September 3, 2013 Notes

Good morning.

This is the second Government-wide Travel Advisory Committee Meeting. I want to thank everybody for joining us today. We have some interesting topics to cover today, but before we do that, I would like to go around the room and introduce everybody or have them introduce themselves. We have David Flynn, Mark Stansbury, Emily Morrison, Dane Swenson, Paul Somogyi, Fred Schwartz (will be joining us within an hour).

Who do we have on the phone? Erin Choquette, Brian Nichols, and Cindy Heston.

Well once again thank you for joining us. I guess the first thing I would like to ask is “are there any outstanding items that you have from the last meeting that you would like to start off with?”

I remember talking about the lodging per diem -- the question on the number of days in which we exceed the lodging rate; the standard rate which is currently $77; the number of occasions and/or reasons that travelers could exceed the lodging rate?

This is standard, you know, business data from defense management. DoD has all the vouchers and processes the vouchers.

We looked for all fiscal year 2012 data in the ETS system. We looked at the number of nights that it exceeded the per diem based on the locality, which were 610,000 days, which works out to be about 3.67% days were over per diem. You can be a few dollars over. That came just a tad short of about $20 million.

Of the total spent for lodging, which I think is more static, it is about $1.448 billion on lodging in 2012 with $20 million exceeding the per diem rate.

So for the Department of Defense, we spent about $20 million where we exceeded the per diem. We have been up and down this road before. We look at some of the vouchers and usually there is justification, like something going on in the town. To make this clear, it was over per diem but still within regulation. In order to exceed the per diem rate, it has to be approved. Without approval, you can still exceed the per diem but will not be reimbursed for the difference. Travelers should know in advance if they are approved to exceed the per diem rate before they go on official travel.

I believe we will do a data call that will deal with emergencies, which will be sent out shortly, hopefully within the next couple of months ago and will be related to more agencies and how they go over the per diem or not, and how they will mitigate that if at all possible.

Any other open items from the last meeting? Silence.

Okay. So I want to ask were there any e-mails sent to the GTAC e-mail address from the last meeting?

No e-mails. I want to state that you can e-mail us at any time if you have any questions or comments or concerns. Feel free to e-mail us so that we can ensure that we address your comments.

Okay. So I think the big topic for today is going to be around “conferences”. So we will look at the definition, which there are many. Also, what is happening on the government side versus the private sector side, as far as approving conferences and controlling conference expenditures?

So I guess to start off with, what I know about the conferences , there is a lot of confusion in the government. I say that because the definition has changed many times over the last 15 years and it is not being pushed down as it changes. You have Congress involved, you have GSA, then you have the FTR, and acquisition folks who are trying to dictate what a conference is.

So there is a lot of moving parts, players involved with conference travel, and now the definition is not staying constant. Reporting on something that does not stay constant is difficult. I think what we are trying to do today is to look at the definition of conference that has been proposed to the Senate; so that we can give them some ideas and advice about what should or should not be included in the definition. Mark, do you have any insight?

Lockheed Martin -- they make up a lot of separate companies. Each one is different. Trying to centralize this was difficult; executives want to control their events and budgets themselves. Executives wanted to know how much they were spending on meetings and events. We could not give them an answer for a lot of the business areas so we put a committee together. The biggest struggle was the funding of the events. In a nutshell, an event is anything that you have a contract with from an external source.

Again this is specific to Lockheed Martin. Every company is different depending on how they are made up, including the conference, training, efficient developments, holiday parties, events, award ceremonies that require a contract for the purpose of the policy, which does not apply to catering, or meeting sales, must be signed. That is the long version if you have a contract with an external source, it will meet the definition of a conference. You have to go through an approval process in which the sources have to be needed, along with an established procurement mechanism before they are authorized. We have a contract that is reviewed and put together by legal and external third parties; attorneys that specialize in contracts and put together a template and an addendum so we are not signing hotel contracts. We were one of the larger ones to negotiate a corporate level contract.

When we have the contract, it limits the liabilities. The Center for Leadership Excellence (CLE), the employees go there for training and stay on-site. It has conference rooms and so forth. If it can go into the CLE, the event will go there. The CLE coordinates with my team when events are registered, we can go to the CLE. They will take over and manage the events; if not, they go through our process-the external sourcing process. We have an agreement set up with the audiovisual, so they can utilize -- the big thing is we do not want to take the control away from the meeting planner. This can take 3-4 business days even to the highest bidder as long as the price is right, it’s within the law and it is reasonable competition. We have seen success with this process. We have more meetings registered that are actually flowing through the whole process. We are 65% compliant for the acquisition process. A lot were registered for the event.

We have seen the compliance numbers go up. We are able to report that we are not spending so much on meetings and events. Everything has arrived at competition or corporate agreements. We are not spending for certain things so it seems to be working. But is not as secure for the travel program, but it is getting better.

That sounds good.

I have a couple of questions.

When you go out and source for that? Are there is conference fees associated with this? Do you source for a great room rate and a fee? Does your room rate include some of the activities that fund for the conference room and that sort of stuff? How do you source for that?

We do not go to an external conference; this is a Lockheed Martin conference. There are no fees. There may be an attendee registration fee that we pay for the event online that is established by the meeting planner. It can be modified to say that we need $10 per attendee to help us pay for so and so. We have a meeting card that they have to register to pay for certain things, such as audiovisual, catering or whatever, but as far as the room blocks, as far as registering, and attendance, this is how many rooms that we need, it is a learning environment, and that is why we go to the hotel directly. We think we will need 40 rooms and a conference room of a certain size for three nights, and we will utilize catering services and negotiate whatever the planner asks for when they register the event and the requirements that they need.

I hope that answers your question.

We are looking at the conference rate, the under 25%, we are thinking about doing away with that. By regulation now you can spend up to 125%.

The argument is, you got to rate the conference free? How does that tie in?

We have a 300% rollover that we utilize. If you go into a prearranged meeting and per diem by certain amount that is what I am talking about.

How did they look at the conferences or events not hosted by Lockheed Martin? Is there any data on that?

External conferences?

There is no data. That is left up to the department manager to decide who can go and how and if it is in the budget.

How does the government classify it? So much TDY travel falls into that category. That is not a meeting, you register for a conference. It is educational, or whatever. You’re classifying that as individual travel, I suspect. You are not planning an event where you have registration for 10 or more people.

Right now, what it is coming down to is, any time there is travel involved, whether there is more than one attendee, it is considered to be a conference.

More than one attendee?

Yes.

Does anybody else use this definition of meeting?

I could not find a number on this one; I looked internally. There is also the international convention association and meeting specialist. If there is a number associated with that, we do not have that. What we have gone into over the last year, is instead of looking at how does this impact the government being productive, how does it impact our mission and the people.

From an industry perspective, piggybacking on what you said, we look at the numbers, but if there are 10 rooms or more it is a meeting. Anything under 10 rooms, we typically do not negotiate. Once you get into a contract, as Mark mentioned, it’s a contractual agreement, which makes it a conference.

This is Rick. That is a pretty good statement.

Exactly.

Back in 2005/2006, they said that they wanted to limit the attendees going to a conference. A person can go to a conference and come back and does the train-the-trainer type of thing. They pushed that to all of the agencies; trying to limit the number of attendees for a conference to about 50. Most agencies tried to abide by that whenever they could, but you have a lot of different missions within the agency. Just because one person is going there to gain knowledge in one area, another part of the agency may get knowledge in a totally different area at the same conference -- two different types of knowledge sets that we transfer. That is the part where we are losing -- limiting the number of attendees and trying to put a dollar threshold on the conferences.

It used to be better defined in terms of what a conference is and where the restrictions apply. It sounds like if you attend an event, how can you restrict? It is mission-critical based on the agency need? To your point, maybe internal conferences may be confused. When it comes to external conferences, we should separate the two (internal and external) for the purpose of trying to help and meet the agency’s mission.

You will see what we have as the current conference definition on the screen. I will read it to you really quick. A meeting, retreat, seminar, or event that involves attendee travel. The term conference also applies to training activities that are considered to be conferences (5 CFR 410.404). This is out of the Federal Travel Regulation. A couple of things to keep in mind, specifically, the Federal Travel Regulation only applies to when people leave their duty station. One of the key words in here, keeping in line with that, is when they travel. Unless we are talking about people who are leaving the duty station, we have no authority to define or talk about conferences.

Okay? That is the first piece. The second piece is that the Federal Travel Regulation has a secondary piece or regulation that is actually in a pending state. I will hand that out in a second. It is actually different data points; with more clarification on the explicit different types of travel that federal travelers use. Attending conferences other than training and the other is for training. Those are pieces of the federal travel definition, which has been cited and many formal documents including the Office of Management and Budget OMB memo M-12-12, which references back to the travel, noting that at the same time a lot of the data collection is associated with the conferences, whether or not people are traveling.

If you notice in the definition, it has the caveat of the travel. The question back to Mark is, are you only collecting or working with internal control or with the travel, or looking at events, or expenditures associated with the events?

We do not have any controls in place for that. We control the budget as managers. To determine if the employees can go to a certain conference and spend whatever; we do not have any control over that.

This is Brian, we take an identical approach. We view travel for external conferences as one of many reasons why a traveler goes on the road. I can visit a client at an internal office or conference. Those fall into the general business travel which policies and controls apply. Conferences are different, similar to what Mark described. If it is an internal sponsored or paid for event above a certain size threshold, we have policies and approval protocols to make sure that the events warrant having an event and recurring expense. We have a formal sourcing process that has to be followed to select the event and approve the final destination and cost. We do not control external conference attendees, which is different than any other type of travel.

