

Opening Statement of Chairman Thomas R. Carper
Examining Conference and Travel Spending Across the Federal Government
January 14, 2014

As prepared for delivery:

Good morning. Our thanks to today's witnesses and guests for joining us today to examine Federal agencies' conference and travel spending.

My thanks as well to Dr. Coburn and his staff for their help in putting this hearing together.

Today's hearing is part of this committee's continuous effort to look into every nook and cranny of federal spending and seek ways to improve results and save money.

In particular we are here today to discuss the progress agencies have made in cutting spending on conferences and travel, while better ensuring that the dollars being spent today and in the future make possible a more effective and efficient government and a better country.

In this time of deep federal deficits and challenging economic times, the people we work for, the tax payers, expect us to be good stewards of their hard earned money.

Unfortunately, in the last few years, several Inspectors General have documented wasteful and excessive spending at government conferences.

The Department of Justice, the General Services Administration, and the Internal Revenue Service have all made the news, and not in a positive way, for excessive conference spending.

The goal of our hearing today, though, is not to reexamine the well-documented excesses of the past. That has already been done in the media and in other committees.

Rather, the reason we are holding today's hearing is to get a better picture of the *current state* of agency spending on conferences, training, and travel and to understand if the culture that contributed to the problems we saw at Justice, GSA, and the IRS has changed.

There is good news to report. In May 2012, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued guidance that required agencies to reduce federal spending on agency travel and to improve accountability on conference spending.

In addition, the challenging budget climate of the last few years has forced agencies to operate with less federal funding, which has, in turn, curtailed spending on travel, training and conferences, while focusing the dollars that are spent on activities and events whose value to agencies, to organizations, and citizens is clear.

As a result of these events, it is my understanding that in Fiscal Year 2013 agency conference and travel spending had decreased by more than \$3 billion as compared to Fiscal Year 2010. That's a significant reduction.

At today's hearing, I would like to hear from our witnesses about where things currently stand in this area.

Specifically, I would like to hear answers to the following questions:

- How much are agencies currently spending on conferences and travel?
- How has the OMB guidance been adopted and implemented across the government?
- What changes have the DOJ, GSA, and IRS made to their internal policies to address the problems found in those agencies?
- And finally, what lessons have been learned and what steps have been taken to make federal agencies better stewards of taxpayer money with respect to conferences and travel?

To help us answer these questions, we have two excellent panels for our hearing today.

On our first panel, we have Beth Cobert , the Deputy Director for Management at the Office of Management and Budget and Dan Tangherlini, Administrator at the GSA.

On our second panel, we will hear from three Inspectors General from the Department of Justice, the GSA, and the Treasury Department, each of whom issued a report uncovering wasteful spending at our government agencies.

We are fortunate to have such distinguished witnesses for our hearing today and I look forward to their testimony.

Before wrapping up, I want to briefly touch on one issue and that is the importance of conferences and the value derived from these types of meetings.

Let me be crystal clear about one thing, though. There is no reasonable justification for the spending that took place at some government conferences over the past few years. It was wasteful and excessive – and simply inexcusable.

I often like to say though, that in adversity lies opportunity. And it certainly appears to me that in light of both these scandals and budget cuts, some good has come about in the sense that agencies have found ways to cut conference and meeting costs through technology, conference calls, and webinars.

However, we must not forget the value of face to face meetings amongst agencies and, more importantly, with those who work outside the federal government.

When properly planned and managed, conferences serve a legitimate and often times necessary purpose of fostering collaboration and partnerships between government employees, state regulators, academia and industry.

And while it is important that agencies make efforts to eliminate any wasteful spending on conferences and travel, we must be careful that we don't unduly restrict the ability of our agencies to interact with outside groups.

This Committee has heard from numerous groups – including state regulatory agencies, non-profits, military associations, and scientists – that are very concerned that conference and travel limitations could cut off their primary means of communication with federal agencies and affect their ability to interact with the government.

These are important concerns that the Executive branch and Congress must consider when shaping policy and I look forward to discussing them with our witnesses today.

I would also note that the Committee has received written statements from a range of interested groups and individuals, including the Majority Leader, that address the matters that we are discussing here today. I ask that all of these statements be included as part of the hearing record.