

October 15, 2014

The Honorable Harry Reid
Senate Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader Reid and Minority Leader McConnell:

The current Senate ethics process is widely – and accurately – perceived as insular and opaque, failing to adequately identify ethical lapses and ensure public confidence in the institution. We, the undersigned groups, urge you, in bipartisan agreement, to publicly endorse the following constructive changes to improve a process that is often described as a black hole:

- **Create an Office of Senate Ethics**

The ethics process in the U.S. House of Representatives was significantly improved with the creation of the Office of Congressional Ethics (OCE). The Office has provided a place for allegations of ethical violations to be credibly heard and investigated, and has alleviated some of the most serious concerns about a process that had become utterly dysfunctional. An equivalent Office of Senate Ethics (OSE), with appropriate subpoena power, would enhance the public credibility of the current process.

- **Create timetables for public reports on the status of investigations.**

While we appreciate that ongoing investigations are sensitive and necessitate discretion, the Senate Select Committee on Ethics has taken these understandable considerations to the extreme. Information goes in, but no information is generally and routinely available until a final disposition is reached, leaving the public in the dark. The process should have established timetables to help manage public expectations, able to be waived only under extraordinary circumstances, such as when an investigation is put on hold pursuant to a review by the Department of Justice.

- **Increase transparency of and access to the Senate Ethics Committee**

Because the Ethics Committee continues to do almost all of its work behind closed doors, reasonable suspicions arise that the Committee is more interested in protecting individual Senators and staff than the integrity of the institution. One important step that can be taken to increase the Committee's credibility is to increase and improve the public availability of documents pertaining to Senate

ethics, such as all current and historic guidance issued by the Committee. In addition, ethics documents already required to be disclosed to the public should be made available online, such as legal defense fund disclosures and statements of recusal.

- **More frequent ethics training for Senators and Senate personnel**

Each Senator and Senate staffer should undergo an ethics training session every four years. This would serve as a refresher/update as well as reminder of ethics rules.

- **Review current travel rules**

The Committee should review current travel rules, especially those governing pass-through transactions, to ensure the rules accurately reveal the purpose and nature of privately financed Senate travel.

We look forward to hearing your response to these proposals.

Sincerely,

Campaign Legal Center
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW)
Common Cause
Democracy 21
Judicial Watch
League of Women Voters
Thomas Mann
Norman Ornstein
Project On Government Oversight (POGO)
Public Citizen
Sunlight Foundation
Taxpayers for Common Sense
James Thurber