

# DoD Conference Guidance

Version 4.0



Office of the  
**DEPUTY CHIEF  
MANAGEMENT OFFICER**

## Version History

Version	Publication Date	Summary of Changes
4.0	June 26, 2016	Updated with conference exemptions and approval for recurring DoD-sponsored or hosted conferences
3.0	September 23, 2015	Updated approval authority and conference reporting requirements
2.0	November 4, 2013	Updated to reflect approved Deputy Secretary of Defense changes and new legislative requirements.
1.0	September 29, 2012	Original

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## **I. Purpose**

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This document serves as Department of Defense (DoD)'s official conference policy. It supersedes and cancels DoD Conference Guidance 3.0. This policy supplements conference provisions in applicable ethics regulations and the Joint Travel Regulations. This guidance is effective June 26, 2016.

## **II. Background**

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The DoD has made substantial progress in reviewing and approving conferences consistent with guidance codified in OMB Memorandum, Subject: Promoting Efficient Spending to Support Agency Operations dated May 11, 2012 and Public Law 113-6, "Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2013." Because of successes achieved in responsibly managing conferences, and based on the feedback that existing guidance may be curtailing attendance at professional conferences; this update to the Conference Guidance balances the continuing requirement to exercise responsible stewardship of taxpayer money with the ability of commanders/directors to manage professional development.

## **III. Responsibilities**

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### **1. Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense**

The Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense are accountable for all of the Department's conference related activities. They oversee DoD's conference policies and controls and maintain visibility and accountability for the conduct of conferences hosted by the Department and attended by Department personnel through Component reporting as required by legislation.

### **2. DoD Deputy Chief Management Officer**

The DoD Deputy Chief Management Officer is responsible for DoD's conference oversight regime on behalf of the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense, to include maintaining this guidance document and executing the reporting requirements contained in Section V. The Deputy Chief Management Officer is authorized to act on behalf of the Secretary and Deputy Secretary on all conference related matters.

### **3. Conference Approval Authorities**

In recognition of DoD's unique size and complexity, DoD has structured the approval authorities to eliminate undue delays and impediments to appropriate conference participation and address the concerns of communities of interest, including scientific, acquisition, and medical communities. This structure builds upon the existing foundation of trust and accountability already in place for senior civilian and military leaders, who have responsibility for billions of taxpayer dollars and hundreds of thousands of our Service members' lives.

- a. Approval Authority for All Conferences Costing in Excess of \$100,000 (Both DoD-Sponsored or Hosted Conferences and Non-DoD Sponsored or Hosted Conferences)**

In accordance with OMB guidance, DoD organizations should not incur net expenses to the DoD greater than \$500,000 on a single conference, unless the relevant approval official issues a waiver after determining that exceptional circumstances exist whereby such a conference is the most cost-effective option to achieve a compelling purpose. In accordance with OMB guidance, approval authority for such waivers is delegated to Tier 1 approval officials without further delegation. The grounds for any such waiver must be documented in writing.

For a conference with a total cost more than \$100,000 and but not more than \$500,000, approval authority is delegated to Tier 1 and Tier 2 approval officials without further delegation.

**b. Approval Authority for DoD-Sponsored or Hosted Conferences Costing \$100,000 or Less**

For a DoD-sponsored or hosted conference with a total cost of \$100,000 or less, approval authority is delegated to Tier 1 and Tier 2 approval officials, and to the commander or director of the DoD unit or organization sponsoring or hosting the conference, who may further delegate such authority to one or more officials who are General or Flag Officers or who are members of the Senior Executive Service within the DoD unit or organization.

**c. Approval Authority for Non-DoD Sponsored or Hosted Conferences Costing \$100,000 or Less**

Approval authority for conferences with a total cost of \$100,000 or less not sponsored or hosted by DoD is delegated to the lowest appropriate level, as follows:

- (1) For conferences estimated to cost \$3,000 or more per attendee or \$600 or more per day per civilian employee or military member, approval is delegated to officials who are at the grade of O-5, GS-14, or equivalent, and at least one level above the supervisors with normal TDY/TAD approval authority for such employees or military members, consistent with organizational guidelines.
- (2) For conferences estimated to cost less than \$3,000 per attendee and less than \$600 per day per civilian employee or military member, and for no-cost conferences, approval authority is delegated to supervisors with normal TDY/TAD approval authority, consistent with organizational guidelines.

