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ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH CONGRESS

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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April 10, 2012

The Honorable Hillary Clinton  
Secretary of State  
Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is gathering government-wide data about the cost and frequency of agency-funded overnight conferences held outside of the Washington, D.C.-area. As part of this investigation, I am writing to request documents and information related to such conferences and the employees who planned and attended them.

On February 9, 2009, the President publically condemned frivolous spending of taxpayer dollars at a town hall meeting in Indiana. He stated: "you can't go take a trip to Las Vegas or go down to the Super Bowl on the taxpayers' dime."<sup>1</sup>

With that in mind, on July 24, 2009, I wrote to the Social Security Administration (SSA) to request documents and information related to a "three-day conference for managers at the Arizona Biltmore Resort and Spa."<sup>2</sup> The agency subsequently produced documents to the Committee that showed it had been careless with taxpayer dollars. The SSA Administrator determined that "the conference organizers made some decisions that were not fully compliant with [SSA] policies or adequately sensitive to the expectations of the agency."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dave Toplikar, *Las Vegas Still 'Reeling' from Obama Comments, Says Mayor*, LAS VEGAS SUN (Oct. 21, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Hon. Darrell Issa, Ranking Member, Comm. on Oversight & Gov't Reform [hereinafter Committee] to Hon. Michael J. Astrue, Adm'r, U.S. Social Security Admin. (July 24, 2009) (citing Josh Bernstein, *Social Security Spends \$700,000 on Phoenix Conference*, KNXV-TV, <http://www.abc15.com/content/news/investigators/story/Social-Security-spends-700-000-on-Phoenix/RrHYW4IRka1mC7wJTm4uQ.csp> (last visited July 16, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Hon. Michael J. Astrue, Adm'r, U.S. Social Security Admin., to Hon. Darrell Issa, Ranking Member, Committee (Sept. 10, 2009).

The Administrator made significant organizational changes at SSA to prevent a recurrence.<sup>4</sup> At the time, I hoped that the abundance of negative publicity about the event from a variety of news outlets would serve as notice that federal departments and agencies cannot use taxpayer dollars to pay for vacations disguised as conferences.<sup>5</sup>

The General Services Administration (GSA) failed to heed the President's message and to learn from the mistakes of the SSA. According to an April 2, 2012, report by the GSA Office of the Inspector General (OIG), the agency's biennial Western Regions Conference held in October 2010 was "excessive" and "wasteful."<sup>6</sup> The conference, held at the M Resort in Las Vegas, cost \$822,751. According to the OIG report, witnesses characterized the conference as "over the top."<sup>7</sup> In fact, the planners made it a priority to outdo previous years' conferences.<sup>8</sup>

Other agencies will hold major conferences in the upcoming months. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority lists a two-day coal mine methane conference in September for 150 attendees organized by the Environmental Protection Agency; a six-day Department of Health and Human Services conference scheduled for June, with 325 expected attendees; and a Department of Defense worldwide education symposium for 2,500 in July.<sup>9</sup>

On November 9, 2011, the President signed an executive order that directed agencies to spend funds more efficiently.<sup>10</sup> Specifically related to travel, the President stated:

[T]o ensure efficient travel spending, agencies are encouraged to devise strategic alternatives to Government travel, including local or technological alternatives, such as teleconferencing and video conferencing. Agencies should make all appropriate efforts to conduct business and host or sponsor events in space controlled by the Federal Government, wherever practicable and cost effective.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> See Joseph Rhee & Brian Ross, *Social Security Execs Boogie Down at Lavish Phoenix Conference*, ABC NEWS (July 15, 2009); *Luxury on Your Dime*, FOX NEWS (Apr. 29, 2011), <http://video.foxnews.com/v/3935199/luxury-on-your-dime/>.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. Servs. Admin., Office of the Inspector Gen., *Management Deficiency Report: Gen. Serv. Admin. Public Buildings Service 2010 Western Regions Conference* (Apr. 2, 2012) [hereinafter OIG Report].

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> Steve Tetreault & Peter Urban, *Nevadans, industry scramble to limit fallout from GSA junket*, LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL, Apr. 4, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Exec. Order No. 13,589, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/09/executive-order-promoting-efficient-spending> (Nov. 9, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

With regard to commemorative items, the President directed agencies to “limit the purchase of promotional items (e.g. plaques, clothing, and commemorative items), in particular where they are not cost-effective.”<sup>12</sup> This order, in addition to the President’s public comments, should deter event organizers from even considering expensive off-site conferences.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) appears to be ignoring the President’s clear guidance. Despite the President’s comments and the executive order, CFPB is seeking to hire an “Invitations Coordinator.”<sup>13</sup> This individual’s duties include tracking invitations for CFPB agency officials, researching the events to which they are invited, and maintaining a master schedule of events.<sup>14</sup> The individual who fills this role could earn as much as \$102,900 annually.<sup>15</sup>

As families around the country are having to spend less to make ends meet, the federal government must follow suit. The American people have an expectation that the federal government is not using their tax dollars to pay for lavish conferences or to fund the salaries of event planners. In order to assist the Committee with its investigation, please provide responses to the following requests for information:

1. Provide a list of overnight conferences funded by the department and attended by more than 50 employees since January 1, 2005. For each conference provide date(s), location, cost, funding source, and number of attendees.
2. Provide the names, titles, and salaries of any individuals employed by the department to plan events.

The Committee also requests that the Department produce the following documents, in electronic format, for the time period January 1, 2005 to the present:

3. The address of any website created to promote, track, or commemorate department conferences. If the website is currently archived on the agency’s intranet, provide an electronic copy.

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and may at “any time” investigate “any matter” as set forth in House Rule X. An attachment to this letter provides additional information about responding to the Committee’s request.

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<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> Job Announcement Number 12-CFPB-145X, Invitations Coordinator, Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, available at <http://www.usajobs.gov/GetJob/ViewDetails/306225500> (last visited Apr. 5, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

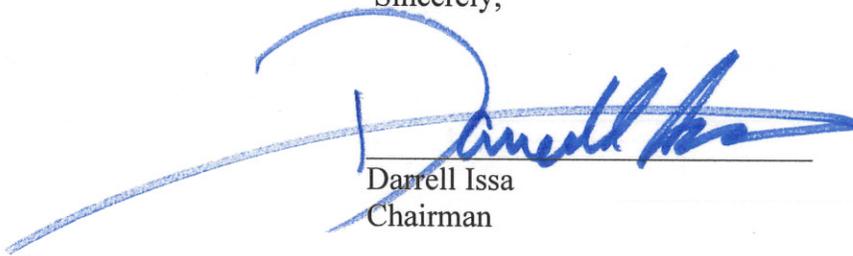
<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

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We request that you provide the requested documents and information as soon as possible, but no later than noon on April 23, 2012. When producing documents to the Committee, please deliver production sets to the Majority Staff in Room 2157 of the Rayburn House Office Building and the Minority Staff in Room 2471 of the Rayburn House Office Building. The Committee prefers, if possible, to receive all documents in electronic format.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact Ashley Callen or Ashok Pinto of the Committee Staff at (202) 225-5074. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Darrell Issa  
Chairman

Enclosure

cc: The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings, Ranking Member