

Secure Compute Environment Testbed for a National Secure Data Service (SCET)

FAQ

As of 2/23/2024 8AM ET

	Question	Answer
1	The RFS mentions that the testbed must ensure the ability to utilize PETS like homomorphic encryption tools for Privacy Preserving Record Linkage (PPRL), secure multi-party computing platforms, and potential linkage to validation servers. Is the ability to utilize differential privacy capabilities to the SCET in scope for this RFS? Differential privacy is the state-of-the-art privacy enhancing technology for output privacy and is called out in the AI Executive order released in 2023 as a key capability that organizations in the federal government must evaluate.	The secure compute environment should allow the flexibility to utilize robust disclosure avoidance techniques, including differential privacy, on the platform. The RFS does not include the purchase or development of specialized software for differential privacy.
2	To build in budget stability and shift the risk of cost overruns to the vendor, would NSF accept a Firm Fixed Price model for all CLINs (including solution CLINs 0002 and 0003) in addition to the Labor CLIN (0001)?	Yes
3	If the proposed tooling offers an ability for users to analyze data via statistical methods out-of-the-box along with the ability to be provide APIs or export to the specific tools mentioned (such as the Microsoft Office Suite or SUDAAN) in Attachment 1 Section 1.3.2, will the Government accept the proposed OOTB tooling?	Yes, the government can accept the OOTB tooling.
4	Will the SCE require an ATO any phase of the described work? If so, at what phase?	Yes, an ATO is required before Phase 3. This is discussed in section 2.2.2 of the SOW.
5	Will test participants require any level of security clearance? (i.e. EQIP or Special Sworn Status)	Test participants will not be required to become CIPSEA agents or receive any other security designation as only public data will be used.
6	To engage with SMEs and the user audience during the development of the SCE, will OMB clearance be required if 10 or more participants are engaged?	If more than 10 non-federal employees are engaged with for usability testing, then OMB approval will be needed. OMB approval is not needed to engage with federal employees.
7	Will contact information of SCE testbed users be provided by ATI or NCSES to the contractor to reach the desired volume of participants?	The number of users will be determined by the projects that are approved. NCSES will provide the names of participants. The number of potential participants is a maximum and is an estimate. The actual number of users may be lower.
8	Can you say more about the FedRAMP requirement, which seems like a heavy lift, especially with the short timeline on this project?	We anticipate that the environment is going to be used for a variety of data not just within NCSES, but potentially across other Federal agencies as well. Many other statistical agencies require a FedRAMP certified environment to house or utilize their data. It also sets a high standard in terms of data security, which is critical. As a result, we've requested that FedRAMP certification be at the moderate level.
9	If the vendor's proposed tooling offers an ability for users to analyze data via statistical methods out-of-the-box, along with the ability to provide APIs or export to the specific tools mentioned (such as the Microsoft Office Suite or SUDAAN) in Attachment 1 Section 1.3.2, will the Government accept the proposed OOTB tooling?	We're open to possibilities. If you have a solution that you think would meet our requirements, then the answer to that would be yes.
10	Can you please speak to the CIPSEA requirement? Does the organization need to be an agent or staff within the organization?	It is a bit similar. You would be required to become a CIPSEA agent. Your organization would need to develop and sign a security plan. We

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	Is this similar to the CIPSEA requirements one obtains for access to data for research purposes?	would provide a template for this plan. Then, each member of your team would need to sign a data use agreement and take a thirty-minute, virtual, online training. The training would need to be taken annually. There could be additional security requirements for your staff if we have data from other agencies that have additional security requirements. We would need to work with the other data-providing agency on their requirements.
11	How was the 3 month development and 2 month testing phase timeline determined?	We are on a rapid development schedule. We have about two years for this platform to be live and we want to maximize it. We also have some projects that will require this platform, so we would like this to be ready when those projects come on board.
12	Given the scope of the RFS, will the government consider extending the response deadline?	The deadline for submissions remains 2/28/2024.
13	Is Privacy preserving record linkage expected to be part of the overall solution?	No in terms of we are not expecting PPRL tools to be made available as part of the overall software package. We want to make sure that solutions such as that can be supported by the platform itself.
14	What datasets are expected to be part of the initial solution for testing?	For testing purposes, the system will be tested with public use microdata files. No restricted use data should be used for the testing of the platform.
15	What is the scope of multiple award?	Each award can have up to \$8.6 million. It could be multiple awards if different vendors have different aspects of the solution. For example, if a vendor can provide a very robust customer service model and another vendor can only support the actual platform itself, that could be a basis for multiple awards. However, we do encourage all vendors to team to provide a total solution.
16	Can you clarify what you mean by 'security clearance'? is this TS or something else?	Gaining a CIPSEA agent status, you do not need a background investigation. We have other statistical agencies that we partner with that do require additional security clearances and we may host data on this platform from an agency that requires additional security clearance.
17	Can you please speak to the requirement to "ensure the ability to utilize homomorphic encryption tools for PPRL"?"	We want to make sure that the platform is robust enough and has the security required to use privacy preserving technology or host software that we may purchase.
18	Can you spell out the acronym that sounds like "SIP-SEE"?"	CIPSEA, Confidential Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency Act
19	Can you please clarify what you mean by "Expenditure Based" contract type?	This is like a cost type agreement, such as cost plus fixed fee, cost reimbursable. Another option than firm fixed price.
20	Under section 1.3.2 it reads - Populate the environment with SAS, Stata, SUDAAN, R, and Microsoft Office Suite software for use by approved users. Will these software's be provided by NCSES or is the vendor to include that in its offer price?	Please provide as much as you can in the offer price. We want to make sure we can use a robust suite of software packages on this platform.
21	Can the entire RFS cost proposal be FFP?	Yes, it can be. You can propose your preferred agreement type.
22	Can you elaborate on vendor iteration with NSF DIS?	We do need to have the system to have an ATO. We will be working with you and with our information security staff to make sure all of the security documentation that you provide is in place and meets NSF standards.

