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**Comptroller General  
of the United States**

Washington, D.C. 20548

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# Decision

**Matter of:** Freedom Graphics, Inc.

**File:** B-261349; B-261349.2

**Date:** September 18, 1995

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Frederic G. Antoun, Jr., Esq., for the protester.

Kerry L. Miller, Esq., Government Printing Office, for the agency.

C. Douglas McArthur, Esq., and Ralph O. White, Esq., Office of the General Counsel, GAO, participated in the preparation of the decision.

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## DIGEST

Protest against Social Security Administration's requirement for specified print resolution for notices is denied where agency shows it needs notices that can be read by visually impaired and aged recipients of social security benefits and lower resolution requirements would make notices more difficult to read.

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## DECISION

Freedom Graphics, Inc. protests the terms of invitation for bids (IFB) No. 393-168, issued by the Government Printing Office (GPO) for production of letter notices for the Social Security Administration (SSA). The protester contends that the solicitation requirements are unduly restrictive of competition.

We deny the protest.

On April 25, 1995, the agency issued the solicitation for a fixed-price contract for two-sided printing of 7 million multipage notices consisting of three forms, ranging from two to eight pages (one to four leaves). The specifications, in pertinent part, required laser printing, with a minimum resolution of 300 X 300 dots per square inch (dpi),<sup>1</sup> as well as gathering, folding, inserting, and mailing the forms. Shortly prior to the scheduled bid opening on May 10, 1995, Freedom Graphics filed its initial protest with our Office challenging the specifications here; the protest was amended after the contracting officer postponed bid opening.

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<sup>1</sup>Hereinafter, rather than refer to 300 X 300 dpi, our decision will refer to 300 dpi.

Freedom Graphics generally contends that few contractors have facilities capable of meeting the agency's quantity and delivery requirements using a resolution of 300 dpi, which requires an imaging device that feeds one sheet at a time. Specifically, the protester claims that its ink jet equipment, offering a resolution of 240 dpi, can meet the agency's requirements for printing such notices, which--in the protester's view--do not require the specified resolution.<sup>2</sup>

Where a protester alleges that a requirement is unduly restrictive, we review the record to determine whether the requirement has been justified as necessary to satisfy the agency's minimum needs. RMS Indus., B-247233; B-247234, May 1, 1992, 92-1 CPD ¶ 412. For the reasons set forth below, we conclude that the SSA has reasonably articulated a need for higher resolution of its notices.

The SSA explains that it produces the forms here to notify social security recipients of changes in their entitlements, and that many of the notice recipients are unable to read printed matter most of the population would have no difficulty reading, because of impaired vision and advanced age. The SSA has developed standards for its notices using focus groups and public feedback, and has adopted 300 dpi as the minimum acceptable resolution for these notices. Although the SSA agrees with the protester that a lower resolution may be acceptable for certain uses (such as "fill-ins" where a recipient fills in blank areas on a form), the agency notes that 300 dpi is also the industry standard.

Our review of the record shows that the protester has offered no evidence that the agency has unreasonably concluded that its target audience, including many older persons with impaired vision, needs the higher resolution required here. In addition, our own examination of the samples submitted by the protester shows a distinct difference in quality between the protester's 240 dpi ink jet printer and the 300 dpi laser printer. Apart from the 240-dpi resolution, the agency asserts that the use of an ink-jet imager would create further problems--such as letter edges that are not as sharp, spatter and wicking (absorption of ink), and a tendency to bleed and

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<sup>2</sup>For the record, we note that the protester also challenges a statement made by the GPO's contracting officer shortly before bid opening, wherein the contracting officer stated that SSA's requirement for 300-dpi resolution was based on a problem with scanning bar codes at the lower resolution. The protester argued that it has produced many bar-coded products at 240 dpi without problem. The agency report, however, does not rely upon this need, and there is no evidence apart from the contracting officer's oral statement that a problem with scanning bar codes formed the basis for the solicitation requirement. Since we find that the SSA had other valid reasons for the requirement, apart from any need to ensure the proper scanning of bar codes, we need not address the protester's argument in this regard.

display an image on the reverse side. Since a contractor must print the forms here on both sides, we find nothing unreasonable about the agency's concern that printing the notices with an ink-jet imager may not produce a form that can be easily read by the notice's intended audience.

The protester also complains that the SSA resolution requirement is antiquated because it dates from 1987, when it claims there was no ink jet printer capable of printing 240 dpi; further, the protester contends that with proper quality control and maintenance, there is no appreciable difference between the two resolutions. The record, however, shows that magnified samples submitted by the protester, in connection with the protest, exhibit a blurred and jagged text, lighter type, and diminished legibility. Although the protester concedes that these defects appear when the text is magnified, it contends that the samples should be viewed at their intended size. We note simply that older persons with impaired vision may, in fact, resort to magnifying lenses to assist in reading the text of these notices, and we believe the agency may validly point to the difference in quality as a basis for requiring the sharper resolution.

The protest is denied.

/s/ Ronald Berger  
for Robert P. Murphy  
General Counsel