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**United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548**

December 21, 2000

The Honorable Christopher S. Bond
Chairman
Committee on Small Business
United States Senate

Subject: SBA: Investigation of an SBA Employee's Travel

Dear Mr. Chairman:

As requested, enclosed with this letter is a copy of a briefing that we gave to your staff on November 21, 2000. At that time, we briefed your office on our investigative findings concerning travel by the Deputy Associate Administrator for Communications at the Small Business Administration (SBA). This included determinations of the official's travel costs for fiscal years 1999 and 2000 and of the tasks undertaken by this official while in travel status.

To make these determinations, we interviewed the SBA Chief of Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff/White House Liaison, Associate Administrator for Communications and Public Liaison, and Deputy Associate Administrator for Communications. We also reviewed travel vouchers, authorizations, and itineraries for the Deputy Associate Administrator for Communications and the SBA Administrator for fiscal year 1999 and the first 11 months of fiscal year 2000.¹ We conducted our investigation, in response to your October 13, 2000, request, from October to November 2000 in accordance with investigative standards established by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

In brief, from October 1, 1998, through August 31, 2000, SBA's Deputy Associate Administrator for Communications made 50 trips at a total cost to the government of approximately \$58,840. He made at least 39 of these trips in conjunction with trips by the SBA Administrator. Of the remaining 11 trips, the travel vouchers and authorizations for 8 contained no reference to the Administrator; and the other 3 were to attend training sessions. According to SBA's Chief of Staff and Deputy Chief of Staff, when the Deputy Associate Administrator for Communications travels with the Administrator his role includes speech review/rewrite and coordinating press activities, such as interviews and media contacts. Prior to and during a trip, he and other SBA employees do whatever needs to be done in or outside their assigned roles, including "advance" work, to accomplish the trip's mission.

¹ Travel vouchers for September 2000 were unavailable at the time of our request.

We are sending copies of this letter to interested congressional committees. The letter will also be available on the GAO home page at www.gao.gov. If you have any questions, please contact Assistant Director William Hamel at (202) 512-6722. Senior Special Agents Mary Balberchak and Andrew O'Connell made significant contributions to this case.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert H. Hast". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Robert H. Hast
Managing Director
Office of Special Investigations

Enclosure

BRIEFING PAPER

Investigation of an SBA Employee’s Travel

For the Senate Committee on Small Business

◆ **QUESTIONS**

What was the cost of travel for the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications for FY 1999 and FY 2000?

What tasks did the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications undertake while in travel status?

◆ **FINDINGS**

Cost and Number of Trips

- The travel vouchers for the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications for FY 1999 and the first 11 months of FY 2000 show the following:

FY 1999 and FY 2000 (first 11 months)	Total amount/number
Amount claimed	\$60,436.97 ^a
Amount paid	\$58,840.51
Trips	50 ^b
Trips with the Administrator	39 minimum ^c

^aThe combined totals of \$29,120.43 for FY 1999 and \$31,316.54 for FY 2000.

^b Includes one trip for which no travel voucher was filed.

^c The other 11 vouchers for the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications reflect that he was attending training (3 trips), or they do not make reference to the Administrator (8 trips). In addition, no corresponding travel vouchers for the Administrator for these 11 trips were available to us.

- In most cases—25 trips, the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications arrived at the travel destination on the same day or up to 2 days prior to the Administrator’s arrival. In two instances, he arrived 3 and 4 days, respectively before the Administrator. (See table below.) For the remainder of the 39 trips, we do not have the vouchers for both the Administrator and the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications and cannot determine whether the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications arrived prior to the Administrator.

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Arrival at destination in relationship to arrival of SBA Administrator	Of the 27 determinable trips
Same day	6 trips
1 day before	10 trips
2 days before	9 trips
3 days before	1 trip (Cairo, Egypt)
4 days before	1 trip (Guadalajara, Mexico)

- Of the 36 travel vouchers and attached itineraries that we reviewed for the SBA Administrator, encompassing October 1, 1998, through August 31, 2000, it appears that the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications traveled with the Administrator on all but 7 trips.

Tasks When Preparing for and During Trips

- According to SBA officials we interviewed, the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications accompanies the Administrator on most trips that involve a communications component. The decision on whether or not he will travel is generally made collectively by the Administrator, the Chief of Staff, the Deputy Chief of Staff, the Associate Administrator/Communications, and the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications. The decision is based on the level of priority for media, the theme of the trip, the workload, and the availability of appropriate public affairs personnel and resources at the travel destination. The Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications is usually notified of his assignment by either the Associate Administrator/Communications or the Deputy Chief of Staff.
- There are 70 SBA district offices and 10 full-time public information officers at the district level. Other public information officers at the district level have collateral duties and a wide range of experience among them.
- According to the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications, for each trip, the communications department in Washington, DC, starts making telephone calls to local field offices/district offices directing staff there to reach out to the local media for the event. The Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications tries to be on site at least 1 day prior to the event to evaluate what the field personnel have done, to coordinate with news media, and to make sure the necessary media is in place. According to the Associate Administrator/Communications, the Deputy Associate

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Administrator/Communications is “self-directed” and makes decisions about what needs to be done once he is on-site. The Deputy Chief of Staff stated that when the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications travels with the Administrator, his role includes press coverage, speech review and rework, and arranging interviews and media contacts.

- According to the Chief of Staff and Deputy Chief of Staff, the SBA does not have an “Advance Team” such as that used for the President and the Vice President of the United States. On occasion, someone, such as the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications, will “advance” a trip because it is his job to coordinate press activities. Because SBA is a small agency, employees “wear many hats” on trips and may double up on duties when necessary to accomplish the trip’s mission. The Deputy Chief of Staff stated, “We all do advance [work].” She explained that whoever is on-site does whatever they have to do to get the job done, including some activities that may not be part of their assigned role but need to be addressed. The Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications stated that he may, on occasion, do other things, such as getting the hotel keys in advance for the Administrator and accompanying SBA personnel and meeting the Administrator at the door when she arrives. However, he said that these tasks are done as a courtesy only and are neither required nor expected of him.
- The Administrator’s staff/scheduling personnel, not the Deputy Associate Administrator/Communications, make the Administrator’s hotel and transportation reservations.
- Setting up hair and makeup appointments for the Administrator, for example, for the taping of communications videos if the taping crew does not provide such services, is standard operating procedure for the Office of Communications.

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