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Congress of the United States
U.S. House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

1102 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
(202) 225-3625

Washington, DC 20515-6348

http://waysandmeans.house.gov

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MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

July 10, 2009

The Honorable Michael J. Astrue
Commissioner of Social Security
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Commissioner Astrue:

Yesterday morning we saw a troubling media report regarding a Social Security Administration (SSA) training conference at the Arizona Biltmore, which was reportedly attended by 700 SSA managers. At a time when millions of Americans are out of work and having to do more with less, and when the SSA has received significant new funding to address near record backlogs after longstanding funding requests made before our Subcommittees, it is essential that great care be taken to use administrative funding wisely, in a way that brings the most value to the American people SSA serves.

Therefore, we ask that you provide the following information by no later than July 17, 2009.

- The purpose of the conference and specific goals the conference was intended to achieve.
- The conference agenda including all sessions and presenters.
- The number of employees who attended the conference and their position titles.
- The number of official hours SSA employees spent traveling and attending the conference.
- All conference costs paid by the taxpayers broken out by category, including travel, rooms, meals, speakers, entertainment, conference room rental and equipment charges, etc.
- The process used to select the conference location, including whether government contracting rules were followed and whether the hotel housing the conference was the lowest bidder.
- Costs of similar conferences held in the last five years. For each, please provide a brief description of the purpose of the conference, the number of attendees, the length of the conference, and the total cost.

In addition, during the March 24, 2009 Ways and Means joint hearing on the disability backlogs, there was discussion of SSA's purchase of video-conference units costing up to $24,000 for its hearing offices. What is the total amount SSA has spent on video-conferencing units to date? In what percentage of the home offices from which the SSA staff came to attend the conference are such video-conferencing units currently operational? In how many SSA offices do you project such units will be operational by mid-2010 and mid-2011? What is the intended purpose and functionality of these units? Would it have been feasible to have conducted the training sessions provided at the conference through video-conferencing rather than in-person? What would have been the advantages and disadvantages of conducting these training sessions using video-conferencing, or other alternatives that could have saved on travel expenses?

Your prompt response to these questions is appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

John S. Tanner
Chairman
Subcommittee on Social Security

Sam Johnson
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Social Security

John Linder
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support