



January 24, 2006

Dear Member of Congress:

As the largest organization representing America's trade, professional and philanthropic community, the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), Washington, DC, is deeply concerned that in Congress's rush to pass a sweeping set of lobbying reforms, there is a fundamental danger of hindering the legitimate educational dialogue between members of Congress and the close to 100 million members of associations and other nonprofit organizations in the U.S.

Certainly, in the current political environment rife with documented instances of corruption, such an examination is not only justifiable but necessary in order to insure that existing lobbying restrictions are enforced, and see how they might be strengthened to ensure public trust and confidence. ASAE understands and supports the need for accountability and transparency in government.

However, the proposal to ban all privately-funded congressional travel is, in particular, a serious threat to the exchange between Congress and associations that represent a profession or group of individuals – the people who may in many cases be on the front lines of an issue, uniquely qualified to share their perspectives on how legislation might directly impact them and their trade, profession or charitable cause. A bottom-line question ASAE would pose is, can Congress afford to lose that perspective? Is such a ban truly in the best interests of the legislative process and the development of sound, well-constructed and substantive laws?

For the purposes of further discussion, ASAE believes Congress must create a distinction between unnecessary "fact-finding" trips to exotic locales where the agenda is more socially or recreationally driven, and educational trips to an association meeting or conference, where an association might pay for an elected official's domestic plane or train ticket. ASAE contends that such trips, outside Washington where legislators can engage in an informal exchange of views with a broad array of individuals, are vitally important for elected officials charged with understanding a huge range of issues and crafting legislation accordingly.

Associations represent America, and in no small way. Approximately 97 million U.S. and 16 million international members pay dues to a U.S. trade or professional association. The primary reason they belong to associations is for education and training. Nearly all associations (94%) invest in education and training programs for their members and the principal vehicle for delivering that education and training is via meetings and conferences across the U.S. In 2004, 21 million people attended association trade shows, conventions, conferences and seminars and nearly 5 million attended committee and board meetings. These industry events are enhanced by the attendance of members of Congress or congressional staff who can share with attendees the thinking back on Capitol Hill and gather valuable feedback from those attendees that they might not otherwise obtain.

ASAE strongly believes that if congressional travel were entirely funded by taxpayers, members of Congress would be less inclined to accept an invitation to attend an association or nonprofit meeting outside of Washington, DC. This would without a doubt be a “lose-lose” outcome, and an unintended consequence of several of the lobbying reform proposals currently under debate.

ASAE suggests that a more amenable policy on congressional travel might include a pre-approval system for all trips, whereby an ethics committee or advisory office would scrutinize all incoming requests for privately funded travel by members of Congress or their staff.

There has to be a better answer to lobbying reform than a complete ban on privately sponsored travel. ASAE urges Congress to adopt rules and regulations that meet the test for accountability and ethical responsibility, without cutting off Congress’s access to the thoughts and perspectives of millions of people attending association and nonprofit meetings outside the nation’s capital.

ASAE would welcome any opportunity to continue a dialogue on this issue with Congress. I encourage you to contact Jim Clarke, CAE, ASAE’s senior vice president of public policy, at 202-626-2703 or by email at jclarke@asaenet.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John H. Graham IV". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John H. Graham IV, CAE
President and CEO