Intro to Government Contracts Guide

Optional. For those of you whose business fits what the government buys. Start with your county, not Washington.

Is government work for you? Three honest questions

1. Does the government buy what you sell? Cleaning, IT and security, training, consulting, catering, childcare, construction, and transportation often fit.
2. Can you wait to be paid? You do the work first. Plan cash to perform and to wait.
3. Will you do the paperwork? Registrations, renewals, invoices in their system, reading every request to the end. You can get help, but you still need to understand what you sign. APEX, SBDC, and SCORE are free; some paid services exist, but start with the free ones.

One way to start: local, then state, then federal

1. Your county, city, school district, parks, library. Small jobs, often faster decisions. Search "[your county] procurement" and use the county's official website. Follow its vendor instructions.
2. Your state: Virginia buys through eVA; Maryland through eMMA. State certifications: Virginia SBSD (SWaM). Maryland moved its business certification office in 2025; see the official Maryland transition notice for the current office.
3. Federal: register at SAM.gov. Many small businesses start by working under a company that already holds a contract.

The three numbers

- EIN: your federal tax ID from the IRS. Follow the IRS EIN instructions. It is free.
- UEI: your federal entity ID. You can request one free through SAM.gov without completing full registration. Most federal bids need full registration. Ask APEX which one fits you. Where to check: SAM.gov. DUNS numbers are no longer used.
- NAICS: a six-digit code for what you do. Check candidates at census.gov/naics. Codes are specific: 541921 is portrait photography (Census: 541921); commercial photography is classified differently.

SAM.gov in plain steps

1. If you're not registered, the federal government usually can't award you a contract. A few small credit-card buys are the exception. Where to check: the federal rule.
2. Registration is free. Anyone charging to "get you into SAM" is selling a form you can fill in yourself.
3. Create a login.gov account, then register your entity. Gather what the SAM entity checklist lists before you start.
4. Give it at least ten business days after you submit. It can take longer.
5. Renew every 365 days (SAM entity registration).

Programs to look into (not an eligibility decision)

Program	What to know	Official source
Woman-owned (WOSB)	Small business, at least 51% owned and controlled by women who are U.S. citizens. Owning it is not enough. You also have to run it.	SBA certifications
Veteran-owned (VOSB) / Service-disabled (SDVOSB)	Certified through SBA VetCert. VOSB benefits are tied to VA contracting; SDVOSB benefits extend across federal agencies.	SBA VetCert
8(a) Business Development	Nine-year program for small businesses owned and controlled by socially and economically disadvantaged U.S. citizens. SBA changed the rules in September 2026. Check the current FAQ.	SBA 8(a) FAQ, Oct 2026
HUBZone	Location and employee-residence tests. Check the map.	HUBZone map
State programs	Virginia SWaM, Maryland MBE, and others. Separate from federal programs. Can help with state and local work.	Virginia SBSD

A certification gets you noticed. It does not win the job. List only certifications you have actually been awarded on your introduction sheet.

How government buys and pays

- A quote is not a contract. Wait for the actual order or award before you start work. Where to check: the federal rule on quotes.
- Some small jobs are paid with a government credit card and simple steps. The buyer still has its own rules. Where to check: the federal rule on small purchases.
- The government is not going to pay you until you do the work and send a correct invoice. For many federal contracts, payment is due 30 days after the government gets a correct invoice or accepts the work, whichever happens later. Check your contract. County and subcontract terms differ. Have enough cash to do the work and wait. Where to check: federal payment rules and what a correct invoice needs.
- Working under a bigger company's contract? Read the master agreement. Check which terms your subcontract makes binding on you.
- Past performance: build your track record under the business you plan to grow. Do not assume another company's record counts as yours. Where to check: the federal rule on past performance.

Free help

- APEX Accelerators: free government-contracting counseling. Call before you register.
- SCORE: free mentoring from experienced business owners.
- Virginia SBDC and Maryland SBDC: free small-business advising.
- SBA local assistance: your SBA district office for federal certification questions.

NEXT STEP: Optional, if government work fits you: find one buyer or call APEX once this week. You do not have to register for anything this week.

This handout is general education for the VEC class, not legal, tax, or insurance advice. Rules change and vary by state, county, and business. Check the official source and ask a licensed professional before you act.