

Julia McIlroy: 0:04

Hi everyone, and welcome to Pulse, the podcast that focuses on current topics in public procurement. I'm your host, Julia McIlroy. Today we're headed to beautiful Colorado to speak with our guest, Sherri Maxwell, Colorado's Chief Procurement Officer. Colorado is a state that's rethinking procurement in fresh and exciting ways. From strategic sourcing and innovative programs to workforce development and agency collaboration, Colorado's procurement team is building a model that's all about partnership and progress. We'll talk about what's working, how they're getting buy-in, and what the future might look like when strategy, people, and purpose all line up. Hi Sherri, welcome to Pulse.

Sherri Maxwell: 0:48

Hi, Julia. Thanks for having me.

Julia McIlroy: 0:50

I'm so glad you're here. Sherri, to begin, I'd love to hear about your professional background and what led you to public procurement.

Sherri Maxwell: 0:57

Sure. So my career in procurement actually started with a bankruptcy. I was 21 working in accounting and suddenly found myself looking for a new job. A former colleague of mine pointed me toward a small private business that manufactured wheel chocks. So you know the blocks that keep airplanes from rolling away. So my first job in procurement was literally ensuring that multi-million dollar aircraft stayed put. I was a team of one. I learned to be independent in the workplace and look for efficiencies in my very first procurement job. And then from there, I jumped into the public sector and I never looked back. I'm a public servant at heart, like I know a lot of my peers are. I've been a low-level buyer at a county, the sole buyer for a \$300 million school bond program, which, let me tell you, will teach you real-world stakes very quickly, and eventually landed at the state of Colorado 16 years ago. And here I've managed PCARD migrations, directed procurement at a decentralized agency, was on my local NIGP chapter board for about 10 years, and finally stepped into the state chief procurement officer role in 2020. So the reason I share all of those details is because I've been almost every kind of customer that my office serves. I've been the person in the field frustrated by an inefficient process and the director trying to meet stakeholder and the public's needs to award and execute multi-million dollar contracts. So that boots on the ground perspective is what fuels my obsession with continuous improvement. To me, it's not a cheesy buzzword. It's about making life better for the person doing the job that I used to have and helping Coloradans get the services that they need.

It's about those small, iterative wins that keep the planes from rolling away while we build a culture that actually enjoys solving the big problems together.

Julia McIlroy: 3:03

Sherri, that's a great point that you have been the end user. So you can see everything from all perspectives. And that's wonderful. Now you had mentioned it's called wheel chucks. That's what keeps planes in place.

Sherri Maxwell: 3:16

Yeah. If you look down when you're flying uh or you're about to fly and you're in the window seat and you want to look down, someone's gonna pull that from the wheels. And I just always think, hey, I used to help buy those.

Julia McIlroy: 3:29

I used to buy those, yeah. Um, funny quick story. So we when we lived in Idaho, we had a boat and you use a wheel truck, uh, though we just use like a piece of wood, to keep the trailer in place while you're out boating. Well, uh one time my husband, um, who I've mentioned before is a physicist, he's a bright guy. He removed it, somehow wasn't thinking before it was uh secured to the truck, and this trailer goes blasting down this hill. You can do nothing about it, it's just we're watching it roll down this hill and crash into a car that was parked, probably, you know, 40 feet away from it. Uh and we were just like, well, get a piece of paper, let's leave a note. And uh we looked at the license plate because in Idaho you can tell which county someone is from based on their license plate. And it was the same county, Lytaw County. So we were like, oh, I bet we probably know this person that we just bashed our trailer into. And sure as heck, we sure did. Uh, because they came walking up about the same time. We all laughed about it. And uh thank you to the Martins, that's her name, for being good sports. And uh, but yes, so wheelchucks for both boating and aircraft, very important, right? Yes, good story. So, Sherri, I'm also excited to tell our listeners that you are the 2026 president of NASPO's board of directors. Congratulations. Thank you. It's an honor. So, could you please tell me what you're looking forward to as president?

