

The Honorable K. Michael Conaway
Chairman, House of Representatives Committee on Ethics
1015 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Linda Sánchez
Ranking Member, House of Representatives Committee on Ethics
1015 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

July 2, 2014

BY EMAIL

Re: Access to House of Representatives Travel Forms and Ethics Information

Dear Chairman Conaway and Ranking Member Sánchez:

We, the undersigned organizations, are writing to express our grave concerns arising from a *National Journal* report that the House of Representatives Committee on Ethics will no longer require the inclusion of privately-funded travel information in lawmakers' annual financial disclosure forms.¹ This news is a surprise. The public must be contemporaneously informed when the Committee on Ethics changes its rules, updates its guidance (e.g. "pink sheets"), or changes filing requirements. The public also should be consulted when changes are under consideration, and a permanent archive of all ethics regulations and guidance should be online. The failure to inform the public in this instance undermines confidence in the ethics process and in the Committee. The non-disclosure policy should be reversed.

Overall, congressional travel needs better and more disclosure, not less. Websites where travel information is disclosed are difficult to use and poorly documented.² The search portals should provide additional search terms and include an opportunity to download all files in bulk. Documents should be available in an electronic format that allows users to search their contents; data should be published in a structured format that allows machines to process the information. The use of PDF "picture" files is insufficient.

Many forms of congressional travel should be disclosed to the public but are not. For example, travel paid by friends of a member of Congress should always be disclosed if it meets a monetary threshold; the disclosure decision should not be up to Committee discretion. In addition, travel paid for by a federal, state, or local governments or federal agencies should be disclosed. Travel paid by public universities out of general funds should be disclosed. One-day trips are infrequently disclosed—they should be regularly disclosed on one central site. Finally, travel paid under the Foreign Gifts and Decorations Act should be disclosed.

¹ "Congress Quietly Deletes a Key Disclosure of Free Trips Lawmakers Take," by Shane Goldmacher, *National Journal* (June 30, 2014), available at <http://www.nationaljournal.com/congress/congress-quietly-deletes-a-key-disclosure-of-free-trips-lawmakers-take-20140630>.

² Some disclosure reports on travel paid by third-parties are available from the Clerk of the House at http://clerk.house.gov/public_disc/giftTravel.aspx; some foreign travel reports are available from the Clerk of the House at http://clerk.house.gov/public_disc/foreign/index.aspx.

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Additionally, if travel is on a private plane, the member should disclose that fact. CODEL travel should be disclosed quickly and at one central location. Travel costs across the board should be disclosed. And, in the House Statement of Expenditures, the destination should be published alongside travel information.

More broadly, all ethics disclosures from the House of Representatives should be available at one central location. It should be a trivial task for citizens to search across all filings concerning a member of Congress. Instead, information is spread out among multiple websites. At a minimum, a central ethics site should describe what information is available from the government and where it can be found. Documents should be searchable and published in a structured-data format. And a central website should include ethics documents that are publicly available but not published online,³ or are online but not in structured-data formats⁴.

We hope that the House of Representatives will look to Title I of the Transparency in Government Act, introduced by Rep. Mike Quigley (D-IL), for inspiration on addressing disclosure of financial, travel, and gift information, and improved access to the statement of disbursements.⁵ In the meantime, the Committee on Ethics should review and overhaul how it disseminates information to ensure proper notice is given to the public. It also should retract its policy on non-disclosure of privately-funded travel in annual financial disclosure reports until the Committee consults with the public.⁶

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you further. Please contact Aaron Scherb, director of legislative affairs, Common Cause, at 202-736-5726 or Daniel Schuman, policy director, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, at 202-408-5565.

Sincerely yours,

Campaign Legal Center
Center for Effective Government
Center for Responsive Politics
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW)
Common Cause
Democracy 21
Government Accountability Project
OpenTheGovernment.org
Public Citizen
Sunlight Foundation
Taxpayers for Common Sense

cc: Members of the Committee on House Ethics
The Honorable John Boehner
The Honorable Nancy Pelosi

³ These documents include legal expense fund disclosures, statements arising from the negotiation for future employment for a member of Congress, and franked materials.

⁴ For example, the House Statement of Disbursements, available at <http://disbursements.house.gov/>.

⁵ H.R. 4245.

⁶ The Committee may find that the public finds uses the annual filings as a jumping off point to look for more detailed disclosure.