Now I would add that this is common what Mark described and what I described across the private sector.

Does anyone have any questions or comments or thoughts? The goal is to try to com e up with a best practice.

Maybe the question is, looking at this, why is the definition here? Why should this type of travel, individual travel be treated differently versus other types of travel? Is it worth having the definition to begin with?

Mark?

I think the definition is a good definition.

However, I think when you start putting thresholds on the definition, which is restricting agencies from meeting the mission.

Now we in the FTR, have a requirement of 5-6 different types of travel for trip purposes? A conference is in one of those.

But as we look into the definition, it gets more scrutinized. All of the purposes turn into one trip purpose when the definition involves travel.

Then how do you report what is a regular meeting when they have to do with your customer because it is more than one person? In most cases, how do you justify that as being a conference? And then how do you report the trip as being a conference?

This is Rick. Maybe the whole definition of conference has to be split.

This is Emily. I wrote down two things. There is confusion between training and conferences and it is strictly travel purpose for the training -- external versus internal conference. Between those issues, there is a lot of confusion. Different approaches by different agencies and different opinions within an agency on how you report it. What category? That are the bigger struggles that I have seen.

So much training goes into an eight-hour day. There is actual training that is going on.

What defines a conference?

The exercise today is to get recommendations back to the Senate as they look at the bill that was passed in the House. So they asked GSA, can you help us clarify some of this since the people from GSA started the advisory committee. Perfect thing to look at. What we will do today is look at the definition, to see if this is best to be broken out into several parts. We can get that recommendation over to them or back to GSA.

To piggyback on what you said David, there has been a lot of discussion in the department over conferences within the past year. I think the definition is important, as far as what is reportable, since we now have reporting requirements and dollar thresholds and that sort of thing. All of the things that you said, what constitutes a conference is the number of people and the purpose for which you are going to be at a conference. We had a lot of discussion on what a conference is or is not and categories of things that may not be reportable. Does someone have to get a certification to perform a function, i.e. Legal or whatever? You have to attend a conference.

There are a lot of things. You can bring a person to Afghanistan, getting people together, that is a deployment conference. I think there is congressional and public interest on what is a conference? I think the definition is important because what we are reporting and what should be excluded.

And this is to clarify what Dane said with specific numbers. M-1212 came out and it required agencies to report and approve anything over $100,000 for a conference. We use this definition right now. Anything that was over $500,000, the Administrator would have to say that is okay. We are applying a waiver and I have reviewed and approved and have personal accountability that is put into place. Those are some of the things that Dane is talking about. That memorandum came out last year.

Following that, Congress put in place a continuing resolution last spring. There are reporting requirements following the same definition of every agency for a $20,000 threshold and so whenever there is a conference following this definition, each agency has to turn to the Inspector General to make sure there is no fraud and waste; a conference using the definition again, a threshold of $20,000.

This summer, the House bill which I will hand out here in a little bit, uses the same definition; and states that conferences do not necessarily include training activities. That is gray, which. I cannot interpret explicitly. That uses a threshold of $10,000, which includes everything associated with the travel, meals, and incidental expenses such as the facilities and so on. That is what Dane is talking about when he talks about certain thresholds and triggers and how the definition is used for reporting requirements.

Emily touched on that just a little bit, I think where you started were that in the private sector, there are internal controls that are specifically what we are talking about with these documents. Mark elaborated on the process and features associated with those internal controls. Emily talked a little bit about some of the reporting requirements of the data field, and the actual internal processes and procedures that each agency has for those internal controls. Each agency owns those. The point is I think you hit this clearly. Are you targeting the right things? Where are the exemptions? That is where the conversation needs to go. It takes a while to pick up all of the pieces, but the question is, is it the right place? Can every agency be accountable for every dollar on this type of activity? That is something that you guys can talk about. Are there certain numbers of people? Dollar thresholds? Certain activities that should be excluded? What are the similarities? How do you mold that into a different way? Or is it okay the way it is?

This is Patrick Moscaritolo. Should the definition involve payment?

No.

That is defined by each agency, which is an area around where you work. For example, GSA identifies the duty station for me. I work out of this building here in Washington DC, so my duty station is Washington DC and all the counties that touch Washington DC. If I travel and I am conducting business for more than 12 hours, on a particular day, or if I stay for a long time over the course of 2-3 days, that is where travel applies.

What Paul said in the memorandum, you can break that up into external and internal.

Yes. One of the problems is with some of the definitions. If a conference is held here in DC, and the Department of Defense is holding it, half of the people are traveling and half are not. The full cost of the conference is the threshold of the dollar amounts. There is a caveat in the House bill that has passed. If the conference is held at a government facility, it has certain exceptions to it. What is the difference between what they are proposing and what is happening now?

The exception is a government facility and there’s a gray area about the training, internal on a new system or service and things like that. I cannot determine whether or not that is the same, but basically, the difference is the dollar threshold and being held in a government facility as opposed to a ballroom or a conference center or something like that.

Are the words training and educational, interchangeable or do they mean the same thing?

I do not know the answer to that question. The government defines the way that training and education are used in conjunction with each other. 5 CFR 10-404 explicitly talks about having a clear training plan, agenda, and certification and things like that associated with it.

So that is how the training act is defined. There is a very clear continuing education requirement or certification or a lot of difference and classifications that government employees have that requires these classes and training to get certified. It is not only that. For example, if they have a new system, that they need all their people to be trained on pushing buttons to do this or that; that would be considered training under the training act. It would be clear to what their objectives are, and there is a specified procedure to go through.

How does that complicate your life?

It can be easier for everybody to know the direction that we are going in.

There is an obvious workload.

It is the dollar threshold that is killing us. Because the definition goes down to a single attendee that is traveling, they are consolidating of the reports. What we have to do to is to ensure that we are not out of compliance. Every single travel has to be reported and we have to go across all of the 27 offices and consolidate everything to ensure we do not have a threshold issue. We have a $20,000 threshold. Then there is the $100,000 threshold, which will go through me and then upper management. And so there is a lot of work involved. It does not take much to get to $20,000. $1500 is a pretty good number for an average trip of three nights. Maybe you have 12 or 13 people.

If it is down to the individuals that will be classified, how will you do the reporting using industry practices that we have shared? External conferences that you attend is individual travel, GSA, IRS those are the conferences for people. That is a conference. How about you have a trip purpose, the second one a hosted conference and the other, a non-hosted conference

You go individually and you do not scrutinize. You only report on conferences that you post.

That is tricky because you put a lot of ownership on the traveler. The trip purpose is tricky. If I register for a conference, I do not necessarily know if they have gone to the conference for a different reason on four different days ago, so there are nuances for the approval process.

How do you report?

All individuals that go to the conference that sign up are on their own.

That is part of the issue that we are having.

Exactly. What is the purpose of the thresholds? It becomes cumbersome for the workload.

Exactly.

You should have a clear definition for the industry practices, for the thresholds and whatever you feel necessary that is dependable and makes common sense. Right now it is not making any common sense.

I like the idea of keeping the host and the non-host separate; if we have a budget for the conference or the meeting?

We have no travel budget; we have external events up to the threshold approved by a supervisor.

You look at the scrutiny behind the travel budget anyway.

You know you look at an organization like HHS. They have certificates that they have to maintain every year. Going to the conferences, they get credit hours towards their certificate. If they are not allowed to go to the conferences to get the certificate, how will they maintain their standing as an employee or in a particular profession?

Are there any comments on the phone?

I have a question in my mind that I’m trying to answer. What is it that is in the public interest and if we know, what the concern is, do we have a definition that fits? We are trying to put our arms around reports. We want accountability and transparency. What do we want to put the spotlight on? Right now you are saying meeting, retreat or seminar. Two or more people together. I do not think this is a worthy issue to get started.

The issue started when we are getting a lot of legislatures saying there is a cost for everything. There are reporting requirements because we have a broad definition. What is it from a taxpayer perspective that they want the federal government to get their arms around? Over regulating a process to account for any possible situation and cost? The taxpayers do not want that to happen; but if you spend a certain amount of dollars to go to a conference, there should be a legitimate purpose for the conference, training or whatever that you can show and quantify. There is no problem with that. You do not want the bubble baths with champagne and going to play golf. That is personal accountability. People will lose their jobs immediately at Lockheed Martin. There is a personal responsibility that has to take place and sometimes it does not happen. For example, the GSA. I do not know about the government but from the private sector, well, that is my personal opinion.

I think it is a matter of leadership and accountability, whoever is sponsoring the event needs to be involved. There are things that we can and cannot do. I think it is accountability and professionalism. Regulations are not going to solve that.

We have to let people do their jobs.

Absolutely. Otherwise they will go into a shell.

If they are scared of pulling the trigger, which is happening now, they do not know what they can or cannot do. This is not helping. We are here to get the industry best practices and share that. The controllables are for the posted events.

From a legislative perspective, there should be controls, but if it is a hosted meeting and an agency has a conference for 500 people, then yes, somebody should look at that and make sure it is appropriate, having that in a right venue. But if I am an individual that needs to attend a training conference there should be empowerments to the individual management and agency levels, which would be able to assess whether that is a good return on investment for the trip. Individuals, 3-4 levels above, are an efficient way to control those types of systems or definitions.

