August 16, 2012

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
United States Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Secretary Shinseki:

It was only four months ago that Americans were shocked to learn about lavish overspending by staff at the General Services Administration. Now, we are learning from reports that the Inspector General of the Department of Veterans Affairs has "uncovered questionable activities" regarding spending at two VA training conferences held in Orlando, FL. According to accounts, some of the five million dollars spent putting on the conferences may have gone to concert tickets and spa treatments for attendees. If these allegations are substantiated, this misuse of taxpayer money—especially taxpayer money that was intended for the care and support of our nation's veterans—is completely unacceptable.

This news is especially disconcerting to gay and lesbian veterans, who are blocked from providing their hard-earned VA benefits to their spouses because of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and other federal statutes. It is insulting to be told by the VA that they will not provide the same benefits to same sex spouse that they provide to opposite sex spouses, only to then watch the VA allegedly waste money during conferences in Orlando. The VA needs to be a welcoming place to all veterans, including LGBT veterans, and stories like this do not help promote the image of a well-functioning and effective VA.

The VA has said in a statement that it is taking corrective action and will launch a full investigation. We urge you to follow through on this commitment and make the results of the inquiries public. There are hundreds of thousands of veterans who have put their lives on the line in defense of this country. They need support, they need care, and they need access to the benefits they have earned for themselves and their families. In short, they need their VA to be doing better than this. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Aubrey Sarvis
Executive Director
Servicemembers Legal Defense Network

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