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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

August 10, 2012

The Honorable Eric Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., N.W.
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

I appreciate your call this morning regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Inspector General's investigation of two VA conferences held in Orlando last year. The Inspector General's preliminary findings of wasteful spending and alleged improper behavior by VA employees are alarming. I share your belief that effective training of VA personnel – the purpose for the conferences – is necessary. Our veterans deserve a Department that is staffed and managed by top-notch, well-trained personnel. Despite the legitimate purpose of training, there can be no excuse for excessive or wasteful spending of VA resources. At a time when so many veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are in need of care and assistance, the VA must make every effort to spend each dollar in support of its important mission.

In addition, the allegations of improper acceptance of gratuities and other benefits by VA employees involved in organizing the conferences are deeply troubling and warrant further investigation by the VA. We owe a great debt to our service members, and instances of improper benefits accruing to VA employees or misuse of taxpayer dollars would be a great disservice to veterans. Should these allegations prove true, I expect to see that those responsible are held accountable and the implementation of immediate corrections to prevent such abuses in the future.

As the IG continues this investigation, I would appreciate being briefed on the following:

1. How much was spent on both conferences in Orlando? How does this spending compare to similar training conferences sponsored by the VA in recent years?
2. Have the employees who worked on the planning team for these conferences participated in organizing other conferences? If so, which conferences?
3. When will the planning processes and expenditures for those other conferences be reviewed for possible similar abuses?
4. What disciplinary measures will you be taking with respect to the employees implicated by the IG investigation?
5. What systemic reforms have you implemented, or do you plan to implement, to prevent similar abuses in the future?

I would appreciate your reply no later than August 27, 2012, and I ask that you continue to keep me informed of any new developments in this investigation. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or have your staff contact [redacted] of my staff at (202)-22- [redacted]. Thank you for your cooperation and for your service to America's veterans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan M. Collins".

Susan M. Collins
United States Senator