That is an interesting topic. There are no authorities for any agency to write regulations for conferences. In GSA, we write the travel regulation and like I said earlier, that talks about the rights of the employee when they travel and the requirements of the agencies to provide for that employee when they travel on the government's business, so to speak. At the same time, there is a requirement that the agency is acting in an efficient manner and meeting their ethical requirements. There has been fraud and abuse, specific ethical lapses, and procurement rules that were broken.

As far as the certain types of speakers, there are no rules explicitly written about that. No one has authority to write conference rules. There are procurement rules, travel rules, and ethics and laws. Those are the three areas and they get blended together. The big entity that everybody calls a conference, sometimes a conference looks different in a lot of different ways. Typically when people speak of a conference they have something in mind. I will not say what I have in mind, but they do not look the same. People have the tendency to go to the far extreme on one end, and when people are not looking what they would like to do, they ask for approval to do something within the same organization, they look at something at the far extreme. The problem is it gets into one pile called conferences. What is a conference? What is the definition that is the problem here? When people try to pull back the reins, they think about the far extreme. That is the exaggerated area that is trying to be stopped.

We understand that, but how do you help the areas in the middle that we have influence? How can you help mold this so it is not going to get pulled all the way back? How do you have influence to say this in a way that everybody can articulate it? Identify? And know what you are talking about?

This is Paul Somogyi. This goes back to professionalism and management. We have taken offense to resorts being excluded or being perceived as being bad. We cannot go to Las Vegas because it’s perceived as being a “bad” territory. On the basis of budget, we have a budget for a conference. This is how we will spend the money wisely, guess what? Orlando in July is a great deal. Scottsdale in Arizona, we get $90 rates. That is smart. If the purpose of the meeting is to inspire, why not bring in some fun and not be scrutinized. You stay within the budget, you got to the goal and the mission is being achieved. That is common sense.

You will have to define something that they can measure. It has to be a number and a certain amount of money. The problem is the extreme. At 20,000, I am shaking my head.

To go back to the original problem trying to be solved, is this program an efficient use of dollars for the desired business results? That is the simple question being asked at any meeting or conference or group movement of people from one place to another. Is it a good use of taxpayer dollars for the benefits that you are getting? It has to be more subjective for the leader of the area to say we are above the threshold. We are spending a certain amount of dollars. What is the desired benefit for the outcome? It has to be a dollar threshold. You can have a meeting for 1000 people, which will be different if the meeting were held in Washington DC versus having the same 1000 people go to Las Vegas.

At a certain point it gets to the threshold, and you say do you reduce the amount of people or the costs?

If you can put a dollar amount, it may not matter.

The federal government has to have something that they can measure.

Are we in agreement with the dollar figure versus a number and the definition of conference? Looking at the industry definition of the conference, I’m trying to get a sense of where we are going with the conversation.

I think they should adopt the industry standard, personally. I think it would help in the reporting. Once this goes into law like you said Emily, there is so much more work. It can be overwhelming.

Counterproductive.

If there is a clear definition, put it in place now and the reporting can fall after that. That is not difficult, I do not think.

A lot of agencies right now are building a SharePoint server and other stuff to report on the data. They keep going off of the word of ADA and the anti-efficiency act. So that is scary for the federal agencies. Nobody wants to fall into that bracket.

So do you say we use the industry standard?

That is the definition. Yes.

Let's say you have 55 for the industry conference but they are coming from Health and Human Services, IRS that is TDY. That should not be specific at that meeting.

Talk to David about that one.

Why is that an issue?

27 different components within HHS. I have two people within each component. They report to themselves. But you have to give us a status now, because it is a conference and we do not want any violations. That is something that we are doing manually right now. But they think this is within my ability to do this.

And then you have four people times the average of $1500 per trip. You can do the math.

It is within the budget.

The reporting requirement is the department requirements.

You have the accountability to report for the whole department. Emily has that for hers, and Dane has for all of DoD. All of the components looking at smaller numbers grow up to the department. Okay? That in itself is a lot of the problem.

A lot comes in at the Bureau level.

They get their separate appropriations from Congress. NIH is separate from HHS. We should not report on anybody but ourselves because this is our own money.

And now they are being scrutinized a lot.

You know I think even if you put any type of threshold on it, you still have to do a consolidation of all travel expenses. CDC may have 50 travelers and then NIH only has two. Neither one has hit the threshold. You still have to consolidate it. Let's say you have 27, but there is a threshold of $20,000, how do you measure that?

You cannot consider the contract.

Okay so it is getting from a reporting perspective you're giving the data?

Yes, and the other expenses associated with it -- registration fees that are done through procurement processes and the funding.

Yes.

Not all of them use the same system.

Maybe we would want to change the definition here. This is individual travel as far as I am concerned.

Exactly -- let's change the definition and make some progress here.

I do not know. I think it makes things more simplified.

It is important to focus on just what Paul said. The policy with the definition is going to drive the process and then behind that, there will be systems or a system, or different pieces that can be built to facilitate the process. You have to understand the process, the procedures in place that need to be there in order to get the point. We want to stay on the front side with the policy and the definition.

That is absolutely the key because you cannot fix a process or program if you have a fuzzy policy.

I agree.

I am with you.

When you talk about expenses, it is not just the cost of travel. It is all expenses related to the conference, includes sponsorship, hosting, attendees, publication costs. We are trying to come up with those working full-time on the conference, we are trying to get that together and get the process for different thresholds that wind up at the major command level for certain conferences. Particularly where this thing breaks down a little bit to is, if you use the definition now, if you have an event that involves attendee travel on a bus, and go into training. Okay? That is an event. We deploy people, bringing the guard reserve together, something like this, it is a meeting or whatever. And so the definition gets us into the reporting across all of the travel. So we are trying to make sense of this thing, and it is not just travel, the conference thing is bigger than travel. We travel for other reasons, other reasons other than conferences.

I do not want to confuse the issue more, but it is complex. Like a Rubik’s cube. It has to do with dollars and the number of travelers. Somewhere along the way for this purpose, why are we bringing people together? I thought all along it was to save federal funds, protecting the taxpayers from events that are expensive and etc., but not to restrict the purpose of the agency’s mission.

So it is a little after 10:30 am right now; this is a perfect time to take a break. I will propose a 10 min. break. Let's meet back at 10:45 AM. Let's work on agreements and redefine the definition of a conference. Conference is on a break until 10:45 am EST.

So we are back from the break now. We can start looking at redefining the definition of a conference. There was a lot of discussion on that. Hearing about the issues behind the conferences, within the government and looking at the definition that we have posted on the board now, what recommendation should we move forward with? What separates conference from hosted versus non-hosted?

Looking around the table, we have a lot of heads nodding yes. Maybe we can dive into that more and figure out what parts of hosted versus non- hosted conferences should be in the definition. I will open it up to see what comments t we have on the definition, especially if you want to break it out.

Anybody? Do you think it is not a good idea to break out the definition?

How would that work for you with the 27 different entities?

So if you ask me about hosted versus non hosted, I think it is definitely for non- hosted, if it is within the budget for travel, whether it’s a meeting, conference, training, education. That is the budget and the manager should be accountable for the budget, the line item.

Now when I say accountability, the travelers should always use the prudent person concept when using taxpayer dollars and things like that as well. But if I look at hosted conferences, it is something to maintain that is easier to report, so I like the idea of splitting it up.

In the Department of Health and Human Services, there are a lot of grants. Anytime grant funding is used for a conference, we have to report on that as well. That goes down to the grantees, and policies down further, not just internal HHS employees and it goes to the grantees, which is thousands of people under the grantee programs. We are getting commerce and for the reporting requirements, we can do this as hosted, since it is easier to control who the attendees are, the location, and the costs associated with the events.

If we had a box and redefined what is involved. So then it is clear. DoD has a process now to estimate in advance, based on the estimation, which basically mirrors the OMB M-12-12 guidance that came out, which has to be approved in advance. It becomes foggy as to what has to be approved in advance and what costs are included?

It would be very helpful to have everybody understand what the definition is for a conference, and whether that is a public perception to make sure that we cover those things by which generated all of the discussion around the federal government spending on the conferences.

The hosted conference is specific to one entity of the government. To your point, you could have a hosted conference but you have 18 different entities sending different people.

Reporting for hosted conferences is for the agency that is actually hosting the conference. If NIH hosts the conference, it has the responsibility for them to report back to me on the total cost for the conference whether there are multiple agencies or just NIH. Do we need to call that agency out, as a specific host?

Are there cases where agencies put together the hosted conference?

That happens too. That has to be clear.

We will not get into the definition now. Which agency will own the responsibility of the reporting?

I know for the agency, we co- host with the other agencies. It is a lot easier because we have more control into the government-hosted rather than the non-hosted.

There are thousands of conferences that are non-hosted. Should we go around the room to agree? Hosted versus non-hosted?

Just for clarification.

This would be the recommendation made to the Senate?

And GSA, okay.

Okay. Does everybody want to go around the room? For those on the phone, what we will do now is go around the room and actually I guess take a vote on whether or not we agree that the definition of a conference needs to be split into two buckets; one being a hosted bucket for a conference and the other being non-hosted. Hosted being anything that government agency puts on them and non-hosted is where the government agency is not hosting.

So we will go around the room and take a quick vote.

Mark. It should be hosted.

Okay.

Claudia. Yes.

Fred? Yes.

Emily? Yes.

Rick? Yes.

Paul? Ye

Dane, Yes, provided we can go further to define the definition of a conference.

