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May 25, 2012

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
United States Senate
130 South Elmwood, Room 660
Buffalo, New York 14202

Dear Senator Schumer:

On behalf of the entire tourism sector in Western New York, I urge you to consider revisions to amendments passed in two separate bills April 25 by the House and Senate that place severe restrictions on government employees attending meetings and conferences. These amendments were included in the "Digital Accountability and Transparency Act" or DATA Act (H.R. 2146) in the House, and the "21st Century Postal Service Act" (S. 1789) in the Senate.

We are already feeling the impact. The largest state conventions that we regularly host have attendees that are government employees. For example, next week CSEA's conference attendance will be approximately 50% less than projected. Even though the bill has not been signed, CSEA members report they've been told to follow the new rules.

We rely heavily on this sector for Buffalo's convention business and its impact is great on downtown and beyond. If you look at just three events, CSEA, NYSUT (New York State United Teachers) and PEF (Public Employees Federation, that's six million dollars in economic impact at risk. In 2011, we booked conventions and meetings which are projected to have $125 million in future economic impact, this new law will significantly impact the value of these events due to decreased participation.

Hotels, restaurants, cultural attractions and retailers will feel this impact but so will the workforce of 19,000 people directly employed (30,000 direct and indirect) in Erie County alone.

Visit Buffalo Niagara fully supports the intent of Congress to induce greater transparency and accountability in government spending. However, while the amendments are designed to limit spending on government-sponsored conferences and travel expenses for federal employees, the actual language will have an effect on government employees' participation in non-governmental meetings and conferences as well. The language in either amendment can be easily modified to allow federal employees to attend educational conferences held by association and other non-governmental organizations, without compromising Congress's goal of enhanced federal accountability.

Sincerely,

Dottie Gallagher-Cohen
President & CEO

cc: Washington, DC Office

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