



March 30, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing in regard to your March 20 memo providing executive branch officials with more detailed guidance on ensuring the responsible distribution of funds from the economic stimulus package ("American Recovery and Reinvestment Act") signed into law last month.

This investment package is understandably critical to the administration's efforts to stimulate the economy, create or save millions of jobs, invest in modernizing the nation's infrastructure, and provide tax relief to millions of American households, among other key objectives. I commend the administration's steps to ensure public accountability and transparency of all expenditures related to stimulus projects. The Recovery.gov web site is a richly-populated portal for citizens to track stimulus spending and monitor our nation's progress toward recovery.

However, as a representative of thousands of trade, professional and philanthropic associations, I am compelled to share with you some concerns emanating from our sector, particularly with a key section of the administration's memo prohibiting executive branch officials from considering the views and opinions of registered lobbyists concerning particular projects, unless they are in writing.

While we certainly understand and support the administration's efforts to ensure transparency and prevent undue influence or pressure from outside interests in commitments of funds under the Recovery Act, ASAE is concerned about the cooling effect these new rules will have on legitimate communications between administration officials and individuals who represent a particular industry or profession.

As a lifelong association professional, I passionately believe that the association community has unique resources to bring to bear to solve many of the nation's most pressing issues. Among those resources, of course, are the millions of skilled professionals and experts in different fields who can share valuable perspectives, raise important questions and help formulate strategies for approaching difficult, complex issues. Registered lobbyists are, in many cases, experts themselves in policymaking and highly in tune with the consensus opinions of the industry or group they represent.

By restricting the access points between these individuals and executive branch officials, the administration runs the risk not only of losing insights that could prove valuable in assessing the worth of particular projects, but also weakening the overall receptiveness of this administration to outside concerns and interests. This would be an alarming development if proven out – harmful to both citizens’ rights to petition their government and the administration’s access to the well of good ideas.

While the March 20 memo clearly states that oral communications between administration officials and registered lobbyists about “general Recovery Act policy issues” are permissible, provided they are summarized and made publicly accessible, ASAE is already hearing anecdotal evidence that lobbyists are having difficulty setting up meetings with administration officials.

Prior to coming to ASAE, I had the privilege to serve as the CEO of the American Diabetes Association, where we frequently worked hand in hand with the Department of Health and Human Services on programs, awareness campaigns and initiatives that were designed to address a growing epidemic in this country. I frankly can’t imagine how far behind we would fall in the battle against diseases such as diabetes if we put unnecessary restrictions on the interaction between government and private sector health interests like the ADA.

Dating back to the 2008 campaign, this administration has reinforced its commitment to openness and has frequently reached out to opposing party leaders for contributions to the critical dilemmas facing our country. More than once, the administration has said it “does not have a monopoly on good ideas ...” I urge the administration not to continue down a slippery slope by initiating further restrictions on dialogues between executive branch officials and individuals registered as lobbyists.

To explore how we might ensure a productive, transparent dialogue between associations and the administration, I would respectfully request a meeting with administration officials at a date and time that is convenient.

If we can provide further clarification of our concerns or answer any questions, please contact Jim Clarke, ASAE’s senior vice president of public policy, at 202.626.2865 or jclarke@asaenet.org. Thank you for your consideration of this important concern.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John H. Graham IV". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John H. Graham IV, CAE
President and CEO