

SMI and Velocity Government Relations forge space and defense lobbying powerhouse

WASHINGTON, September 1, 2026 _ SMI and Velocity Government Relations (VGR) have merged to establish one of the most experienced and effective government affairs operations and deliver even more results for our growing roster of defense, space, and aerospace clients.

VGR represents some of the foremost space pioneers, from communications to in-orbit servicing and manufacturing, and supports a broad range of defense and aerospace firms, including emerging technology start-ups and established contractors delivering autonomous systems, advanced sensors, and propulsion technologies.

“SMI is excited to unite with Velocity Government Relations as we sharpen our strategies for client success,” said SMI CEO Bill McCann. “Under the leadership of Erin Neal and Jo-Anne Sears, Velocity has built one of the most successful models for positioning clients to seize upon historic opportunities in commercial, civil, national security space, and much more.”

“Their reputation, track record, and deep networks all complement SMI,” McCann added. “Together, we strive to be the premier federal government relations firm for aerospace industry clients.”

“VGR has earned a well-deserved reputation as one of Washington’s leading advocates for aerospace, space, and defense innovators,” added SMI COO Ken Wetzel. “This combination strengthens our ability to deliver exceptional results for clients while expanding SMI’s leadership position in industries that are critical to America’s future. We are excited about the opportunities this merger creates for our clients, our team, and the continued growth of SMI.”

Neal, who holds a bachelor’s degree in physics and a master’s in space policy, founded VGR in 2017. She brings extensive in-house industry lobbying experience from Ball

Aerospace and ATK, as well as consulting experience with Signal Group. She previously worked on Capitol Hill, at the Congressional Research Service, and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Earlier in her career, she served in the Peace Corps, teaching math and physics in Cameroon.

“I chose the name Velocity for the firm when I founded it because in physics, velocity is about both speed and direction — and I’ve always thought that was a good metaphor for effective advocacy in Washington,” Neal said. “Success isn’t always about moving faster. Sometimes it means changing direction, knowing when to apply a lighter touch, or recognizing the right moment to accelerate. In SMI, we found a team that approaches client service with that same kind of judgment, and together we’ll have even more tools to help our clients achieve their goals.”

Sears, who holds bachelor’s degrees in communications and English and a master’s in organizational management, is an experienced national security and strategic communications professional. She has worked at the Department of State, the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, and Office of the Director of National Intelligence. She joined VGR as a partner in 2019.

“Success in Washington takes more than groundbreaking technology,” Sears said. “It requires a clear understanding of the mission and the ability to demonstrate how innovation can help policymakers meet their most pressing challenges. By joining SMI, we will give our clients an even stronger voice and help position them for success as decisions made today shape the future of these industries.”

Neal and Sears join SMI as vice presidents effective September 1.

Also joining the firm is analyst Michael Parisi. As a senior associate at VGR, Parisi supported defense and aerospace clients with policy research, appropriations and authorization analysis, and stakeholder briefings. He holds a bachelor’s degree in international relations and a master’s in government.

Said SMI VP Nick Vance, who leads the Aerospace and Space Practice Area: “Velocity’s deep expertise will expand the capabilities we offer our clients, create greater connectivity across our Aerospace and Space Practice Area, and reinforce SMI’s commitment to investing in the areas that will shape the future of national security.”

Founded in 1993, SMI has been the premier choice in Washington for companies, universities, nonprofits, and industry associations for federal marketing and lobbying services focused on national security, defense, clean energy, life sciences, advanced manufacturing, and research and development.