For purposes of determining the costs per day, all costs, including travel costs, must be averaged over every day on which a substantive portion of the conference occurs. A “day” does not include days on which only travel occurs and/or the only conference activities are non-substantive, such as welcome receptions and social activities.

**d. Threshold Determination for Non-DoD Sponsored or Hosted Conferences**

If an approval official has reason to believe that the Department of Defense will incur more than \$100,000 on a conference not sponsored or hosted by DoD, such official shall use reasonable

efforts to determine the total cost to the Department for the conference, taking into account previous conference experiences, and shall take steps to ensure that conference attendance is subject to approval in accordance with paragraph (a) or make a determination that the thresholds for such approval have not been triggered.

If an approval official knows or reasonably believes that 50 or more DoD employees under his or her authority will attend a conference not sponsored or hosted by DoD, such official shall provide for a cost estimate to determine whether waiver or approval by a Tier 1 and/or Tier 2 approval authority is required under this paragraph. No DoD component shall be required to establish a tracking system to count conference attendance across multiple organizations or units in advance of the event unless the approval official has reason to believe that 50 or more DoD personnel are likely to attend.

**e. Approval for Recurring DoD-Sponsored or Hosted Conferences**

Approval officials are authorized to provide one-time approval for recurring DoD-sponsored or hosted conferences (e.g., annual conferences) within the overall limits of their approval authority. Approvals should be documented and will include control conditions based on historical execution of these events. Such conditions should include, but not be limited to, cost limits; event durations; maximum attendance; and location restrictions. The actual conference execution is still subject to annual reporting requirements and subject to the availability of funding.

**f. Tier 1 Approval Officials – For waivers allowing conferences costing greater than \$500,000; for approval of conferences costing over \$100,000**

For the purposes of this Guidance, Tier 1 Approval Officials are as follows:

- (1) For conferences hosted by the Department of the Army:
  - (a) Secretary of the Army
  - (b) Under Secretary of the Army
- (2) For conference hosted by the Department of the Navy:
  - (a) Secretary of the Navy
  - (b) Under Secretary of the Navy
- (3) For Conference hosted by the Department of the Air Force:
  - (a) Secretary of the Air Force
  - (b) Under Secretary of the Air Force
- (4) For conferences hosted by the National Guard: Chief, National Guard Bureau
- (5) For conferences hosted by elements of the Office of the Secretary of Defense and by Defense Agencies and DoD Field Activities within their respective organizations, the Under Secretaries of Defense

- (6) For conferences hosted by elements of the Office of the Secretary of Defense or by Defense Agencies or DoD Filed Activities that do not report to an Under Secretary, the Deputy Chief Management Officer
- (7) For conferences hosted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Director, Joint Staff
- (8) For conferences hosted by the Unified Combatant Command: Commanders of the Combatant Commands

**g. Tier 2 Approval Officials – For conferences with a total cost more than \$100,000, but not more than \$500,000**

For the purposes of this guidance, Tier 2 Approval Officials are as follows:

- (1) For conferences hosted by the Department of the Army:
  - (a) Chief of Staff and Vice Chief of Staff of the Army
  - (b) Commanders of the Army Commands
  - (c) Administrative Assistant to the Secretary of the Army
  - (d) Director, Army Staff
- (2) For conferences hosted by the Department of the Navy:
  - (a) Chief of Naval Operations
  - (b) Commandant of the Marine Corps
  - (c) Department of Navy/Assistant for Administration
  - (d) Director, Navy Staff
  - (e) Director, Marine Corps Staff/Staff Director, Headquarters Marine Corps
  - (f) Commanders of the Major Commands of the Navy
  - (g) Commanders of the Major Commands of the Marine Corps
- (3) For conferences hosted by the Department of the Air Force:
  - (a) Administrative Assistant to the Secretary of the Air Force
  - (b) The Air Force Surgeon General
  - (c) Commanders and Vice Commanders of the Major Commands of the Air Force
  - (d) Superintendent, United States Air Force Academy
  - (e) Commander, Air Force Research Laboratory
- (4) For conferences hosted by the National Guard:
  - (a) Vice Chief, National Guard Bureau
  - (b) Director, Army National Guard
  - (c) Director, Air National Guard

- (5) For conferences hosted by elements of the Office of the Secretary of Defense and by Defense Agencies and DoD Field Activities within their respective organizations:
  - (a) Principal Deputy Under Secretaries of Defense
  - (b) Assistant Deputy Chief Management Officer
  - (c) DoD General Counsel
  - (d) Director, Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation
  - (e) DoD Inspector General
  - (f) Director, Operational Test & Evaluation
  - (g) DoD Chief Information Officer
  - (h) Assistant Secretaries of Defense
  - (i) Director, Net Assessment
  - (j) Directors of the Defense Agencies and DoD Field Activities
- (6) For conferences hosted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Vice Director, the Joint Staff
- (7) For conferences hosted by the Unified Combatant Commands: Deputy Commanders of the Combatant Commands

#### **4. Legal Compliance**

Approval officials are responsible for ensuring compliance with all applicable laws and policy in making their approvals and therefore should consult with legal counsel, when appropriate.

