



# Heather Barto

Preferred pronouns: **she/her**

Title: **Manager, Contracts Quality Management, New Hampshire Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS)**

Years in procurement: **10+**



## What does procurement excellence mean in your role?

My unit in the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for **integrating quality and performance management more clearly into the contract life-cycle process**. So, our goal is to help colleagues in our department use new methods of more actively managing contracts to see results.

This is brand new for our department. As I was getting up and running, I spent the first several months researching an array of methods and tools for effective contract management. Two tools that were very helpful for me were Gemba walks

(a Lean process improvement where you go and observe how the work is conducted, see its value, and ask questions to understand) and learning about active contract management (ACM) through the Government Performance Lab (GPL). (Active contract management is a set of tools that support contract managers in working with vendors to make it more likely that contract outcomes are met. For more on ACM, check out the GPL's publication [Orienting Towards Outcomes: Results-Driven Approaches to Contract Management](#).)

## What do these tools look like in practice?

Mike Donati, Bureau Chief with the Division for Children, Youth and Families here in New Hampshire, helped me learn about their application of data and reporting within their contracts and the direct applications of ACM. I attended meetings observing how our staff used data generated by the contractors, which created targeted conversations. These in turn generated ideas for process improvements, really quite effortlessly. Hook, line and sinker, this was the end-goal model I wanted for the program.

As far as improving contract management goes, we have developed a tool within our department's portfolio management system, Smartsheet, that we call the Active Contract Management System (ACMS). We received support from senior leadership to deploy this tool with two priority program areas, (1) the children's inpatient psychiatric hospital, Hampstead Hospital Residential Treatment Facility (HH RTF), and (2) the Division of Economic Supports, Bureau of Child Development and Head Start Collaborative.

**ACMS helps to organize our contract managers to become effective, efficient, and to serve as experts for the contract.** It helps contract managers keep information up to date, provide

recommendations for next steps by the contractor, and most of all, be familiar on a day-to-day basis with performance management on the contract.

## What advice would you give to a colleague wanting to implement a similar active contract management system?

1. **Use organizational tools to support change management.** Tools such as issue escalation logs, communication tracking, key personnel listing, data and reporting tracking, task listing, etc. were effective in our deployment.
2. **Focus on people first, process second, and technology third.** When you're trying to work through change management, you can't just share tools without support and coaching. Invest in the time necessary to meet people where they are. We find that as long as people know where they're going with contract quality management, they do well. Authentically acknowledging and helping our staff to understand they are not alone in having gaps in contract management skills goes a long way. If they are less tech-savvy, that's fine; not everyone is up to speed with more complex systems!

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– **Heather Barto**, Manager, Contracts Quality Management, New Hampshire Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS)

The beauty of ACMS is that it's in Excel and Word: both straightforward tools with no new financial costs!

3. **Build leadership buy-in.** Seek leadership buy-in and support for alignment with mission-critical work to support the strategy of the department! We received approval from our department's Governance Committee to deploy ACMS, and then we launched a couple of pilot teams where the pilots would serve as proof of concept to continue to build that support. This is part of our strategic plan. We have been working with Kelly Martin, the Contract Manager at Hampstead Hospital Residential Treatment Facility, on a \$53 million dollar contract for children's mental health that is high-priority, high-visibility, and can be high-risk, so using change management is crucial there. We update leadership on various communication platforms to ensure there is transparency.
4. **Keep communicating.** Get on as many stakeholder channels as you can: the portfolio channel, the executive level, the people with boots on the ground. When you do that, you can have conversations about what you do and what you offer, about tools like ACMS. You can start small. We had a program manager request assistance because a vendor didn't consistently communicate in a professional way. In this instance, the program manager asked us for help solving this particular problem and we were able to assist, strategically and quickly. You don't need to get someone on board with every single tool at once, but if you keep communicating you open the door for opportunities to engage. We are the connectors. We have the expertise, resources, the tools, but people need a place to land.

