



GSA waste, abuse more common than indicated

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Congressional lawmakers grilled General Services Administration officials for a third straight day Wednesday about a rogue employee's penchant for lavish, taxpayer-funded junkets, unearthing evidence that the waste, fraud and abuse is more common and has been going on much longer than first indicated.

Over the last six years, the GSA, which is in charge of the federal government's real estate holdings, has been racked repeatedly by financial kickbacks, insider dealing and general incompetence, lawmakers said.

Just last year, seven GSA employees were found guilty of accepting bribes and defrauding the government in a scheme that cost taxpayers \$750,000. Other GSA scandals date back to the Carter administration in the 1970s.

"It really shakes you up," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., who chaired a Senate inquiry Wednesday. "The expression is fool me once, but again and again?"

Senators Wednesday marveled at the scope of the latest scandal. A regional commissioner, Jeff Neely, spent \$823,000 on a conference for GSA employees in Las Vegas in October 2010 and appears to have a long history of freely spending taxpayers' money on leisure trips and perks and other questionable expenses.

The GSA's Inspector General, Brian Miller, who has been investigating Neely since November 2010, said he learns of new abuses nearly daily. He told the Senate committee he just discovered that Neely's wife, Deborah, "had a parking space throughout the year" at the federal building where Neely worked, even though she doesn't work for the government.

Wasteful spending was embedded in the culture of some GSA departments, in particular Neely's, where the management for years planned annual conferences with the chief goal of outdoing the previous year's event, Miller said.

The Las Vegas conference Neely planned included loft hotel suites, lavish parties, a mind reader and clown for entertainment and commemorative coins in velvet boxes for the 300 attendees.

While the Las Vegas event was described as "over the top," even by Neely, it was apparently nothing new, Miller said.

"Many of the witnesses we talked to said this conference was similar to previous Western Regional Conferences held in Oklahoma, New Orleans and Lake Tahoe," Miller said. "This was along the same lines. Each of the so-called hosts for the conference tried to outdo one another."

President Harry Truman created the GSA more than 60 years ago to oversee federal buildings and support federal government offices. One of the agency's missions was to streamline government and reduce costs.

"There has been abuse throughout the GSA over a number of decades," Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wy., said. "Would it not be fair to ask, has GSA outlived its usefulness as a federal agency? Dan Tangherlini, who took over the GSA following this month's ouster of top management, assured lawmakers he has already canceled most GSA travel and is stepping up oversight. But the pattern of abuse will likely continue, Tad DeHaven, budget analyst for the Cato Institute, told *The Washington Examiner*.

"You just don't have the incentives in place for people to be economical with money," DeHaven said. "There will be hearings. Everyone will express their outrage and indignation and will promise to fix it, and then five years from now, they'll have another scandal. It will never end. It will never stop."