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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6100

TELEPHONE: (202) 224-0642 FAX: (202) 224-4835

ERIC UELAND, REPUBLICAN STAFF DIRECTOR
WARREN GUNNELS, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR
www.budget.senate.gov

October 7, 2015

The Honorable Shaun Donovan
Director
Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20503

Dear Director Donovan:

I am concerned by a recent *Washington Post* article that reports a spokesman for the Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) acknowledged that SAMHSA hired an outside firm to better influence its press coverage.¹

According to the article, public relations firm Edelman e-mailed reporters on behalf of SAMHSA last month to solicit insights on how to “refine their agency messaging” and “to gain insight into how our messages are being received by journalists.”

I am concerned about how much is being spent on this SAMHSA contract and other such “messaging” activities conducted by Executive Branch entities. Agency spending on advertising, public relations and media relations is largely a black box, according to a recent Congressional Research Service (CRS) report. It’s hard to tell how much is spent and where the money is going, according to CRS, which reports that agencies tend to have great discretion over how such funds are spent. CRS did estimate that close to a billion dollars was spent on advertising and public relations services contracts in FY 2013 alone, including \$892.5 million dollars on “advertising services” contracts, and another \$86.6 million for “public relations” services. That is all apart from the cost of in-house media relations activities conducted by federal employees.²

As you are aware, multiple provisions of federal law prohibit the use of appropriated federal funds for publicity or propaganda purposes – including by private contractors.³ Federal funds are also not to be used to advocate the Congress for legislative outcomes.

¹ “Federal agency pays outside PR firm to ask reporters for ‘messaging’ help,” Colby Itkowitz, *Washington Post*, accessed online on October 6, 2015 at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/10/05/federal-agency-pays-outside-pr-firm-to-ask-reporters-for-messaging-help/>

² “Advertising by the Federal Government: An Overview,” Kevin Kosar, June 23, 2014, Congressional Research Service, accessed online on October 6, 2015 at <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41681.pdf>

³ For instance, a series of related prohibitions are contained in P.L. 113-235, Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015, and are continued under the current Continuing Resolution, P.L. 114-53.

Legal issues aside, unnecessary media relations spending is a cost that the Nation simply cannot afford. With the Administration again asking Congress to raise the federal debt limit, it is essential that the Executive Branch avoid spending on unessential and inappropriate activities, and that Congress be made aware to the extent that such spending continues to occur.

Therefore, please provide written responses to the following inquiries by October 16, 2015:

1. How much has been spent on the SAMHSA contract with Edelman, and how much more is expected to be spent on it? Please provide a copy of the contract, and a breakdown of the spending by the budgetary account(s) to which it is being attributed;
2. Provide an Executive Branch-wide total of all spending on advertising, public relations and media relations efforts in FY 2015. Describe the manner in which the Administration categorizes such spending, and a breakdown of how much was spent within each category. Also provide an agency by agency accounting of such spending, broken down into the same categories. Describe how "messaging" activities such as that described by the *Post* are categorized, and provide Government-wide and agency by agency totals for spending on messaging activities. Within each agency, provide a breakdown by individual budgetary account of the source of funds for all advertising, public relations and media relations spending. Also, provide a breakdown of the portion of such spending attributable to in-house activities, and the portion attributable to outside contracts, both Government-wide and at the agency level; and
3. Provide a copy of all written policies the Administration has currently in place to ensure that agencies do not engage in unlawful public relations activities, including propaganda and publicity efforts, and attempts to influence legislative outcomes. Also describe what efforts the Administration engages in to ensure that Executive Branch personnel consistently comply with such policies.

I appreciate your cooperation in this matter.

You may contact Peter Warren with the Budget Committee staff at (202) 224-0642 with any questions concerning this information request.

Sincerely,



Mike Enzi

Chairman