#### **5. Document Management**

Approval authorities must maintain electronic records of documentation used in making their decisions for not less than five years or in accordance with DoD Directive 5015.2, DoD Records Management Program, whichever is greater. Approval officials for conferences costing in excess of \$100,000 must document their approvals in writing. For each conference with a cost exceeding \$500,000 an approval/waiver memo that is specific to that individual conference (or to multiple instances of that conference, as provided in the January 2015 Controller Alert) must be signed. For those conferences with a total cost below \$500,000, an approval memo may cover more than one conference, but each conference must be individually listed in the memo.

#### **6. Conference Attendance**

Conference attendance by an employee or a military member is subject to a determination by the relevant approving authority that such attendance is appropriately related to the performance of the employee's/military member's official duties and that the expense of attendance is justified on that basis. When making conference approval decisions, approval officials must confirm that physical co-location of DoD personnel in a conference setting is beneficial and cost-effective and consider alternative means of delivering the relevant information, including usage of remote

collaboration tools (e.g., teleconferencing, videoconferencing, webinars, online sharing applications) and other real-time communication methods that would mitigate the need for physical co-location of DoD personnel.

## **7. Prohibited Conference Expenses**

Entertainment-related expenses are expressly prohibited as part of DoD-sponsored or hosted conferences. Illustrative examples of entertainment-related expenses that are prohibited include hiring musicians or other entertainers to perform at conferences, procuring extraneous promotional items, decorations, or other goods and services for participants that are unrelated to the purpose of the conference, procuring tickets to recreational activities outside of the conference setting, or using funds to produce non-substantive audio/visual materials. Common sense and good judgment must be used throughout the conference planning process. If there is any doubt as to the appropriateness of certain expenses, coordinate with appropriate officials, including legal counsel.

## **8. Grants and Contracts**

Grants or contracts funded by appropriated funds may not be used for the purpose of defraying the costs of a conference that is not directly and programmatically related to the purpose for which the grant or contract was awarded, such as a conference held in connection with planning, training, assessment, review, or other routine purposes related to a project funded by the grant or contract.

## **9. Jointly Hosted Conferences**

In the case where more than one DoD unit or organization is sponsoring or hosting a conference jointly, and if it appears that the total cost of the conference to the Department will be over \$100,000, those units or organizations should designate one of the units or organizations to obtain approval for the conference through that unit's or organization's appropriate approval official on behalf of the Department.

## **10. Enhance Scrutiny**

Approval officials should apply enhanced scrutiny to conferences that involve the following circumstances:

### **a. Spousal Travel**

Approval officials must ensure that for conferences where spousal travel is involved, the spousal travel is authorized in accordance with the Joint Travel Regulations.

### **b. Co-Sponsorship with a Non-Federal Entity**

Approval officials must ensure that a conference DoD is co-sponsoring with a non-federal entity is planned in accordance with this guidance, to include ensuring that no prohibited conference

expenses are involved, and that the conference circumstances do not create the appearance of government impropriety.

### **c. Using Conference Planners**

It is acceptable to contract with a non-federal entity for help in planning and executing a DoD hosted conference, including through the use of a no-cost contract, as long as proper contracting procedures are followed. However, approval officials must ensure that the conference is planned in accordance with this guidance, to include ensuring that no prohibited conference expenses are involved, and that the conference circumstances do not create the appearance of government impropriety.

## **11. Approval Timing**

Organizations should not finalize conference plans or make any commitments to vendors or hotels that obligate the government to pay funds until the requisite approval from the appropriate approval authority has been obtained. This includes commitments addressing costs if a conference is cancelled or where DoD participation may need to be withdrawn. Further, DoD entities should not enter into a co-sponsorship relationship, no cost contract, or other arrangement with a non-Federal entity until the requisite approval has been obtained. Since this approval will normally occur early in the conference planning stages, the approval official shall exercise continuing oversight of the conferences, as necessary, to ensure that the entire conference is being carried out in a manner that is fully consistent with this guidance.