Okay.

Nan? Yes. I agree.

On the phone?

This is Cindy, I agree to split.

Brian? Yes. Split.

Okay.

Erin, Yes, it should be split.

Myself, Yes, and Kathy, are you on the line?

No, she’s not on the line.

Then it is unanimous. We have everybody in agreement to split or give the recommendation to split the definition of conference into two buckets; hosted and non-hosted. I think that is good. We can go into redefining into as to what those buckets should be and then we can build controls into the new definitions for each of these buckets.

This is Emily; can you e-mail the purpose definition?

It identifies the biggest confusions of conference other than training. They are two different purposes. The definition of a conference includes training. What does that mean for each agency? Are they identifying it the same way?

You know to have a conference and the definition of the training under the conference definition is creating confusion.

It is a good idea for the trip purpose to call it out for training. It should not fall under the conference.

It does do that on the trip purpose. This is clear.

Got it.

But then it goes up into the conference definition.

A lot of travelers are confused

Is it training, meeting the definition under the purpose of am I supposed to report that or not? I want to go back to and maybe Craig has an answer for this. Where did the five trip purposes come from? Why were they established?

There is a portion of the standard data elements. GSA identified that every agency should collect standardized data elements for the reporting. And so some of the things that are also included besides the trip purpose-everybody should have authorization for the travel. The date of the authorized travel and other elements. Identifiers for employee ID. You can figure out who is authorized to go where, when and why are they going?

Those are the basic data elements across all government that everybody, all of the agencies should be capturing. So that makes reporting up the chain easier, which works well, as we found out earlier today? The point is each agency can further identify more elements underneath these as long as they roll up. For example one of the elements is mission.

That is the big pile that should be enlarged for the amount of travel. That is, the more clarity that we need at the top level, but if you are an organization that does reimbursable work or does many different types of work like HHS which has 27 different components, I think they will have at least 27 different types of missions within the department level. So they can clarify more if they want to but we need to roll them all up into one so that can be collected, but these are from the standardized elements developed by the government, which are used for travel by the agencies. Now the point is, they have to be put in correctly and further if you going to identify a particular event, that is part of the problem. That’s what Emily and David talked about earlier, reporting is by every agency on all of your conferences. So it would have to be -- you would have to identify what each event is and where each person is going to and summarize those events, and report at that level, not just conferences.

We spent this much money and so many people went to the conference. This data element is designed to do that. It is not designed to identify 15 people or authorize $150,000 to go to the next conference where we have other people going to Y, Z. That’s kind of the newer area, although that is in the system now if agencies want to identify that. This t will take time and effort and there are definitions associated with it.

Okay we have been reporting on this trip purpose code for a while now so I think people are used to these.

They were started in 2009 as they are right now.

As you were saying, there are a lot of trip types that will roll off these purpose codes. I think when you look at the definition, I mean there is still a lot of confusion on the travelers side on when do I consider this training or education versus conference. So that is something to consider when you look at the definition or trip purpose of training, as well, because, as you see, that is a huge piece of the conference. A lot of people go to conferences to get credit hours to keep their certificates current. Their professional certificates whether its CPE credits for accounting or for any specialized credit or anything else. They go to these conferences and they need to go to these conferences to do that.

That is maybe where we could cite examples in the non- hosted conference section, which is the conference section which we should redefine. There are areas that we can write off the bat go to 300 3.1 and start on the non- hosted, call it hosted and go to non- hosted where we cite examples, grants, certifications, things like that.

You go to meeting you go back to trip purpose codes.

Okay. How are we going to tighten the definition? Let’s focus on hosted conferences first?

Let’s call this a hosted conference; it applies I guess, but it involves attendee travel to an agency hosting an agency sponsored event.

But then the term conference also applies to training activities that are considered to be conference training, should that come out? Training should be almost a stand-alone trip but should it be considered a hosted conference?

And training, can we go back to your definition?

External is basically coming out of the travel budget for events.

Our definition is conference, training leadership development class, holiday party, award ceremony, banquet, similar activities that requires a contract with an external supplier or internal contract with the center for leadership excellence for the purposes of this policy determining events and does not apply to catering for Lockheed Martin facilities or meetings held in a Lockheed Martin conference room unless a contract has been signed.

I thought you wanted to exclude training to allow or not to allow the scrutiny to get certifications?

The policy maybe not so much, but obviously we are going to be coming up on using the new travel system. I mean that is really to include training. We are trying to do it through webinars so we would have travel expenses but it will be different with tracking internal training.

This is Emily. That is why I suggested threshold rather than necessarily targeting the number of traveling employees.

So as we go through this exercise of defining hosted and non- hosted, we may arrive at a conclusion that one may just focus on uses and something more; generally checks and balances and not tied to a hosted versus non- hosted, if the person has a reason to be at a conference whether it's hosted or non- hosted. Some criteria that allows that person or not allows the person to attend whether it's hosted or non- hosted, we may decide after that-the way of bureaucracy hosted versus non- hosted or take it to the personnel department.

Exactly. We have to find out whether it was legitimate or not. We can try to help. If you hit a quarter of a million dollars or $200,000, you start evaluating hosted, not hosted, whatever, but I think a valid threshold has to come into play.

How about if we take non-hosted out of the equation?

That would certainly help.

That’s great, but how do we determine it?

The question I have is, “Is there a difference between hosted and non-hosted?”

I think we have more insight into all the costs involved, which is what David was articulating: qualitative differences or entities.

I understand. I'm wondering “category of meetings” whatever you want to call it. There has to be some flexibility within your management to make decisions on whether or not the employees should or should not go to an event or whether it is training or conference or whatever.

I agree with that but what if the event is not hosted?

Like I said before, you got to have accountability on that and I think that's probably something that's been lacking in the government, holding people accountable, but I don't think we can fix that issue.

Even in hosted events, an annual convention means 26 employees in my office are going there or everybody needs to attend certain situations. Just because it is hosted does not mean everybody goes.

I think accountability is still there whether hosted or non- hosted. Responsibility goes back to the required party.

Right now no one wants that responsibility.

I think you want to look at actual budget line items as you put your budgets together. If you are going to host an event that is going to come under your acquisition line item, I think putting it out hosted or non- hosted make sense as it ties right back to your budget line items that goes to Congress for approval. So that makes sense to keep acquisitions hosted separate and travel and training separate.

Making the distinction is important.

The way I understand the process and correct me if I'm wrong is I would think if you are hosting, your agency is putting together the elements of this travel, whether it is training, education, whatever you have those under and you have your budget. I would think it would be more of an issue on non- hosted government travel where you're spending thousands and thousands of dollars. Refer to the travel directives and focus on reporting and hosted events is that so provides information purpose codes in the first place without overwhelming or causing a burden to the agencies on the workload side.

The difference between hosted and non-hosted for recording the elements associated with conference hosted events could be determined by the agency, while if you are attending or have employees attending a non- hosted events by your organization, the data elements would only include the travel, the direct meal reimbursement, direct reimbursement for specific registration or something like that, and at that point you would not be reporting anything else. So it would be travel, transportation of the employee and any kind of registration cost associated with that event, so you would be limiting at least in this scenario, as it appears to be, limiting the reporting requirement of the agency for those hosted by someone else as opposed to those you’re hosting yourself and then you have to do all this reporting around that particular event, such as shuffling the top of the meal, the cost of meals, the catering, the speakers, all that kind of stuff. So I see from a reporting perspective as being a big difference other than you are reporting in your threshold, things like that could be the same or maybe different. I don't know but that is kind of how you put these piles together. So far and I think that is not a bad idea to keep in mind having different buckets but knowing what the data elements in those are part of the discussion.

This is Emily. Some of the other basic costs you mentioned about non- hosted, travel, registration, meals, all of those expenses, and various reports are required to turn in with the trip report, so to me it is almost like we are now doing double work on the non-hosted instead of multiple places; that was kind of my angle for focusing on the hosted.

Of the spending level for the trip purpose it is reported separately.

This is Patrick. Basically it is up to GSA, since these recommendations go up to the Senate, almost like you are going to need FAQs so they can differentiate. I mean this is the way you broke it out which makes a lot of sense. But if you just say break out into these buckets, you would have to really have FAQs and they are still getting the accountability travel report mechanism type back to the agency’s overall budget. There are ways of not being less accountable.

The current record for reporting requirements, where agencies are already reporting their purpose codes and the spending associated with those. So, we have a conference if you will, there are certain agencies in the current bill, also who report to us right now. So there is law enforcement that has quite a bit of accountability and that being said, they are trying to bring it down to the highest level.

I think Rick said the hosted events are one of the targets. I think the initial reaction is to start having these conversations. I mean that was an issue coming up in the new findings for the hosted events; really having oversight on those.

This is Mark. One of the things wrong in travel was the amount of money they were spending on internal meetings and some of the things I am not saying that Lockheed did. One of the concerns we had as well was if you don't have the structure around hosted events, you have non- procurement personnel, administrative assistants or whatever setting and managing meetings just because management says I need to have a conference or a meeting set up. They would call the front desk of a hotel and sign paperwork for $50,000 for this meeting and the procurement professional calls us for the approval of $50,000 and ask can you process this?

The administrative assistant doesn’t know any better. Certainly Lockheed Martin didn’t do that but this is what we want to prevent from possibly happening. That is where all the focus came from having to report on the meetings, your hosted events and that is for all the reporting.

