

Weekly Column
Congressman Tom Cole

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**The Government's Waste Watch Plan
By Congressman Tom Cole**

The United States government spends \$69,000 a second. With a government as powerful and as far-reaching as the United States, mistakes can be made and what seem like small bookkeeping oversights sometimes go overlooked. Our government plays a vital role in our every day life by funding important programs and providing essential services. But in order to increase spending in programs like No Child Left Behind and Medicare, while remaining fiscally responsible, we must find ways to eliminate waste, fraud and abuse.

This year, members of Congress are taking large steps in identifying waste, fraud and abuse. The Fiscal Year 2004 Concurrent Budget Resolution requires House and Senate authorizing committees to identify means of eliminating waste, fraud and abuse in mandatory programs within their jurisdiction. They have set a goal for each committee this year at 1% – one penny of every dollar. Although these savings might seem small, they will add up over time and help us make great contributions to balancing the budget and paying down our debt.

The freshman class of the 108th Congress has started a taskforce to bring attention to and identify examples of government waste, fraud and abuse. Our primary objective is to provide a clearinghouse of information to educate members, staff, and constituents about the vast amount of waste, fraud, and abuse within the federal government and to highlight legislative and administrative solutions to combat this trend.

Our collaboration has already identified many examples of waste, fraud and abuse.

- Medicare: Since 1996, annual audits by the Department of Health and Human Service's Office of the Inspector General have found that Medicare contractors have improperly paid claims worth billions of dollars – \$12.3 billion in fiscal year 2002 alone.
- Food Stamps: During Fiscal Year 2001 erroneous payments totaled about \$1.4 billion. Sometimes individuals illegally sell their benefits for cash – a practice known as trafficking. In its most recent report on trafficking [March 2000] USDA

estimated that about 3.5 cents of every dollar of food stamp benefits issued each year from 1996 through 1998 was trafficked by stores – about \$660 million.

- Credit Card Abuses: At the Department of Housing and Urban Development, it was discovered that improper purchases totaling about \$1 million where HUD employees either split, or appeared to have split, purchases into multiple transactions to circumvent cardholder limits.

While most government programs fulfill their purpose and most government employees are hardworking and honest, there are some areas of waste and instances of fraud that could be eliminated to make our government more efficient. Anytime the federal government escapes the standards expected of a small business by overpaying a sizeable amount of its operating budget to ineligible individuals - we have waste. Anytime the federal government funds programs that have the same purpose – be it housing the needy or combating drug use – we have duplication.

Unfortunately, the government can't oversee every dollar of spending, but there is a way for everyone to help the government better track it's spending. If you have witnessed any erroneous payment or example of government abuse you can report it at <http://budget.house.gov/waste.htm>.

The goal of the task force is to reduce the size and scope of the federal government. People who steal from the government are stealing from hard working families who pay their taxes in good faith. I look forward to continue working with my colleagues to trim down the fat in our national government.