## **12. Escalation Circumstances**

If, as the date of a DoD-hosted conference approaches, it becomes apparent that its total cost will exceed the estimated cost and breach the next approval threshold, approval must be obtained from the higher level approval authority as soon as possible.

## **13. National Guard Bureau**

The Chief, National Guard Bureau is required to follow this guidance.

# **IV. Determination of a Conference**

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## **1. General Definition**

"Conference" is defined in the Joint Travel Regulations as, "[a] meeting, retreat, seminar, symposium, or event that involves attendee travel. The term 'conference' also applies to training activities that are considered to be conferences under 5 CFR 410.404."

## **2. Additional Indicia of a Conference**

Conferences subject to this guidance are also often referred to by names other than "conference." Other common terms used include conventions, expositions, symposiums, seminars, workshops,

or exhibitions. They typically involve topical matters of interest to, and the participation of, multiple agencies and/or non-governmental participants. Indicia of a formal conference often include but are not limited to registration, registration fees, a published substantive agenda, and scheduled speakers or discussion panels.

### **3. Local Conferences**

Events within the local duty location that do not require travel authorization may also qualify as a conference for the purposes of this guidance.

### **4. Exemptions**

For the purposes of this guidance, the types of activities listed below should not be considered conferences even if the event meets the general definition of a conference as outlined above. Should an event be considered exempt from this guidance, organizations are expected to continue to apply strict scrutiny to DoD's participation to ensure the best use of government funds and adherence with not only all applicable laws and policy, but the underlying spirit and principles. Additionally, all events, regardless of whether they are considered exempt should be clearly related to carrying out the mission of the organization. This includes ensuring that only personnel that have a mission-essential need to attend events do so, that expenses be kept to a minimum, and that participation in any associated social events be limited and restrained to the greatest degree practicable to avoid the appearance of impropriety. The determination that an event that would otherwise be a conference falls within the scope of an exemption described below, and must be made by a GO/FO or SES equivalent or higher. Exemptions from this guidance should be granted only when events fully meet the definition and intent of the criteria below:

- a. Meetings necessary to carry out statutory command and staff oversight functions. This exemption would include activities such as investigations, inspections, audits, or non-conference planning site visits. Other considerations include:
  - (1) The meeting is directly tied to a language in a statute, government-wide regulation, or DoD regulation.
  - (2) The meeting is related to an official inquiry or investigation based upon reported wrongdoing or reports of systemic problems. The inquiry or investigation in these cases generally is conducted by a single official and is directed by a formal appointment memorandum.
  - (3) The exemption does not apply broadly to meetings designed to improve policies or processes or to prepare reports, such as "reengineering," "strategic planning," and the like even if the product of the meeting is a report mandated by statute or regulation.
- b. Meetings to consider internal agency business matters. This exemption would include activities such as meetings that take place as part of an organization's

- regular course of daily business. Some indicia of a meeting to consider internal agency business are:
- (1) The host is the Department, the event is held in a Departmental facility, only local travel is involved, and the attendees are solely government personnel; or
  - (2) The meeting is a regular and recurring part of the employee's job description or job duties.
- c. Meetings necessary to carry out planning or execution of operational or operational exercise activities or pre-deployment, deployment, or post-deployment activities. This exemption would include activities such as planning and preparation for, as well as execution of, war games, military exercises, and operational deployments.
- d. Bi-lateral and multi-lateral international cooperation engagements. This exemption would include activities such as International Military Education and Training events, Traditional Commander's Activities, and other regional assistance programs. It would also include many of the activities of the Department's Regional Security Centers.
- e. Formal classroom training. This exemption would include activities such as regular courses of instruction or training seminars. These activities may be offered by government organizations, institutions of higher learning or professional licensure/certification, or other training entities. However, events are not exempt simply because they offer continuing education credits or the equivalent. Even when a portion of a larger event involves formal classroom training, this does not mean that the event as a whole falls within this exemption. For instance, if the annual meeting of Organization X has sessions that are comprised of formal classroom training, but the remainder of the meeting is not formal classroom training, the event as a whole does not fall within the exemption. Some indicia of formal classroom training are:
- (1) The sole purpose is training, as opposed to networking, sharing best practices, or other similar purposes;
  - (2) Continuing education credit is available for all event sessions other than meals;
  - (3) The event is held in a facility regularly used for training such as a university classroom and not a hotel or conference center. However, even if an event is held in a hotel or conference center and all event sessions other than meals consist of classroom training, the event may qualify under the exemption. While location is not determinative, there should be special scrutiny if the training is held at a resort or other location; or
  - (4) The means of instruction is typically in a classroom setting with an instructor and not speaking with exhibitors or obtaining others' views through participation in small groups.
- f. Change of command, official military award, funeral, or other such ceremonies.