External conferences are captured in the travel system’s travel report and posted even if it involves travel. The full expense is not captured in that report so I think that does warrant a separate set of rules and oversight and I think that is a valid concern that we are trying to get away from, but if we really are being transparent and value the information from the hosted events, they are in a kind of the gray area as to what part of it might be included on the trip report and other reporting requirements, but it’s not the full picture, so I think that's fair to ask for all that information, if it's valid.

So is our mission now to come up with criteria?

You got a separate code. Trip purpose code for hosted versus non-hosted.

I think we certainly can take it from that point and create that, but you still have the issue of what’s important to identify the difference. I don't have the answer, but it’s important to distinguish the difference between training and internal conferences. We can target those but that is the pile of internal hosted events that are in the target. Is it everything? Is that part of those? I guess it is. Everything, awards, hosted training, non- hosted, a conference, you make training acceptable to everybody, who is going? How do you determine that as a manager?

If that is true, I think if you don't clearly define training versus conference, which is kind of where we are at now, it’s very gray.

Maybe there should be a subcategory for a training conference.

I am not necessarily arguing one way or the other, but I think without definitions of training and conferences it is difficult to distinguish what goes into those buckets.

An event is something that takes place in a particular city at a particular time. For example, GSA has or had the Expo, which was a conference but also a training event. Lots of agencies sent their procurement people to be trained on the latest rules, to be updated, to run the program, to understand how they purchased property and personal property, as well as how they did the disposal process for getting rid of property that was no longer necessary and put it up on to the website to be sold. It was a training event but also a conference in the big picture, because it had a great big event hall with lots of vendors and displaying the new badges and all that, all those kinds of things. So that event happened at a certain day through another day of the certain location whatever city, from the third through the seventh so that event would be reported and all the direct costs and all the indirect costs associated with that GSA would have to report.

Got it but, but that is a hosted event.

So each one of those and that is what makes it a little easier. If you are breaking it between hosted versus non- hosted you are really trying to make money on that based on tradeshows and suppliers outside the industry.

Some of this is being fueled by the GSA scandal and going way over the budget and having an event that really goes way out of the norm so maybe we have to drill down to really what went wrong, what checklist wasn't followed to allow an abuse of power and having way over the top costs.

I don't know that I can say that has happened explicitly across the board in all agencies. But I think that these documents that we have been referring to today have been the attempt to change the culture across all government to verify and to absolutely guarantee that every single agency, including the top person is being held accountable to make sure that each one of the agencies are definitively certain that they are not allowing those to happen on their watch. I think that this is a big hammer that we saw over the last 18 months or so that happened in a lot of different agencies when these things got out of hand. The government is being reevaluated and it is being reexamined, as far as whether in this conservative culture, that is absolutely certain that you need to make sure you have to do this and send this money otherwise it should not be done. It’s sort of like correcting the market when the market should correct itself, meaning things get a little higher than what it can sustain this is a correction mechanism in these documents are invoking that culture is taken seriously and so that is kind of what is going on. As far as the one particular event I know a lot about because I studied it, there were a lot of laws (no travel rules) broken in that event. There were procurement laws that were broken and there were ethics violations.

I have been in the government for about five years now and I have worked in the private sector before that and every company I worked for always had retreats, off-site meetings which helped build teams and to make sure that everyone in the organization understood the mission.

The feedback and collaborating with your peers, which you may not see seen on a daily, daily, monthly, or quarterly basis, so in my opinion, I think it's very valuable that when leaders have the ability to call off-site meetings within their organization, they can push the organization out so you have the buy in from everyone within the organization and they start looking at the workforce and I think that's what the American people really need is a more productive workforce in the government without having leaders putting constraints on your management which will really hurt the government.

I think that is key. I think it is not being so restrictive that you are hurting the mission of an agency but providing enough oversight so those checks and balances are there.

Let me recap what you guys have done. You have identified that it is important to break out hosted versus non-hosted travel to events held by other people. You have identified that training should be included with the internal events and that agencies should report what conferences they are holding when they report meetings and conferences held internally. The training should also be included in that pile. And the last thing is that this is kind of where you just started, in that there should be a threshold of reporting, a dollar threshold. So those are kind of the key big chunks. There could be more chunks. There could be refinement within those, but basically you are looking at internal events, reporting all events that are hosted by the organization and that there is a dollar threshold, not that you wouldn't collect this, but as far as reporting there is a dollar threshold.

So the question in the bill that passed the House, did they change any of the definitions that OMB used? No.

Or you have been working on?

No they referred back directly to the definition.

So, did it include training in anything?

Yes.

I just want to say one more thing. Were there any questions that came from the committee or from the staff people about changing definitions or did it just immediately go right to the definition from OMB?

From the House, there were no questions. Thank you. What committee is this? Homeland Security?

Yes.

Well not the full House.

What committee did it come out of?

I can't tell you.

Government Reform and Oversight?

I don't know.

Homeland Security?

This is Erin. I've been thinking about the comment a little while about the fact that a lot of this is already being reported in different reports. Since the information is already included in different reports, is there a way to short-circuit some of the process by just adding to the people who received those existing reports? They are getting information, but you are not creating a whole new report to give it to them.

This is Craig. The current reports are at a summary level and if you were to think about this basically like everybody that all the individuals in your agency that took a trip collectively for the purpose of the mission and flew on an airplane, what are the number of people that went and what and how much money did they spend? This is the level of the data that we currently get (very high level). I think it does incorporate a full picture of the non- hosted events as far as the dollar spent and that is why I still agree with the hosted event being broken down. It is still valid.

I guess under non- hosted, what about the cost for registration fees?

It is in the dollar threshold that all the expenses related to the conference are included; not just travel to and from, but it is still being charged to the same accounting line of the reports; which would still account for it not necessarily in the travel system itself, but as far as the spending allocation by trip or by expense type should be still accounted for.

I think that should be part of it, we can tweak it from the top-level.

All these reporting requirements are not coming to GSA and GSA is sending them to whoever the entity is. Each individual agency is responsible to post it on their website. So, if you are hosting an event, you would put that on the website. We said, here is the event, we had it at this location, and how much money it cost, etc. Basically that is the requirement and so is their waiver associated with that event by the Administrator? So as far as collecting the registration amount, we could work with agencies to figure out a way to include it and if agencies can take their data and report it to us. GSA and the trip report associated with conferences include registration fees to conferences that they continue to host, so that is kind of how they keep their own record.

I absolutely agree. Now my question is, what do we really think is a reasonable number as a threshold?

$100,000?

$500,000.

What about the approval process?

Those thresholds dictate the level of approval.

What is a realistic threshold that comes into place that proves effective oversight but at the same time does not create so much work that you spend more money on the oversight then you would if you actually held the conference?

Based on per person or in the aggregate of $10,000?

The problem with the per person number, which happens a little bit more in some agencies than others, is the number as well but sometimes you have certain events that require certain locations or certain activities associated with them that are going to really send the price up, so I think that your growth number is going to pick that up a little bit, but if you have a small number of people going to a high dollar area, you are still going to end up with that.

I guess we are still trying to define a hosted versus non- hosted conference.

You could probably write this definition without us having to do that.

I think we can identify a trip purpose code.

Right.

We can identify a purpose code we can all agree with.

Either way you are still attending a conference and the reporting associated with that is all that is different, so you’re depending on internal or external, but that is still the same thing.

Why do I need to report on my employees?

I would not send them there just to get them out of the office. It becomes part of the mission of the agency? Why do I need to report?

Are you referring to an externally hosted conference?

Externally hosted, yes.

That is my argument for not being required to report those because they are accounted.

We are already being scrutinized on the capital budget to reduce travel by 30%. So you throw this in as part of your travel budget in reducing the number of conferences you are going to ,allow managers to make decisions on what happens within the organization whether they go to training, meetings, conferences , education events?

I think that if you look back in history when there is no data, data was assumed. So if you follow that logic, would the government say we spent too much on conferences in 2010 through 2014 and in 2015 or 2018 they might increase a little bit, but what is the perception of the increase? So if you don't collect the data people are going to make it up.

A number of conferences are increasing because our reporting requirements from our 2010 levels are actually reporting higher conference expenses today, even though they are more restrictive on their conferences that we are attending.

If you separate the data, it will show if you just did hosted conferences only, which a small threshold is. So at this point; I think we should have a vote on this -- a recommendation to say let’s look at a measure on hosting a conference. Everything else is accountable, they already have guidance and they are managing their budgets. You should not have to go to an external conference. This is a recommendation of the Senate to have a new platform and guess what hosted government meetings are. It’ll be held a lot less than what what is reported.

Things like to GSA, that would have been captured under hosted.

I mean they are going to find these things that they want to see.

Plus it will be much more productive.

My comment is, let’s try looking at the number and see if that number is, let’s say the number was 200 for the next level of reporting, that eliminates 60% of the work managing it, but at the same time creates a lot of abuse as well.

You have to have your operating division sign off on about the $20,000 mark; your Deputy Secretary sign off on $100,000 mark, and then the Secretary of your agency sign off on $500,000 mark, but then as you see here, anything that is over $10,000 has to be reported to Congress and posted on the website, so everything pretty much on conference has to be reported.

Today I think that there are thousands of conferences-hosted versus non- hosted. There may be at least 75% to 80% not hosted.

This is Emily. I like the idea of taking the non- hosted conferences out of the equation and just being required to focus on hosted. I really don’t have a problem with thresholds. I think that there are limits set in there, usually and universally to agencies. I don’t know if the best way to work through or how we can get rid of non-hosted conferences.

