

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-0301**

March 1, 2016

The Honorable Charlie Dent  
Chairman  
Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Military Construction,  
Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies  
U.S. House of Representatives  
HVC-227, The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sanford Bishop  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Military Construction,  
Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies  
U.S. House of Representatives  
1016 Longworth HOB  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Dent and Ranking Member Bishop:

As you begin work on the fiscal year (FY) 2017 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies bill, we urge you to ensure transparency for all funding spent by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) on public relations.

As revealed in a December 8, 2015 article in *The Hill*, the watchdog group Open the Books reported that the federal government has spent more than \$4 billion on public relations since 2007, with over \$2 billion going to private firms. Shockingly, several of these private PR firms charged federal agencies \$40-\$88 an hour for the work of an intern.

According to the Open the Books report, “Federal agencies...not only resist transparency but often pretend to be transparent when, in reality, they are engaged in self-promotion. Too often, they use their charge to disclose information as a cover for public relations campaigns that are designed to advance their interests (i.e. their desire for more funding and higher salaries) rather than the public interest.”

Of particular interest was money wasted by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which has come under fire in recent years for gross malfeasance that contributed to the deaths of 40 veterans who were waiting for care at the Phoenix VA health care facility.

Since 2007, the VA has spent \$38.4 million on PR services, \$1.7 million of which was spent on “employee engagement” surveys conducted by the Gallup Organization. The report stated that, “Although, Gallup was paid over \$1.7 million during this period, there is no indication that their ‘employee polling and surveys’ led to or identified the need for any real reforms – while some veterans died waiting to see a doctor.”

Government transparency is important to the health of our republic, but exorbitant spending on advertising, polls, and private firms does not reflect the priorities of a government that is more than \$19 trillion dollars in debt. Instead of hiring more people to advertise and spin what the government is doing, we should be more discerning stewards of the taxpayer dime. In Open the Books' words, "Agencies certainly aren't charged with using taxpayer funds to engage in thinly-veiled propaganda campaigns that are primarily designed to protect their budgets and hype outcomes."

The VA has proposed to cut the VA Office of Public Affairs by nearly 50% in FY 2017 and to reduce full-time employees within the office by 11 people. While this may sound good at first glance, the VA has simultaneously requested an \$81.3 million increase for General Administration, indicating a strong likelihood that the VA will spend more money this year on private PR firms and contract workers.

Accordingly, we ask that you include report language similar to the following:

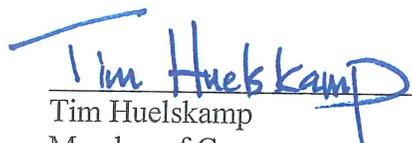
*The Committee is concerned by the amount of money estimated to be going to private PR firms from federal agencies. The VA has proposed to cut the VA Office of Public Affairs by nearly 50% in FY 2017 and to reduce full-time employees within the office by 11 people. The Committee is concerned that such actions could result in the VA spending more money this fiscal year on private public relations firms and contract workers. Accordingly, the Committee instructs the VA to track all money spent on public relations activities that aren't performed by agency FTE's and to report any and all expenditures to the Committee for fiscal year 2017.*

We thank you for your consideration of this request, and for your leadership on the committee.

Sincerely,



Paul A. Gosar, DDS  
Member of Congress



Tim Huelskamp  
Member of Congress