- g. Events where the primary purpose of DoD's participation is military or civilian recruiting and/or recruitment advertising.
- h. Meetings of advisory committees subject to DoD Instruction 5105.04, Department of Defense Federal Advisory Committee Management Program, where the membership of the committee consists of one or more individuals who are not full-time or permanent part-time Federal officers or employees or military personnel.

## **V. Determination of Conference Costs**

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### **1. Conference Expenses**

The expenses of a conference include all direct and indirect conference costs paid by the Department, in accordance with 41 CFR 301-74.2. For the purposes of this guidance, conference expenses include, but are not limited to:

- a. Authorized travel and per diem expenses for all DoD sponsored attendees, including both government and non-government attendees
- b. Hire of rooms for official business
- c. Audiovisual and other equipment usage
- d. Computer and telephone access fees
- e. Light refreshments or other food and beverage
- f. Printing
- g. Registration, exhibitor, sponsor, or conference fees for all DoD sponsored attendees, including both government and non-government attendees
- h. Ground transportation and/or parking fees
- i. Outlays for conference preparation and planning
- j. Speaker fees
- k. Administrative expenses

### **2. Expenses Not Included in Calculation of Conference Expenses**

For the purposes of this guidance, the following expenses should not be included in the calculation of conference expenses:

- a. Federal employee time for conference preparation and planning

- b. Federal employee time for attendance at the conference or en route
- c. Security costs to ensure the safety of attending governmental officials
- d. While the Department determines a feasible way to accurately capture these costs, contractor attendance costs charged to a contract that is not associated with the hosting or running of the conference

### 3. Revenue

Revenue is all direct or indirect conference costs collected or reimbursed to DoD by non-DoD entities. For the purpose of this guidance, revenue includes, but is not limited to:

- a. Registration fees collected
- b. Exhibitor fees collected
- c. Sponsor fees collected

### 4. Total Conference Cost

Total conference costs should be the net value of the conference expenses, less any fees or revenue received by the Department through the conference.

For DoD-sponsored or hosted conferences, the total conference cost must be calculated by the hosting DoD Component and must include funds paid by all DoD Components, not just the host.

## VI. Reporting

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### 1. Annual Reporting

In accordance with OMB's memorandum and section 739 of Public Law 113-235, "Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2015," the following data will be reported publically on an annual basis for conferences which the Department *hosts*, where the total expenses associated with the conference are in excess of \$100,000. This data will be captured by each DoD Component and reported through the DoD Conference Tool. It will be validated by each DoD Component prior to posting.

- a. The name of the conference
- b. The Component hosting the conference
- c. The date(s) of the conference
- d. The location of the conference

- e. The total conference expenses incurred by the agency for the conference, including a breakdown of those costs by:
  - (1) The cost of any food or beverages
  - (2) The cost of any audio-visual services
  - (3) The cost of DoD participants travel and contractor travel costs if paid by DoD
- f. The number of participants attending the conference
- g. A brief description of the conference's purpose
- h. A discussion of the methodology used to determine which costs relate to the conference
- i. A description of the contracting procedures used, including whether contracts were awarded on a competitive basis and a discussion of any cost comparison conducted in evaluating potential contractors for the conference

## 2. Ongoing Reporting

For DoD-hosted conferences where the total conference expenses associated with each conference are in excess of \$20,000.00, each conference will be entered into the DoD Conference Tool within **15 days** of the conference being held. The report, required by section 739 of Public Law 113-235, will consist of the following:

- a. The name of the conference
- b. The date(s) of the conference
- c. The location of the conference
- d. Number of DoD personnel attending the conference

The DoD Conference Tool Homepage can be found at the following link:  
<https://apps.sp.pentagon.mil/sites/DoDConferenceTool/Pages/home.aspx>

## 3. DoD Inspector General Access to Conference Reporting

To comply with statutory requirements personnel from the DoD Inspector General's office have been granted access to the DoD Conference Tool to view information about conferences that have been completed.