I don't see how having multiple people look at these is really going to help. What we’re really looking at for hosted conferences is the acquisition policy and keeping it out of the FTR and then put the hosted conferences in the FMR. We keep non-hosted events in the FTR.

That is actually an interesting concept because right now there is a document called Appendix E of the FTR and that is conference planning guidelines. They are non- mandatory because there is no authority of writing the FTR for planning conferences; however we have written guidelines because there were none in the government and those include things like which are acquisition type, things like looking at multiple locations for hosting and comparison and getting bids and things like that those are all acquisitions. Pushing something into the acquisition regulations, into the FAR, would be rather difficult. There might be some leeway that could be explored managing or hosting a conference is actually a bigger and different activity than approving travel because quite frankly you don't have to travel in order to attend a conference.

So I'm asking you to speculate so some members of the Senate would see that as a positive. Right now you just kind of do it, but how do you get or make agencies or people more accountable?

I can't speculate that way. I don't know the answer to that. I would think one of the issues would be that even if members of the Senate or the committee members and their staff were amenable they would push back on this issue. How does this affect the taxpayers? Would they still be productive?

I think literally there is a thin line between internal controls and the efficiency of the administrative process. I mean that is what it’s really about. All morning long that is been bubbling up to the right threshold for the amount of administrative work in order to make sure that you don't cross the line.

Okay. Well we are approaching 12:00 right now and I think it is about time for us to take a break. I don't really want to stop the conversation. I think we have really good conversations happening right now but I think taking a break and thinking about more strategic ways to move forward after lunch and bring some energy back into our bodies. Anyway some brain food. Again let's go ahead and take a break. I'm going to propose an hour. If anyone thinks that is too long, let me know. So we can meet back in the room and on the phone at 1:00 and once we get back, we can really start getting into and talking more about the definition of conference, hosted versus non- hosted, how should we move forward, who should move forward and go from there? Any comments? No? Great. See you at 1:00. Thank you

The Government-wide Travel Advisory Committee Meeting is on a lunch break until 1:00PM EDT.

Welcome back everybody. Thank you everybody. Who is on the line?

Brian, you have to unmute yourself.

Brian, is that you?

I can hear you too.

Okay for those of you on the line, put your phones on mute, but first please identify yourself.

Brian Nichols. Okay so let's go ahead and get started.

Before the break we have some pretty good discussions going around the table and on the phone. We actually left with breaking out the definition of conference into two parts, hosted and non-hosted. I think what I was hearing is that GSA wants to take the lead on redefining hosted, hosted conferences and possibly keeping non-hosted conferences as part of the TDY.

Therefore the reporting for TDY will remain TDY and the scrutiny behind TDY as far as reducing the budget also impacts the amount of travel that falls under the category as well. Did I interpret that correctly?

If that is a recommendation, it should be made as such.

And the rest of the committee?

I want to be clear about one thing before we start. We say hosted including the training, is that all of the training?

Repeat the question.

My concern is the amount of training that we do. The Reserve wants to do a weekend drill or active-duty. Even bringing recruits and turnover is about 170,000 for the military workforce, sending them all to training. We had a big effort to think about the duty station, the PCS travel and the TDY travel. It was cheaper to do that, rather than locating the whole family, if you include travel these are huge numbers. And this will be posted to the website?

The training that you do for DoD now, is it afforded under the conference act?

There is the statutory piece in Title 5 that says if more than half of the time it is a plan organization or change of information between presenters and audience; it is all pure 100%. You know? Training right now, Title 5 we do not have to report any of this.

Is there anything in there about hosting a conference?

So there would be exclusion?

I agree. To do that it would be the difference between conference and training, it is not clear right now.

It may be clarified more since there is a definition in here when you look at this thing. It says the purpose is for education or instruction, at the time of the event or whatever. Spent on doing training, improving individual organizational performance and development is pretty obvious.

That is pretty good, I am not saying it cannot be improved on but that is pretty good.

To make sure I understand this, hosted except for training?

I think that works.

Are you taking the training out of the reporting requirement?

We are not reporting training right now.

Yes.

It is that way now. Business practices are doing this now and the statutes are set up with the current thinking without putting a huge non-intended consequence. I do not think the taxpayers will have a problem with a guardsman going to the Army for training on the weekend.

That makes sense.

Okay.

I am trying to get a better idea of the conference and the training activities. What training activities are there?

You can see the flipside of this, the starting points. Less than half is done or not done to include an individual skill.

Some jobs require training. I think that is covered, isn’t it?

It would include what I would call, training. You know? To improve or qualify you for a job or a skill. Direct performance of your duties like military policing, you go to school for military policing. I do not think if we have a broad definition, that falls under you know we have a huge employee requirement.

I have a suggestion. You have the reporting requirements $20,000 and $100,000. I recommend eliminating the $10,000 and $20,000. They are irrelevant for what is going on. For reporting purposes.

I agree.

$10,000 and 20,000 is in the legislation which will expire this month.

I do not know what will replace it and another one for $10,000.

Yes. Can we add another vote on that one? Dropping the reporting for $10,000 and $20,000?

Would you like to vote on that one right now? Okay. Recommendation will be that we eliminate the reporting requirement for $10,000 and $20,000. I guess the proposal will start at $100,000 per month. Does anybody understand it?

Yes.

Required internal controls have to be approved.

The approval process will stay the same. The reporting requirements will change here.

Okay. We will go around the room really quick.

Paul? In favor.

Dane? Yes.

Pat. Yes.

Agree.

Good.

Claudia? Yes.

Mark. Yes.

Brian? On the phone? Yes.

Cindy? Yes.

Alright.

Kathy, are you on the line?

No, she is not.

Myself is a yes.

We will recommend the reporting requirements for the hosted conferences be moved to $100,000 as a minimum instead of the $10,000 and the $20,000 is currently there.

Great.

So I guess going back to defining the training. Do we agree that the definition of training is spelled out appropriately within the current purpose?

I have a question, are these developed by GSA?

Yes. A lot of the pieces of the training that is explicitly regulatory of the law, conference is worded other than training. And so, the law itself says conferences for the purpose of training. You cannot say conferences. And that is part of the problem why the big definition in the front of the FTR says conferences for training.

If you are targeting the training conference and going to the one side that is a little bit looser in the definition of conference, this easily conference captures everything but that. Your big internal meetings and large award events, symposiums and your forums, it is not real explicit, an agenda with a certificate and all of that stuff. Your conference definition is really -- it seems to me it may be targeted towards that group of events that everybody wants to scrutinize.

That is my opinion.

And do you think that training is one of those items that are scrutinized?

Strategic planning instead of training and in line with mission, but that does not mean you do not have management meetings that are rather large. That can be off-site. It varies on each event and agency; it will have to be managed by the agency.

I guess you know, you can say that it is possible, what you described it. You can have a large management event. I did not know about $100,000. That is in the range of questionable practice if it is that big, but at the same time, some of the training events that Dane talked about are very cumbersome if you are a large organization that is about training. You know it is overkill on the administrative process.

This is Dane. The training is scrutinized, the length, personal development, every single course, it is the resourcing contacts, the instructors, the date of the course, the training materials used. It is all under budget and scrutiny. Often sometimes we send people for medical training.

For the most part, yes, if you have a class of 20, for an extended period, you could probably get to that number. The training definition takes that out the consideration for conference.

There was the discussion before we left that the training is reportable. The kind of training that we do not want to necessarily to report. There is too much other material.

I have seen events listed as conferences be converted into a training event.

Whether it be full training or they are throwing it under reimbursement, how do we factor that in? If training is excluded, how do we present all conferences being converted into training

I cannot propose how to do that. I can tell you how the GSA deals with that. Explicitly in the FTR, there are things required of agencies. They must do XYZ. For those agencies that do not do that, the first thing that we do is, we follow up with education. GSA does not have compliance authority around every single agency.

So that is where things like that get investigated; things like that are enforced rather than if it is directly in conflict and purposeful for wasting and/or avoiding reporting. It is who has responsibility for that sort of thing. While you need to be cognizant of those types of things that could be maneuvered, if someone purposely tries to do multiple things like that to go around the rules.

Can I have another example? Smart pay has always been called a conference. This year they are moving it towards a training event. All of a sudden it has been a training event rather than a conference.

A lot of people are looking at the true purpose of some of the events. Maybe in the past it did not matter as much. Now it makes a big difference as to what it is called. I do not know about that one. But I can say, if everybody is paying close attention to the true sense of all of the terminology and the website and all of the purpose codes and travel identifiers, you can make that same argument for every conference, you are going there to learn.

I do not know.

No matter what you call it, it has to meet the statutory definition of the training. If the Smart Pay conference does not meet the criteria, you can call it anything that they want, but if it does not fit the criteria, you will not get reimbursed for that.

So the announced purpose of the conference is educational and structural. They can change the purpose of the conference to make it educational half of the time it is scheduled is to exchange the information. The conferences are an exchange of information. It is conference development and so on.

You can subtly see a lot of conferences changing to report out as training to avoid scrutiny. You may not have a strong presenter, but there may be an exchange of information. Then you would be fine.

Exactly. Okay.

Are you exercising this in your agency? The non-reporting of the training?

Just DoD does.

We do this as well. I am trying to figure out, how do we move forward with training? And the conferences? Is conference the right word that we want to call this? Call it hosted events?

Conferences are external.