Sherri Maxwell: 5:00

Yeah, um, there's a couple of things that I'm excited to talk about for initiatives this year. One is, you know, advocacy for the profession and specifically uh legislative tracking. So I think we are seeing a massive shift where legislation isn't just hovering over procurement, it's actively driving it. And for those of us on the ground tracking these bills and translating them into fiscal reality, we've been flying a bit blind. We need a pulse on national trends before they hit our local desks. So that's why I'm so energized about what NASPO is rolling

out. They're working towards giving us a more centralized intelligence that we need to move from being reactive processors to proactive strategic partners in the legislative process. And then another one is, as I hope everyone's heard by now, PPA and RFXP. And, you know, I really support this initiative. The Procurement Professionals Alliance was approved by the NASPO board a few years ago as a way to give back and help elevate the procurement profession as a whole, as an organization that's not just focused on state central offices like NASPO has been, but more tuned into local government, higher ed, and state agencies that are outside the central office. And now it's live. So the recent launch of PPA and RFXP as the cooperative purchasing mechanism is a total game changer for elevating the procurement profession. But we all know the reality. Procurement folks are drowning in emails and may miss these invitations to join. So for me, I didn't want this to be just another notification that got lost in the noise. I felt it was critical to lend my stamp of approval for whatever it's worth to give this new organization immediate legitimacy. I sent a direct message to my agency delegates and local government partners saying, hey, this is real, this is valuable, and this organization was created for you. So by framing the transition of Procurement U to PPA as a win for them, offering high-level resources at little to no cost, we're breaking down the silos between the central office and local agencies. And honestly, looking at the tools that are available now, I'm a little jealous. I wish I had this kind of ecosystem behind me when I was starting my career in local government procurement. It would have been so helpful. I'm just so glad we have it now.

Julia McIlroy: 7:42

Thanks, Sherri. Yes, the launch of PPA is so exciting. I've reached out to supplier friends and suggested they join as well because it's a real opportunity for them to be able to interface with the uh buyer purchasing community. So just a great program. It'll be exciting to watch that grow. So Colorado's taken a thoughtful approach to strategic sourcing. Can you share how the strategy is evolving and what success looks like when agencies and suppliers both benefit?

Sherri Maxwell: 8:16

Absolutely. So in Colorado, we're moving away from the old model of right, like set it and forget it price agreements. We've recently brought on a very talented, you know, dedicated strategic sourcing specialist to lead this evolution. And the goal is for us to make our decisions far more surgical. I'll be honest, to give credit where it's due, I was heavily inspired by the work coming out of the NASPO Value Point Executive Council, which I was fortunate enough to serve on for three years. Seeing the high-level strategy there made me realize we needed to bring some of that same rigor home. We are now pivoting to a model that is heavily data-driven and rooted in robust market research. But the secret sauce, I

believe, will be the feedback loop. Success for us looks like constant customer interaction, surveys, touch points, things that will tell us if a contract is actually performing in the field. When we have better data, our vendors get clearer expectations and our agencies get better outcomes. It turns a standard transaction into a strategic partnership where, you know, hopefully everyone actually wins.

Julia McIlroy: 9:31

I love the set it and forget it philosophy. And it goes into what you had said earlier about going from reactive to proactive and using data to really make decisions as well as market research. That's wonderful. So, what are some of the innovative procurement initiatives that Colorado has rolled out that you're most proud of? And what kind of impact are you already seeing?

Sherri Maxwell: 9:59

Well, one initiative I'm incredibly proud of is our new procurement insights program. And because Colorado is a decentralized state, I delegate a lot of purchasing authority to various agencies and higher ed institutions. But delegation shouldn't mean just leaving them on an island. We want to be more, we want to move beyond providing rules and start providing intelligence. We're now delivering data-driven snapshots to these agencies, bite-sized analysis of their specific spending habits, solicitation timelines, and even where they might be tripping over common compliance hurdles. For example, we don't just want to see a violation and fix it. We want to look at the data and ask why is this specific error happening across three different agencies? Is it a training gap? A confusing template? By comparing metrics like how many sole source contracts are being used or how long a typical RFP is taking, we can provide tailored guidance rather than one size fits all policies. And it's called the insight program for a reason. It gives my team the visibility we need to see exactly where we can provide more support, better templates, new education. It's about using data to make procurement across the entire state more efficient, more transparent, and frankly, a lot easier for the people doing the work.

Julia McIlroy: 11:32

And is Insights a program that you all developed? Is it a homegrown or legacy program, or was it software that you purchased?