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23	Will the ramp certification be required at the time of submission?	No, However, we are on a rapid timeline, and we need the system ATO'd within about five months. So just keep that in mind in terms of timing because it can take some time to become FedRAMP certified.
24	Will there be any Government Furnished Equipment provided by the government or does the Offeror need to provide all of this for the SCET (Cloud infrastructure, tools, etc.)?	No GFE. Infrastructure and tools need to be provided by offeror.
25	Is privacy preserving record linkage expected to be part of the overall solution?	No, we are not expecting you to include software that can provide that capability as part of the solution.
26	What types of data would be used for the test bed, and would they differ from a production system?	Once we are done testing, which will be with public use data, the answer is no. We want to be able to use the same type of data in the system that we would in another production system.
27	If an ADC member had non-traditional status and won a previous ADC contract, do they lose that status or are they grandfathered in?	They are grandfathered in. Awards under ADC do not count against that non-traditional definition. More information on this can be found on the ADC website under the FAQ page.
28	RFS 2.7 Page 4 Agreement (Contract) Type: During the 2/12 webinar the Government stated that Offerors have the flexibility to propose Contract Types for the various CLINS. For example, if Offerors want to propose something other than FFP for CLIN 0001, that is allowable. Please confirm.	Yes, it can be. You can propose your preferred agreement type. Time & Material is not an option.
29	RFS 3.1.1.2 Page 5 Is having a non-traditional entity on the team required or evaluated more favorably?	Teaming with a non-traditional entity is not required but will be used an evaluation factor.
30	RFS 3.1.1.2 Page 5 Teaming: Can you please further clarify the "non-traditional" definition? The definition seems to be focused on whether Offerors have recent NSF performance/experience. For example, if a Large/for-profit business does NOT have any recent NSF experience, would they still qualify as "non-traditional" under this definition?	An entity (construed in its broadest sense to include qualified large and small businesses, universities, non-profits, philanthropic organizations, partnerships, joint ventures, and other entity forms) that is not currently performing and has not performed, for at least the three-year period preceding the solicitation of sources by NSF for the procurement or arrangement, under any NSF procurement contract or NSF instrument of financial assistance.
31	RFS 3.1.1.2 Page 5 RFS excerpt: "A "non-traditional entity" means an entity ...that is not currently performing and has not performed, for at least the three-year period preceding the solicitation of sources by NSF for the procurement or arrangement, under any NSF procurement contract or NSF instrument of financial assistance." Can you please further clarify the part of the statement concerning "NSF procurement contract or NSF instrument of financial assistance"? If an Offeror has partnered with a University to receive NSF grant funding to support underrepresentation of Black students in STEM fields, would this count as an "instrument of financial assistance"?	If the Offeror was a subcontractor to the university, they will maintain non-traditional status.

