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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

For release - see memo dated 7/7/76
in file.

B-180224

MAY 10 1976

The Honorable John E. Moss, Chairman
Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee
Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This refers to your letter in which you request the advice of this Office, with respect to nine agencies of the Government under study by the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, as to whether public participants in proceedings before those agencies may be assisted in any or all of the following ways:

"(1) the provision of funds directly to participants, (2) modification of procedural rules so as to ease their financial burden on public participants, (3) provision of technical assistance by agency staff, (4) provision of legal assistance by agency staff, (5) creation of an independent public counsel, and (6) creation of a Consumer Assistance Office such as that now employed by the FCC."

The agencies to which you refer are the Federal Communications Commission, the Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Power Commission, the Interstate Commerce Commission, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Your letter refers to our decision in the Matter of Costs of Intervention, Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), B-92283, February 19, 1976, to the NRC (hereafter referred to as the NRC decision) in which we considered the legality of providing similar types of assistance to participants and intervenors in NRC rulemaking and licensing proceedings.

Due to the time constraints established by the terms of your request, we have not solicited comments and views of the agencies concerned on the questions your letter poses. However, we have examined, with respect to

2774

each agency, some of the statutory and/or regulatory authorities which authorize or direct that public hearings be held for a variety of purposes related to accomplishment of the agency mission. We find that each agency has authority to request participation by members of the general public in its proceedings, either as parties or intervenors, although there are individual differences in the extent to which such participation would be likely to be required.

Finally, we could discover no statutory prohibition against the provision of any of the types of assistance about which you have inquired.

We thus conclude that there is no significant difference in the relevant authorities for the nine agencies you named and in those of the NRC. Accordingly, the rationale of our February 19 decision to NRC is equally applicable to each agency named.

1. Provision of funds directly to participants. With respect to your first question, appropriated funds of each agency may be used to finance the costs of participants in agency hearings whenever the agency finds that ⁽¹⁾ it cannot make the required determination unless it extends financial assistance to certain interested parties who require it, and whose representation is necessary to dispose of the matter before it; and (2) the party is indigent or otherwise unable to finance its participation. It should be noted that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has specific statutory authority, provided by section 202(a) of the Magnuson-Moss Warranty-Federal Trade Commission Improvement Act, Pub. L. No. 93-637, 88 Stat. 2183, approved January 4, 1975, to provide compensation for expenses of participation for persons appearing before it. This provision is discussed on pages 4 and 5 of our aforementioned decision.

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We would like to emphasize, however, that it is within the discretion of each individual agency to determine whether the participation of the particular party involved is necessary in order for it to properly carry out its functions and whether the party is indigent or otherwise unable to finance its participation. No party has a right to intervene at Federal expense unless the agency so determines.

Finally, for the reasons set forth in the NRC decision, we believe it would be advisable for the parameters of such financial assistance, and the scope and limitations on the use of appropriated funds for this purpose to be fully set forth by the Congress in legislation, as was done in the case of the Federal Trade Commission by the provisions of section 202(a) of the "Magnuson-Moss Warranty-Federal Trade Commission Improvement Act," supra.

2. Modification of procedural rules so as to ease their financial burdens on public participants. For the reasons stated with respect to NRC in the NRC decision, we find nothing in the laws of any of the agencies considered to prevent simplification of procedures and the elimination of unduly burdensome requirements which increase the cost of participation by parties involved.

3. Provision of technical assistance by agency staff. For the same reasons given under "Access to Technical Information and Staff" in the NRC decision with respect to NRC, the same access to technical expertise may be made available by each agency. As we stated with respect to NRC, this would not extend to the assignment of agency staff members to participants in the role of individual technical advisors for the purpose of advancing the position of a particular party.

4. Provision of legal assistance by agency staff. To the extent a participant needs factual information concerning legal aspects of a proceeding, such as explanations of procedures or examples of documents required to be filed, we believe agency staff members can provide this. However, agency staff could not be permitted to act in the capacity of advocates for a participant.

5. Creation of an independent public counsel. We believe nothing precludes an agency from having its staff present information to the agency's decisionmaking bodies concerning the public interest or consumer viewpoints in the course of a proceeding in order to call attention to relevant opinions not expressed by parties representing private interests. However, no agency could use its appropriations to establish an independent entity outside its jurisdiction and control.

6. Creation of a Consumer Assistance Office such as that now employed by the FCC. On March 19, 1976, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced the formation of a new Consumer Assistance office. According to a press release from FCC:

"This office will provide a central location or coordinating point within the Commission for members of the public, citizens groups and FCC licensees who seek information or assistance.

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"The Consumer Assistance Office represents another step in the FCC's efforts to ensure prompt and accurate

211d

response to inquiries and to enhance public understanding of the Commission's policies and regulations.

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"Any person or group wishing information about the Commission's rules, matters pending or material explaining FCC policies and regulations may contact one of the full-time staff members of the Office.

"The Office also will provide information assistance to persons who wish to participate in the Commission's processes or file an application with the FCC but who are unfamiliar with the procedures to be followed.

"Finally, the Office will help prepare attractive and easy to understand brochures explaining Commission regulations and how best to comply with them."

We have been informally advised by staff of the FCC that this office is not in any way intended to act as an advocate for consumers. It does not include in its staff attorneys or professional experts in other fields. Its function is, basically, that of providing the public with factual information. We are not aware of anything which would preclude any of the agencies named in your letter from establishing a similar office.

We might also point out that our NRC decision would also be applicable to agencies other than the ones mentioned in your letter, assuming that there was no specific legislative prohibition against it, provided that the particular agency holds hearings at which it has the discretion as to whom to admit as participants or intervenors; has appropriations available to pay for "necessary expenses" to carry out the missions for which the hearings are being held; and makes the determinations mentioned in the immediately preceding paragraph. This is also true of the other types of assistance mentioned herein.

Sincerely yours,

[R.F.] KELLER

[Deputy] Comptroller General of the United States