Sherri Maxwell: 11:42

It's it's homegrown. And we have two staff members that we recently got for it, and it's and it's new. And we've done a lot of interviews and stakeholding to really make sure, like, how do we make sure with our limited resources that we're you know finding a way to maximize

this initiative? You know, um, I think initially it was looked at as should this be like an audit program? And again, we're not trying to be the police. We want to be more of a consultant that empowers people to manage their own delegations and grow and improve their programs instead of it being punitive.

Julia McIlroy: 12:16

I love that perspective. And also that you're asking why. Like, why do I keep receiving sole source requests from a particular agency? Or as you said, is there a gap there in understanding of our policies and procedures? So I think that's fantastic that you're using this tool to not be punitive, but instead to create education opportunities for folks. So procurement is changing fast from technology to policy. How's your office helping procurement professionals across the state stay current and confident through training and professional development? I love this question.

Sherri Maxwell: 12:56

Um, when I stepped into the CPO role, I realized we had a like a legacy process, slash like the way we've always done it, training mentality. And agencies were training each other on the fly, often using guides that predated our code modernization. It was inconsistent, you know, not their fault, but inconsistent and frankly, you know, risky. So I've made it a mission to professionalize our state procurement workforce by building a centralized high-tech training infrastructure. We've moved away from the old wait for a class a couple times a year and launched a suite of on-demand learning management system courses and certification programs. But what's really exciting right now is how we're scaling that. We've leaned on NASPO's Procurement U for high quality content. And now that it's transitioning over to the Procurement Professionals Alliance, the resources are only getting more robust. It allows my team to focus on Colorado-specific courses while leveraging the PPA's national standard training for the foundational skills. We've applied the same rigor to contract management, which was one of our governor's wildly important goals a couple of years ago. We realized the work on a contract, you know, continues and really begins after the ink is dry on a contract. So by requiring annual contract management training for program staff, not just procurement folks, we've created a common language. Now the people managing contracts in the field know exactly what's expected of them. And more importantly, they know when to raise their hand and call on their procurement office for backup. So you can see we're looking at training from like a variety of perspectives to really try to, you know, modernize and empower our workforce here.

Julia McIlroy: 14:50

That's fantastic. And thank you for the shout out to Procurement U as well, an incredible program that NASPO and that PPA offers. So it's uh just a wonderful tool that all members can utilize. So let's talk about the Executive Procurement Advisory Committee. It sounds like a big deal for coordination and strategy. Can you walk us through its role and how it's helping to shape statewide procurement priorities?

Sherri Maxwell: 15:22

I love my Executive Procurement Advisory Council. So I like to think of them as our strategic compass. In a decentralized environment, you can't lead from an ivory tower. This group consists of eight elected and appointed procurement directors who represent the full spectrum of Colorado. So from higher ed to executive branch agencies and with a variety of delegation levels. They're my frontline reality check. So before I re-roll out a new initiative, I like to bring it to this group to see how it will actually land. We use their feedback to identify where unwritten rules are still lingering and where our processes need to be sharpened. For instance, we recently sat down to look at the NASPO and NASIO RFP summary sheet concept. Instead of just mandating a change to all of our templates, I asked the committee, will this actually help your vendors and your teams? Their insight ensures that our continuous improvement isn't just change for the sake of change. It's change that works. And in this case, it's also about making it easier for vendors to do business with us by giving them a Cliffs Notes version of the project right up front, saving them time. We're also having some really visionary conversations right now with that group about succession planning. Specifically, how can we build a pipeline for our deputy procurement directors to ensure that when the next generation takes the reins, we aren't starting from scratch. So their perspective is very, very valuable. I hate to take on a project and be like, what a waste of time. No one was interested in it. There's no buy-in. So they really just are such a helpful and brilliant group.

Julia McIlroy: 17:08

So getting agencies on board with new procurement practices can be tricky. What approaches have worked best in building trust and buy-in across different departments?

Sherri Maxwell: 17:19

Well, I have a very simple rule. I don't do anything in a vacuum because, again, I've been a customer of this office myself. I try to always remember that and put myself in other people's shoes. So building buy-in for me is all about transparency and lead time. In addition to my executive committee, I attend monthly meetings with all my procurement delegates and maintain a constant stream of communication. My goal is zero surprises. If a new requirement is coming down the pike, I want our agencies to have the mental and

operational space to prepare for it. But it's more than just sending emails. I keep my calendar open for what I call same-day counsel. If an agency is dealing with a complex, complicated type issue or procurement that's going sideways, I want them to know they can grab me on a Google chat immediately. We're not just here to judge their work. We're here to help troubleshoot it and make them successful. When we rolled out that contract management policy I mentioned, we didn't just write a policy, send it to them, and walk away. We provided optional templates, training, guidance, and the support resources to do the heavy lifting for them. We even did individual check-ins to ask, what do you need from us to make this work? So, yes, it takes longer to be inclusive. Sending out every template we create or change and policy for a two-week stakeholder review slows down the process, but it also speeds up the adoption. And at the end of the day, I'm not looking for something that's just legally correct. I'm looking for something that works in the real world of everyday business.

