility. Where SBA issues a COC with respect to a referral in paragraph (a)(2)(ii) or (a)(2)(iii) of this section, the contracting officer is not required to issue an award to that offeror if the contracting officer denies the contract for reasons unrelated to responsibility.

(n) *Effect of Denial of COC.* Denial of a COC by SBA does not preclude a contracting officer from awarding a contract to the referred firm, nor does it prevent the concern from making an offer on any other procurement.

(o) *Monitoring performance.* Once a COC has been issued and a contract awarded on that basis, SBA will monitor contractor performance.

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