This article originally appeared in the The Hill's Congress Blog on April 25, 2012.
By Congressman Mike Quigley (IL-05)

The revelation that the General Services Administration (GSA) spent more than $800,000 on a conference in Las Vegas is extremely troubling. We cannot afford $44 breakfasts or catered private parties in resort suites. While the price tag of this scandal is insulting, even worse is the GSA's brazen exploitation of the public's trust.

Being a policy maker from Illinois, where four governors have spent time behind bars – as have two of my predecessors – I quickly learned that it is impossible to lead or make tough decisions without the public's trust. The American people have to be able to trust the government to spend their tax dollars wisely.

The GSA's frivolous spending on commemorative coins and conference yearbooks is a slap in the face to taxpayers everywhere. Considering actions like these, it comes as no surprise that trust in government is at an all time low. A CNN/ORC poll from September 2011 revealed that only 15 percent of Americans trust the federal government to do what is right, down from 25 percent in September 2010. The pre-Watergate era, during which a majority of Americans said they trusted government, feels like ancient history.

As a Member of Congress, I view this number as both an embarrassment and a demand for action. We must make government more transparent and accountable, so that we can win back the public's trust and avoid losing it again in the future. Since being sworn into Congress in April 2009, I have introduced multiple pieces of landmark transparency legislation towards these ends.

One of the first bills I introduced in Congress was The Transparency in Government Act, an omnibus transparency bill that would achieve unprecedented accountability for the federal government through new lobbying restrictions, enhanced access to financial information of Members of Congress, and increased oversight of federal contractors. This last point is especially salient, given that just last week investigators revealed that the federal contractor hired to plan the GSA's outrageous event violated ethics laws and rules requiring competitive bidding.

In the wake of the GSA scandal, budget transparency has taken on new meaning. While organizations like the CBO and OMB publish vital information about how hard-earned tax dollars are being spent, it is simply not enough. Regaining the public's trust means going above and beyond precedent and giving taxpayers new tools to hold legislators accountable for spending decisions in Washington.

I will continue to advocate for measures I have introduced like The Taxpayer Receipt Act, which would provide taxpayers with a receipt on the scale of their tax payment, demonstrating how their tax dollars are being spent. In similar fashion, I am offering an amendment this week to a bill in the Oversight and Government Reform Committee that would require each federal agency to establish a taxpayer receipt calculator on its website. This calculator goes even further by allowing taxpayers to enter their annual tax payment and receive a receipt showing how much they have contributed to individual programs administered by that agency.

If regaining the public's trust is the first step, then taking action to maintain that trust for the long-term is the next step. Stand-alone transparency legislation is absolutely necessary, but it is not enough. We must stop treating transparency and accountability as peripheral issues and proactively incorporate them into everything we do. If GSA leaders knew their bad decisions would become public information, they might have thought twice before enjoying fancy drinks on the taxpayer dime.

Going forward, as the proud co-chair and founder of the bipartisan Transparency Caucus, I will continue bringing together Members of Congress and government watchdog groups to develop proposals to improve oversight and make the government more open and accountable. Rolling back the decades of mistrust that began with Watergate and continued to today's GSA scandal will not be easy, but if we believe in the good things government does—and that government's mission matters—then it is essential.

Rep. Quigley (D-Ill) serves on the Oversight and Government Reform Committee