



Written Statement of John H. Graham IV, CAE  
President and CEO, American Society of Association Executives (“ASAE”)  
“Lobbying Reform: Proposals and Issues”  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
January 25, 2006

Chairman Collins, Senator Lieberman, and Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record on the important issue of lobbying reform.

I am John Graham, president and CEO of the American Society of Association Executives (“ASAE”), a 501(c)(6) tax exempt organization founded in 1920 and representing roughly 23,000 members who staff trade, professional and philanthropic organizations in the U.S. and in 50 countries worldwide. Among the member benefits provided by ASAE to its members are education and skills training, credentialing, access to industry research, access to industry partners who supply services to associations, and advocacy on issues that impact or threaten to impact the success of the association and nonprofit community. In short, our members represent nearly every trade, profession, or philanthropic cause one might imagine.

I am very grateful for the ability to speak to you on the issue of lobbying reform, because at its heart, lobbying is a constitutional right, and an honorable and fundamental principle of American democracy. We have all read the recent headlines about abuse of existing rules governing the act of lobbying, and hence, we fully comprehend the need to reexamine these rules to ensure public accountability and trust in the political process.

Nevertheless, we ask that in its examination of various reform proposals, Congress not lose sight of the obligation to preserve legislators’ access to firsthand information about the impact of legislation, regulations, and other public policy on various trades, professions and philanthropic causes across the country.

One such proposal in particular -- the proposed ban on privately funded congressional travel -- poses a serious threat to the exchange between Congress and associations that represent a profession or group of individuals. The companies or individuals who belong to associations may in many cases be on the front lines of an issue, uniquely qualified to share their perspectives on how legislation might directly impact their trade, profession or charitable cause.

Chairman Collins has astutely made the point in her public comments that the term “lobbying” today too often conjures up images of all-expense paid vacations masquerading as “fact-finding” trips. ASAE believes Congress must create a distinction between these 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. We would contend that such conferences provide a setting outside of Washington, DC, where lawmakers can see and hear from the source how legislation impacts a particular constituency.

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.

I especially appreciated the statement in Sen. Santorum’s comments for this hearing urging Congress to look into the “use of self regulatory organizations.” As Sen. Santorum points out, many professions – doctors, lawyers, accountants – all have their own self-regulatory bodies. It seems reasonable that Congress might entrust a pre-approval system for discerning legitimate privately funded travel invitations to just such a body.

Lastly, I would like to say that we are thankful Congress appears to be addressing this issue through a deliberate process. With careful consideration of these various reform proposals, Congress can avoid a rush to judgment that might result in unintended consequences for the legitimate, vital dialogue between elected officials and our community of trade, professional and philanthropic organizations.

We look forward to continuing a discussion with Congress on the proposed ban on privately funded congressional travel, and ASAE stands ready to answer any questions members of Congress or their staff may have on the subject.

Please contact ASAE's Senior Vice President for Public Policy Jim Clarke for more information at 202-626-2703 or email him at [jclarke@asaenet.org](mailto:jclarke@asaenet.org).

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