

GOVERNMENT MANAGERS COALITION

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January 14, 2014

The Honorable Tom Carper
Chairman
Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Coburn
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
442 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Carper and Ranking Member Coburn:

On behalf of the member organizations of the Government Managers Coalition (GMC), we write to express our concern with on-going attempts to place extreme restrictions on conference and travel spending, especially in light of the committee hearing today. Although questionable conference spending appears to have occurred in the past, there are legitimate purposes for conferences, meetings and travel which should not be cut due to alleged abuse by a few people.

As you know, the GMC consists of the five major federal sector executive and managerial professional associations representing over 200,000 executives and managers in the federal government. GMC works to advocate for good governance and policies throughout the federal workforce. As managers and executives across the government, we respect and agree with the idea that dollars are spent wisely and sufficient oversight mechanisms are in place to ensure effective government. However, following the conference spending scandals that occurred in the past at GSA and VA, attempts at oversight have been too broad and are actually limiting necessary government business and important opportunities for engagement with stakeholders.

Several pieces of legislation have been introduced to limit agency travel budgets to 70 or 80 percent of 2010 levels or put other limits and bans on conference and travel spending. While this may seem appropriate on its face, blanket reductions do not generally address the problem of mismanagement. Furthermore, budget pressures and the threat of further cuts have already had a chilling effect on agency travel budgets, rendering further cuts more harmful than effective.

Government conferences, meetings and trainings – some of which require travel – can serve many beneficial purposes. They bring experts together from academia and the public and

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private sectors, provide a forum for idea-sharing and collaboration on innovative projects, and dissemination and discussion of best practices. Further, many federal employees require certain training or certifications to effectively and efficiently do their jobs. For these positions, failure to maintain professional accreditation could result in a skills lapse, or worse, a loss of security clearance. Conferences, meetings and trainings also provide case law, regulatory, and practice updates so that employees in particular professions, such as human resources, are up to date on any changes.

Travel to conferences and other meetings is often necessary to meet these requirements as many agency training installations are located around the country. For example employees from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Social Security Administration (SSA) receive mission critical training and developmental opportunities at their meetings. In rapidly changing fields of science and technology, government professionals from agencies like NASA, NIH, DOD, USDA, and DHS benefit from knowledge exchange and networking opportunities with practitioners from private industry, academia, and state and local government.

The specific experiences of GMC member organizations highlight the pressure on legitimate meetings, conferences, and trainings. For example, at the Internal Revenue Service, training classes have been cut at the last minute and many employees have been told not to conduct outreach activities, roundtable discussions, or attend information sharing meetings. These are legitimate meetings that are cut at the expense of employee engagement, development, and efficient agency communication.

The GMC urges you to consider alternate ways to increase oversight of travel, meeting and conference spending. Rather than across-the-board budget cuts, each meeting, conference or travel request should be considered on a case by case basis. If the requested event fulfills requirements for training or certification, it should be approved. Agencies should be required to ensure that meetings and conferences sponsored by an agency follow strict policies – perhaps even capping limits on spending for certain promotional items or speakers. Any oversight mechanisms should be clear, straightforward, and government-wide. However, it is our experience that there is never a one size fits all policy and exceptions always exist. Agencies should have flexibility to determine what travel, meetings and conferences are a necessary expense. If additional oversight is required, agencies should be able to receive an opinion from OMB on whether certain spending is warranted.

As you continue to examine these issues, the GMC would also like to remind the committee that mechanisms are already in place to hold employees accountable. Where any improper spending did occur at GSA and VA, inspector general investigations identified improprieties and employees were held accountable. The GMC believes that weaknesses in the system are due more to a lack of training for managers in how to deal with problem employees and a lack of consistent support from political leadership. The GMC encourages you to consider investments in areas such as training instead of making the perhaps easier choice to cut budgets.

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We offer our assistance in identifying areas of investment within agencies and we look forward to working with you to ensure dollars are spent wisely. Thank you for your continued interest in an effective and efficient federal workforce.

Sincerely,



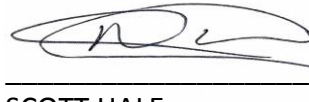
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FAA Managers Association



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President
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Senior Executives Association

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