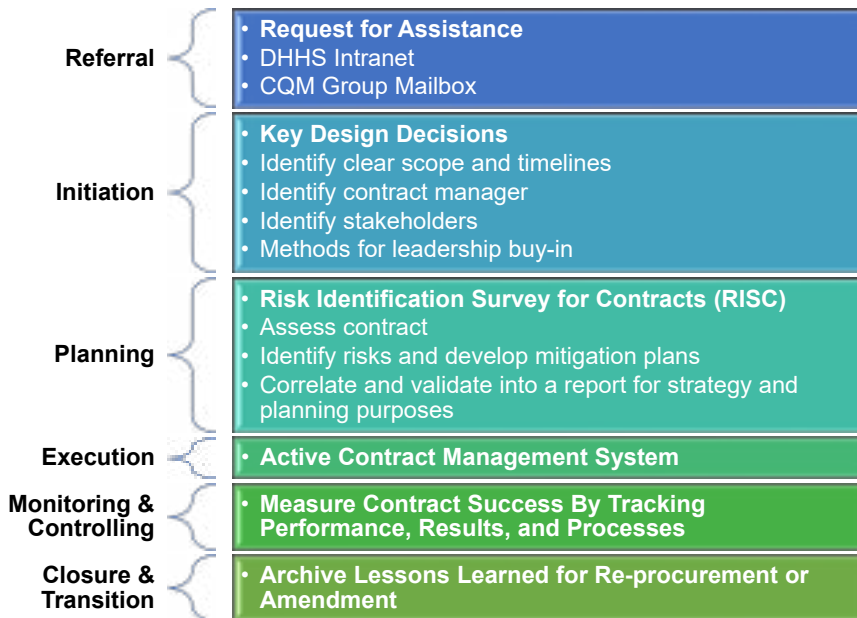
## What procurement-related transformation or change have you been involved in that you are most proud of?

My colleague Denise Krol (the CQM unit's Program Evaluation and Planning Coordinator) and I have been working with Kelly Martin to create a standard for contract management at HH RTF. The department acquired the hospital and hired a vendor to manage the hospital's operations including the clinical aspect. We are providing technical assistance in order to advance the way the hospital manages contracts and approaches procurements. We have especially enjoyed the value added from using what we call a Specification, which is a guidance document issued to contractors that clarifies context for and details about a contract deliverable.

This is especially useful if financial contract deliverables aren't sufficiently developed in a contract. The Specification provides instructions, clarity, and removes ambiguity in contract language for internal staff as well as for our vendors. The structure creates clarity and accountability for everyone involved, and takes the guesswork out of unclear contract language. If there is something where a vendor is not in compliance, we can talk through it, and the contract manager can then enforce it.

Another example: last summer, we rolled out what we call the Key Design Decision (KDD) process and tool during a particularly complex Request for Proposal (RFP). We adapted this approach from an existing GPL tool. We deployed the tool for a complicated procurement with a large scope and many deliverables. The KDD helped to narrow our focus on what is essential and helped us to objectively identify the "so what" of the intent

## NH Department of Health and Human Services Contracts Quality Management Framework



*A visual of how the ACMS and KDD processes fit into the department's larger quality management framework.*

for an upcoming contract. This tool has become a standard part of the RFP process for our work and early design process with leadership.

Communication, trust, and **deep relationship building** have been key to our success with these tools. For example, Kelly Martin and I first worked on a Lean project together at NH Hospital. Fast forward several years and Kelly was promoted to a Contract Manager. The relationship we'd already built supported our collaboration as we worked to pave a new path for the hospital to adopt a contract management model.

### What advice would you give to people interested in joining the procurement industry?

Consider **finding a mentor**. About 10 years ago, while working in public health as a manager, my mentor Dr. Elizabeth (Beth) Daly, MPH, helped

me to navigate a complex technology contract for support and maintenance of the State's infectious disease surveillance system. I learned an array of negotiation tactics, the value of clear performance guarantees, and the importance of a strong contract project manager. It was through this mentoring experience and cultivating new skills that I realized contract development processes could be creative and create a pathway to set the stage for solving business problems. The procurement industry requires patience, a feedback loop, and tenacity to hone in on needed skills. A good mentor can help connect you to resources and educational opportunities.

The **Procurement Excellence Network** is an initiative of the Government Performance Lab designed to help public sector leaders use government procurement as a tool to improve resident outcomes and advance equity. The **Government Performance Lab**, housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are able to provide experiential learning as well.

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