Well I think you can go literally to the example that David used. It was a hosted event by GSA, attended by other agencies, still has the same purpose and reporting requirements. While there may be individual. The point is, maybe this is the whole purpose, we had this discussion between Fred and I earlier, has anybody taken a look at what were the triggers that happened in the past where nobody was paying attention or things that were done wrong. People are trying to tighten. Why are you going through this? Is it really important? What are you getting out of it? The bottom line maybe what is the value of a federal employee actually attending a particular event? What is the taxpayer, organization, mission getting out of that? If you learned something, which applied to your job? Advance the mission? If it is a conference, okay report it. If it is training and you can articulate those explicitly to these exceptions, time and accountability is tighter, to the dollars that are being spent.

That is a mindset that maybe has to do about what is going on here. Even looking at the definitions closer, in order to qualify for the exception, you need to pull it down and justify it tighter. Otherwise you will not be able to do this.

That is addressed to the internal controls that we have rather than, I think travel is across the board; internal control has been tightened. Internal control has more scrutiny on all types of travel, not just conferences. There is an obvious interest in conference spending, in the last 18 months. That is where we are now.

And that is why I like the hosted event that is the trigger of the interest in the conference setting.

All of the documents are aligning towards the entity called a conference. Although the definition in 301 earlier on the page here, it is broader than that including training. If you drill down to the purpose code, there is a purpose code for conferences, and the OMB document talks about conferences, the current bill talks about conferences.

It is not identifying or trying to grasp training and the conference, they are not written that way right now.

So perhaps some of the definition issues or clarification within the FTR without really changing anything, just identifying what is selected in the data on the entity of a conference; working all the way through.

Yes. Getting back to your question, do you just focus on the conference? You identified there are external events, there are many data items. There are internal events that are hosted, external events that are just the travel associated with the registration. There is also the threshold of $100,000. The trigger or the reporting of the internal and then the question is, does this training belong in this reporting cycle?

Does training belong in the reporting cycle? I think this is the last piece; we talked about all of the others. It looks like this will be the next point.

So in here the definition of conference includes training. I see it summarized on page 6 of HR 313.

That is right. It does have an exclusion below that, regarding the government facility. For example, that would exclude the reporting of the foreign language classes and others like that.

It would have to say something, not held entirely at a government facility or contracts.

Okay.

For instance, the Reagan Building.

You can have a big event in that building and it would be exempt, for example.

Okay. So I think what we want to do is, instead of calling it a conference, we want to call it a hosted conference.

Yes. Government hosted conference at a government site?

Non-government site?

Yes.

Hosting a conference on a government site would be exempt, right?

That is how I am reading it.

Yes.

Still on the training. It sounds like DoD is still exempt.

That is correct.

We do not figure that they train the whole agency. Would that be under the same $100,000 threshold scrutiny, is that of concern?

Most agencies would be able to fill the training needs under a $100,000 budget. We do have training that exceeds $1 million. There is only a handful of those. And those should require a lot of scrutiny.

Absolutely. Especially if you are in a nongovernment site.

This pushes in the efficiency to reduce the cost, attempting to have it at a government site.

So then we would have to change the definition to keep the training included or separated?

If we agree to what we mentioned earlier, the $100,000 threshold applies to the training, if we keep with the government hosted conference training at a nongovernment site.

A lot of training is outside of the government facilities, in other words, you send someone to a non-hosted event.

We do hosted training events as well.

All the training is accounted for.

Exactly.

As far as the facility, you can bring in a facilitator for the training. The cost goes $100,000 and up, conference, speakers, training you will go through the $100,000 very quickly.

And just to clarify, the $500,000 threshold means that the Administrator of the department has to sign off on it. $100,000 is the same reporting requirements, that someone below the administrator can sign off on, that is the difference between the two thresholds.

Something like that.

So right now we have between $20,000-$100,000. The component head has to sign off on. The Administrator for CDC has to sign off on a $20,000 conference. You are given a budget of $30 billion and you have to sign off on $20,000 conference. $100,000 the Deputy Secretary has to sign off on it or the HHS and $500,000 for the Secretary.

HHS is on the verge of being $1 trillion organization and we have a secretary signing off on $5000 at a time for conferences. W e do not have that many at that amount, but for her to sign these -- they are a burden for her to do that. The others goes along with the position.

I would think something of more significant value, $5 million gets secretarial approval, but that is not the reality.

Correct.

We are having two different conversations -- the threshold and the reporting.

The reporting requirement is over $100,000 it requires a different person to sign off on it.

These are two separate conversations.

Maybe the next thing that we need to do is vote on what we think the term conference in the document should be called? Which is government hosted conference at a non-government site? So define this conference term.

I guess. So why do you think that is so critical in the scope of these terms?

What is being clarified? That is a good point. We can still define conference exactly the way it is defined. We can just say, these are conferences and the threshold for reporting is without changing. It does not need the threshold of the government-hosted versus the non-government site.

It does. You will have to go and find out the registration for the external conference as opposed to the government-hosted conference. You have to report on all of the individuals that you do not know about signing up for the events.

I agree with that. By changing the definition or requirements for reporting does not mean that we are changing what a conference is. We are not saying this is a conference. These are the conferences that we will report on. Does that make any sense?

Yes.

The term conference, we should not use that.

Okay.

I mean. I think it should be a different name especially in this document here.

If you define the conference, you will have to report on the conference. We want to define what it is, it is not a conference, and we are defining the government hosted conferences at a non-government site. The definition of a government-hosted conference at a non-government site is stated well here. We just have to change the conference designation; that is the source of the confusion.

So do we need a new purpose? That would change the purpose?

If you go to the hosted conference, you would not just say conference. Go back to this, redefine each of these. Maybe you know, instead of it being a conference, it can be a hosted conference other than training. The mission would include conferences that are not hosted. We have not hosted things that fall into other buckets. What we said earlier, non-hosted falls under the TDY.

That is correct.

That causes more confusion.

The point is, when you host a conference, you control so many of the other variables. Somebody is in charge of those expenditures. That includes the people from your organization that handle them.

Therefore, if you know who is there, you know how much they spend and you can find out how much they are reimbursed regardless of their purpose code that they put in the system. However, concerning the people in an organization that has many components, if you take those large numbers of people, and the sporadic multiple organizations that are going to the conference, those can be rolled up in this particular purpose code currently and reported as conference attendance. That is you’re sporadic-hosted by somebody else.

I think you have the mechanism and definition and reporting requirements all on the table. The question is, can it be articulated in such a way that somebody can understand it?

That is from the reporting side as well as the attendee side.

That is a big deal.

Yes.

I think you are almost there. I do not know how many actual conferences are hosted by different government organizations. Somebody is already organizing those; there is a group or individual that is responsible. It is a matter of getting into the organization and finding out the person, and the person has the accountability. OMB has already pushed it to an issue they have required reporting it $500,000 for administrators. They have their attention. The majority of the agency -- they are putting up websites and they have sorted of that stuff out. It has the top-level attention they identify all the costs of the hosted conferences. The pieces are in place -- I think through a little bit of education and clarification, I think we have the pieces there. I do not think there will be a significant change.

The $10,000 and $20,000 collective amount was really challenging. It was challenging the agencies; figuring out you have ten people from seven organizations that amounted to more than $20,000 in spending. Then how do you report that?

Separating that out has already been simplified, at least from understanding, but what is the process? We have access to the information for the hosted events. Like you said, somebody is already doing the work. It is the non-specific events.

It is the continuing resolution that has another 27 days, that requirement is in law and is required. This will not change. Hopefully we can help to inform before something else comes out so it is not that path that we are trying to get out of this, we are trying to help the agencies. I did not mean to take over your meeting.

You provided clarity.

On the phone, are you guys still with us?

I am still here.

Thank you. Making sure, I have not heard from you in a while.

You are hashing the issues out very thoroughly.

Do you have any comments or feedback?

It seems like we are taking over everything in the room.

I want to make sure that you guys get to say something as well.

It is hard to follow a little bit, but what I am gathering, tell me if I am wrong. You are trying to minimize the amount of reporting while still complying with the general rules that are statutory or regulatory. The problem is the definitions are not clear. Any definition that you impose that is inconsistent with the definitions will be unlawful. Trying to clarify them is tricky. I do not have a solution for that. I have been trying to think of one. You cannot define training outside of conference because it is there. You can clarify the reporting you have to do for conference and then specify the conference means in training you have different reports. You cannot just do this just by policy and define the term inconsistently with the statute.

Since I do not have a solution, I cannot offer one.

Okay. What about in the room? For the purpose of the bill, we agree to separate and define the hosted events and it has to be the area of focus. As far as the reporting and you know training will also fit into that. And then that recommendation and risk measurement for the $100,000. That summarizes where we are at. Unless there were is anything else?

Was there anything else? I think that is what we are trying to do here today.

Okay. Do you want to reiterate some of the things you were talking about? Like with GSA?

So the key points so far are the issue of the hosted conference. And then agencies can be accountable for the travel already reported in the trip report and to see if there is a way that we can help agencies keep documentation of registration fees associated with those events.

The threshold itself has been addressed. As far as when it is reported, it is at $100,000 for the trigger. What is the other thing? Whether or not training is included? The training being included or not included, determined that we would continue with the purpose code that follows the law about the training act for identifying specifically whether or not it is training. If it is not training, it goes to a conference.