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32	Attachment 2, Vol I Page 1 Can Offerors include Technical Assumptions as part of Vol I in an appendix (NOT counting towards 20 pg. limit)?	Technical assumption will count towards the 20-page limit.
33	Attachment 2, SOW Page 2 SOW "Future Phases" section: "Proposals may include a discussion of optional, future phases of work." Can you please clarify, would this be for support that would extend beyond the August 9, 2026 POP end date? If yes, would this also be priced as a separate (optional) phase in our proposal response?	While future phases of work can be proposed, they would be priced separately in an optional phase after the POP for this project.
34	Attachment 2, Cost Proposal Page 2 On the 2/12 webinar the Government stated that there would be no GFE included and that Offerors should propose all infrastructure and tooling. In an effort to provide NSF with the best value approach and solution, is the Government open to exploring use of existing NSF investments in infrastructure and tooling?	We cannot guarantee the ability to use existing NSF investments in infrastructure and tooling. If this is preferred and would reduce overall costs, please include as an option in the proposal.
35	Can you please confirm a Table of Contents, in addition to the Cover Page, does not count towards page count?	It does not count towards the page count.
36	What types of data will be used for testing the SCET?	Public-use data.
37	What are the different data source types (database types, file formats, APIs, and so on) that a testbed user would need to connect to?	Data used within the environment will primarily be statistical data that will need to be securely transferred to the environment. Connections to other databases, such as SQL, Oracle, or other statistical datasets, may be required for tasks such as secure multi-party computing.
38	Can you provide an order of magnitude estimate for the average size of the data expected to be processed and stored, per user per year?	This is dependent on the projects and cannot be estimated at this time.
39	Can ATI/NSF clarify whether the \$8.6M budget is for the base or the whole period of performance for this effort?	The whole period of performance.
40	RFS Section 2.4 Page 3 The RFS states that Proposals must be submitted in Microsoft Word format. Should all pricing be included in the Microsoft Word Cost Volume, or may offerors submit an additional Excel Spreadsheet containing pricing?	Please submit in Word formatting. If additional information is needed, it will be requested.
41	Attachment 1 Page 9; Attachment 2 Page 3; RFS Section 2.7 Page 4 CLINs 0001, 0002, 0003, and the Optional Surge CLIN are identified as "Expenditure Based" CLINs. Please provide clarification about the contract type for these CLINs. May offerors propose these CLINs as Time & Materials or CPFF, at our option?	You can propose your preferred agreement type between fixed or cost type. T&M is not an option.
42	Att. 2, Proposal Format, Page 1 Does a table of contents count towards the page count?	No
43	Att. 2, Proposal Format, Page 1 Can tables and figures use 10-pt font and single spacing?	Tables and Charts may use smaller fonts; however, it must remain legible.

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44	Att. 2, Proposal Format, Page 1 Can resumes use single spacing?	In accordance with Attachment 2, it must contain 1.15-spacing.
45	The RFS states: "No work will be performed outside the United States, including accessing government data and email." Can you help us understand the interpretation of the phrase?	All servers must be U.S. based. Anyone who has access to the system itself, and would have incidental access to our data, would need to be U.S. based.
46	In RFS Attachment 2, Volume II: Cost Proposal, the Cost Estimate instructions state that the "suggested level of detail are shown in the table below" and the following sentence states that the total cost "must be provided using the level of detail shown" in the table. May an Offeror submit a fully loaded budget, containing both direct and indirect costs, with its proposal? If Offerors are required to submit a budget including Indirect Costs, may Offerors provide the detailed budget and a copy of its NICRA directly to NSF if requested?	Yes, an Offeror may submit a fully loaded budget. The cost element details that make up each CLIN and Phase are to be provided separately.
47	We would appreciate clarity regarding the process for obtaining the Authorization to Operate (ATO) for this solution system. As per the Statement of Work (SOW) page 5, section 1.3.2, mentions leveraging a Cloud Service Provider (CSP) with a FedRAMP Moderate Impact Level. Does this system require ATO directly from FedRAMP if already leveraging the CSP's FedRAMP ATO or will the Assessment and Authorization (A&A) process be conducted internally within NSF (NSF Authority Official (AO) providing the ATO)?	The A&A process will be conducted internally within NSF.
48	Will researchers/users require earlier versions of the statistical software? If so, how does NSF/NCSES like to provision this and how far back in versions would they want to go?	No.
49	What is the archival policy? How long would you like to archive the user's project space for, after they have completed their research?	Through the period of performance.
50	Should the project space be single user specific or allow for collaboration of multiple users? If multiple users, do you have a limit on the # of users in a project space?	It should allow for collaboration among multiple users. There is no limit on the # of users.
51	Does NSF/NCSES allow the researcher downloading specific libraries or software to their project space?	Yes, with NSF/NCSES approval.
52	Can tables and figures use single spacing?	Yes
53	Can NSF clarify the hosting service model requirement for the NCSES environment, both the FedRAMP Impact level required and the hosting model required? (IaaS, PaaS, SaaS)	Please see section 2.3.2 for system requirements.
54	Would NSF be open to the use of an existing Managed Services solution to provide the required continuous monitoring and security requirements assumed by the agency?	Yes.
55	What is the expected user count (Peak/total and average) for normal operations within the NCSES environment?	Peak user count could be up to 500, average user count no more than 150.
56	Does NSF require adherence to the M21-31 Directive?	The secure compute environment solution must adhere to the M21-31 directive.
57	NSF has stated an ATO is required prior to go live. Is this ATO at the Agency level, and is the awardee expected to supply a 3PAO for this ATO process, perform the audit themselves, or would NSF manage the audit internally?	This will be an agency level ATO. The awardee would need to supply the 3PAO to perform the assessment of the FedRAMP controls.

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58	If NSF and/or NCSES plan to issue an ATO, would NSF and/or NCSES plan to issue a provisional ATO (P-ATO) for an existing FedRAMP authorized system to support use of a system authorized at the FedRAMP Moderate baseline within the first 3 months of the project while NSF reviews the customer responsibility matrix and works on their e-package documentation?	NSF does not do provisional ATOs for FedRAMP authorized services. NCSES and the vendor providing the service will need to jointly develop the ATO package before the ATO will be issued.
59	Can you confirm if there is salary cap to be used on the budgets?	There is no salary cap (particularly related to months of support) that applies to this solicitation.
60	Are foreign-based staff authorized to work on this project?	No