Julia McIlroy: 19:05

That's great. I love that you have again the point of view of an end user dealing with central procurement. When I was uh at the university, I would tell my buyers that they really need to look at what it feels like to be a faculty member in a department that needs assistance with assistance with procuring something and try to look at it from their point of view and understand the research they're doing, et cetera. And that that collaboration in the end benefits everyone. Yes, it takes a little bit more time, but as you were saying, in the end, it speeds up the process sort of on the back end. So that's great. If you could look ahead a few years, what's your vision for how Colorado's procurement community will continue to modernize and collaborate? And what role do you see your office playing in that future?

Sherri Maxwell: 19:55

That's a great question. So when I look a few years down the road, my vision and hope is that we finally stop talking about procurement as an administrative function and start treating it as the critical strategic lever that it truly is. I'm going to keep spreading this message, not just through high-level advocacy, but through the ground level work of building the next generation of leaders. One of the most impactful things I do right now is personally participating in the hiring of my agency procurement delegates. That's my chance to sit down with executive leadership at those agencies and advocate for the role. I advocated for the position to be classified correctly, paid fairly, but more importantly, I help them understand that a procurement director isn't just there to sign forms or check boxes. They are a strategic leader who is there to ensure Coloradans get the goods and services they need while also protecting the state, managing risk, and driving value. Moving forward, our procurement insights program and our training program will be the engines that drive

this. It will move us from guessing to knowing, using data to free our people from the busy work so they can focus on high-level problem solving. I want our training library to be so robust and our succession planning so seamless that when the next CPO steps into my shoes, they aren't just maintaining a system. They're inheriting a thriving professional ecosystem that is ready for whatever comes next.

Julia McIlroy: 21:31

That is fantastic. It's clear that you've put a lot of effort and thought into your succession planning and making sure that the next CPO, which hopefully isn't for a long time, but that they have the tools that they need to have just a successful department. So that's great. So, Sherri, lastly, would you please tell me your most memorable or unique procurement?

Sherri Maxwell: 21:57

Uh uh this is a fun one, but it's a tough one. So it's a hard. To just pick one because procurement is right, it's that invisible thread that runs through so much of our lives, and most people don't even know it. But when I look back at my career, I don't think about the contracts, I think about impact. I think about my time at County Social Services where I was buying items for children in the foster system. And I think about that \$300 million bond program. There's nothing like the feeling of walking into a brand new school or classroom or library and seeing the desks, the tech, the equipment that you sourced that's being used by students who finally have the environment they deserve. That's so tangible. But it's also been an adventure. I've traveled the country with our state lottery team to ensure our scratch ticket services were world-class. That was really fun. And I've managed the complex technology behind the very driver's licenses that people in my state carry in our pockets and now actually in our phones as digital IDs. So I think that's the beauty, the beauty of a career in procurement. One day you're focused on the security of a state ID. The next you're ensuring a school has the tools to inspire the next generation. We aren't just buying stuff. We're actually buying the components of a functioning society.

Julia McIlroy: 23:24

Well, it's clear to me that Colorado is doing it right. So kudos to you and all of your efforts because every time I visit Colorado, it's clear that the folks that live there are benefiting from outstanding public servants like yourself.

Sherri Maxwell: 23:40

Oh, thank you so much. I'm so fortunate to have so much support from my leadership all the way up to the top and have such an amazing team and also all the resources and support from NASPO and now PPA. Thank you, Julia.

Julia McIlroy: 23:53

Thanks, Sherri. We've had a great look into how Colorado is shaping the future of procurement, one partnership at a time. A big thanks to Sherri Maxwell for joining us and sharing her insights on strategy, collaboration, and what success really looks like when everyone's at the table. Thanks for listening, and until next time, keep the conversations going, your collaboration strong, and remember, we work in the sunshine. Bye for now.