

October 30, 2015

The Honorable Candace Miller
Chairman
House Administration Committee
1309 Longworth HOB
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Robert Brady
Ranking Member
House Administration Committee
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U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Miller and Ranking Member Brady:

It is not clear under the current rules that the Committee on House Administration has the authority to review, and potentially reject, expenditures from Members' Representations Allowances (MRAs). Nor is it clear that the Committee or the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of the House has the authority to periodically audit MRAs for compliance with the *Members' Congressional Handbook* and House ethics rules. Thus, even when a Member submits a voucher to the House Finance Office that appears questionable (e.g., the large disbursements to a well-known campaign consultant that were described merely as "staff training" by Rep. Paul Broun's office and are now the subject of a Department of Justice inquiry), there is no formal process for the Office to question or disapprove the disbursement.

This tradition of deferring to Members' disbursement requests is outdated and should be changed.

Last week, the Committee on House Administration adopted new regulations governing permissible reimbursements for automobile mileage, private aircraft use, and office decoration. Another provision in the new rules instructs the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of the House of Representatives to submit a proposal to create a "searchable, sortable" online database of Members of Congress's expense reports. The last provision instructs the CAO to develop proposals by November 21st to improve "the internal processes, procedures, and training for compliance with the Voucher Documentation Standards."

We commend the Committee for taking these necessary steps, and believe that the provision concerning Members' Representational Allowances (MRAs) in the Committee's Resolution merits closer attention.

As a general rule, it is our understanding that the Committee on House Administration has taken the position that they provide "guidance" to Member offices on the use of the MRA, but the Committee and its staff are not empowered, under current rules, to formally approve or reject specific expenditures.

It is our understanding that the House Finance Office (the office to which vouchers are submitted) takes the same position. This approach of deferring to Members played a role in creating the House Bank scandal of the 1990s when Members were permitted to overdraw their accounts without penalty. Further, the House Ethics Committee frequently is too accommodating to Members' wishes, focusing more on helping Members to fit what they want to do within—and around—the rules than promoting and encouraging high ethical standards. The Ethics Committee's timidity played a significant role in the creating the need for the Office of Congressional Ethics.

Saying "yes" to Members is also embedded in the DNA of the CAO and the House Finance Office. The CAO should be empowered to review Members' expenditures, raise questions, and refer a proposed disapproval to the House Administration Committee for final disapproval.

We urge the Committee to adopt new rules making clear that MRA expenditures are subject to review and approval. MRA budgets should also be periodically audited for compliance with the *Members' Congressional Handbook* and House ethics rules.

Again, we commend the Committee for updating the regulations for reimbursements and look forward to the creation of a searchable, sortable database containing information on how taxpayer money is being spent by the Representatives we send to Congress.

Sincerely,

Campaign Legal Center
Democracy 21

Common Cause
Public Citizen