The statement a few minutes ago and David's comment about mission, and agencies that are traveling for certain purposes. There was a question about strategic planning which had to do with management decisions. David talked about having meetings associated with site visits and interaction. Those are explicitly already defined within the mission. The mission categories, if you travel for the purpose of an off-site meeting or strategic planning, which is a management activity that is a mission.

If you follow, you are including the site visits, including the management off-site and that is part of a mission, not a cost or training. And so the key is for the agencies to push harder in their education, and supervisors to actually review the purpose codes when they are approved. That is important to get the codes right as is getting the dollars correct. That will help rolling it up higher.

Is there anything else? How did I do?

That is what I have captured today.

Was there anything else that needed to be captured in that? Because I think you captured most everything. From here I propose that we recommend that GSA follow through with those items.

Does anyone oppose that? Do we want to take a vote on what Mr. Flynn said?

Yes.

The key points are, reporting hosted travel at the $100,000 level and everything above.

That was not discussed. It includes the data points and everything associated with direct and indirect expenditures and the details of the other data points.

Training would not be included if it falls under the Training Act and the purpose code of the training.

Other items such as managerial items and site visits should be included in mission.

The operation is not in the conferences.

The conferences are other than training.

Agencies should continue to report to GSA. The purpose codes as they are required in the trip reports.

Conferences as well as the other items.

Which could include registration fees as a different item? We will work towards that.

That is what I have.

That is good.

All right.

So as far as the conference definition, it involves travel?

I guess I'm trying to figure out the threshold. That does not involve the travel.

Is it not reported?

The conference definition does not state travel.

It does involve the attendee travel. I am looking at what is in the legislation.

There is a category.

It’s called local travel.

It is not included in this. It is excluded.

Without confusing the fact, what most people call local travel is a miscellaneous expense around your duties. The official definition of local travel would mean you go someplace else, your hotel to the meeting place or airport to the hotel.

Not to confuse anyone.

I am there.

The permanent duty assignment is defined, but that is not what we are talking about.

My question is about the definition as it is now, all these things we talked about whether there is travel. And what a conference is. I am trying to clarify which occurs when an employee travels, on the screen, it is different from what I have in front of me. I do not know why. At one time when somebody travels a short distance, less than 25 miles is the trigger. I have no idea why.

But you still have conference expenditures. So there is not a reason to have trouble associated with this.

That is what I was getting at.

Having a conference that meets the threshold of $100,000 and all of the other things-having travel triggers that part of the definition. From my perspective around the conference spending was not whether they were traveling or not? Those issues come up in here.

To piggyback on the travel, DoD excludes -- you cannot draw per diem in and around your place of work. Sometimes we have an event that people go to that they are supposed to stay at a hotel. That goes to the secretarial level. The general rule is if you go to a local area, you do not get per diem.

I am saying that as a clarification.

What if I have an event three blocks from here but it’s still training or a conference $100,000 for whatever reason?

I am not sure that the travel triggers that part of the conference?

Everything associated with it will be included: Meeting rooms and travelers and transportation for the travelers, paying for the speakers.

Let's take a look at the OMB memo. It goes into some details, direct and indirect costs.

That is a good point.

I am not sure why travel has to be a part of the definition.

The travel?

No. Exclusively in one location and there is still cost associated with the conference, yet nobody travels.

Okay. Should it be reported? That is what Emily’s question is.

This is Erin. I think Emily is correct in raising the point. The point of the reporting is to find out how agencies spend money, not tracking where the people are. The issue should be about how much money they spent on the conference? If they spend all sorts of money on the conference and nobody is traveling, you would want to know more about that than less.

How much are we spending on conferences and what are we spending our money on? If we have the $100,000 threshold, it should not matter if it is here or two hours from here, it is still government money we spent. Having the transparency is the point of all of this.

Do you propose eliminating travel in the definition or the act?

You have to do it in the act first.

It is on page 1; the definition of conference.

The documents on the web screen is what I am referring to, is that the act?

You would have to remove it from the act before you remove it anywhere else.

We can follow up in our response. If the act currently has it or not, we can still go ahead and move forward.

I believe travel spending has to do with the 30%. There is another section back here.

It is still valid.

It is in the OMB memo; it had a section on the trips and the conferences.

There is this whole thing on the travel spending. I think that is what the law is getting it.

So the purpose of the document that we have, will speak to the travel. A definition of conference from my opinion does not necessarily have to be triggered by having travel for it to be conference.

Okay. In the definition here, it involves or intends to imply participation.

I do not think that travel triggers the reporting requirements. Obviously it will remain in the purpose.

Hold on.

If we are trying to get the point of control and oversight, what are we are spending regardless of where it is except for the issue of government site versus a non-government site?

Okay I will add that to my list. To make sure that we look at whatever is the most recent and make comments that it is not the travel; it is the amount that you spend that is the trigger.

The travel does not trigger the conference; it is the other way around.

Okay.

Good catch.

I made that comment not to necessarily vote on anything, but as we are looking through both we might as well.

It is different when we make the comment back officially from GSA whether or not it is in there. We can still make a comment to that the travel should not be necessarily the trigger.

So do we want to vote on that, to take away the term travel?

That is interesting.

Taking it away and what triggers whether it is a conference or not, understanding that some travel is involved.

We are describing the definition of a conference. A conference does not mean that you have to travel.

That is correct.

Looking at this definition, if no one employee travels more than 25 miles, then all the reporting is null.

If you look at controlling spending that means up there on the screen, the way it is worded, you can spend $200,000, the way it is reported.

That makes more scrutiny. That is a red flag. The same issues have not necessarily had a threshold of a number of people; that is intuitive of costs. Travel increases the cost, therefore on its own.

You are proposing what again?

The current definition is in the FTR. The recommendation is to change the FTR definition to include travel.

I do not know if that has to say it involves the travel.

It may or may not be involved. It depends.

To me it says if we are raising the threshold which makes more sense now; if we raise the threshold but being inclusive of all conference spending, I believe it is the motivation for that -- Meaning every responsible citizen.

All right. So let's vote on this.

The votes will be to change the FTR to say may or may not include travel.

We may have. You can still recommend this, so everyone understands. We do not have authority in the FTR to make a statement about something that does not include travel.

It is still recommended.

It can be killed on a technicality that I do not have authority on for the travel.

The statement in the FTR lends itself to say yes, travel but not necessarily.

That is a great point.

Absolutely.

Okay.

So the proposal is that we vote on changing the FTR and having GSA recommend to the committee that the definition be changed to say may include travel. Does everybody understand that?

On the phone?

Yes. That sounds fine. Is the federal rule the same as everywhere else that? Do you follow the same rules?

There are three levels. Must, should and may.

Okay. May is definitely the word to use.

We will start here in the room. To my right, Mark?

In favor.

Claudia? In favor.

Rick. Yes.

Emily? Yes.

Fred left the room.

Patrick. Yes.

Dane, yes.

Myself is a yes.

Brian on the phone? Yes.

Cindy? Yes.

Erin? Yes.

We have enough for a quorum. The recommendation is that the GSA change the FTR definition to say it may include travel. And also they will give a recommendation to the Senate committee to include that same language.

I have done their research and a copy that is at the table and those on the phone received from me later this morning, those are the most current versions in the Senate. It does not include the 25 mile statement or phrase.

Okay. Craig listed a whole bunch of things that GSA is going to look at.

I do not know if you want to vote on that.

I think we already did.

We voted on several items.

That was changing the FTR language. That may include the travel, the reporting requirements, the $100,000 and $100,000 threshold; $500,000 threshold and the conferences under two buckets, hosted versus non-hosted.

Yes.

Was there anything else? Those are the three things that we have voted on.

That is it.

Okay.

Does anybody else? Do we need to go into anything any further than what we have already done today?

This is a question. I know the answer but DoD and other agencies host conferences like GSA.

Sometimes another agency will host a conference and we will go to it. The hosting agency is responsible for all of the costs and everything-the threshold.

Yes.

Okay.

All right. Well I think that concludes the discussion and topics for the day. Once again I want to thank everybody for participating in today’s conversation and for those listening in, thank you.

We have an e-mail site that you can e-mail us with questions or comments or concerns or topics for future meetings, feel free to e-mail us at GTAC@gsa.gov. Feel free to e-mail us and we will review those e-mails. We looked at the e-mail box earlier, there was nothing in it. Feel free to e-mail us so we can get your feedback on those items and we can bring those up in later meetings and for discussion.

For those on the phone, we will have an administrative meeting in about 5 minutes after we hang up. Please hold on.

Give us your cell phone numbers; we will call you for the administrative meeting.

DoD has a conference tool.

Travel to and from conferences -- the expense management is more than the travel; so it is a conference tool.

This is primarily for hosted events.

We can reconcile the expenses electronically; the payment for those attending and such. Does your agency do anything like that?

It varies from agency to agency.

There is a database with government buildings and state meetings. You can access those. If one agency is smaller than another and does not have available space, they can use other agencies meeting room technology.

GSA has several tools; one is for the MIS service which allows you to identify the best value location and the city and venue and where best to host your meeting based on where travelers are coming from and taking all into consideration.

That tool and the market research tool that was referred to -- you go out and do the market research on different properties. GSA is also looking at a strategic meeting management solution and place. We are developing that now.

I would be more than happy to sit with you in that meeting.

It is not universal. You guys are definitely moving in the right direction on that one. Is there anything else that needs to be brought up?

If not, I want to thank you very much. For those of you on the phone, the committee members we will call you shortly. Provide your number to the GTAC e-mail address.

Thank you. Have a nice day.