AUTHORIZATIONS VS. APPROPRIATIONS

Or, “They talk the talk, but do they walk the walk?”

**INTRODUCTION**
In order for a federal program to become a reality, there are usually two important steps involved, the “authorization” and the “appropriation.” In some cases, programs may be “authorized” but not “appropriated,” which allows politicians to get credit for supporting a particular program even though that program may not actually be funded or become a reality.

**AUTHORIZATION**
Federal authorization laws establish policy; for example, they say that the United States government believes that public schools in America should make after-school care available to all children. In addition to establishing policy, authorizing bills also often establish programs to implement these policies (i.e., the No Child Left Behind Act, which was signed into law on January 8, 2002, establishes “21st Century Community Learning Centers,” a grant program that provides federal money for urban and rural after-school programs). Authorizing legislation also sets federal guidelines for these programs as well as spending guides for the programs; using the same example, in the No Child Left Behind Act, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program is slated to receive $1.75 billion in fiscal year 2004. Thus, in January, 2002, lawmakers received tremendous credit for their commitment to spend $1.75 billion in federal monies in 2004 on after-school programs.

**APPROPRIATION**
Once a program has been authorized, the appropriations come into play. It is through the 12 “appropriations bills” that must pass the House and Senate and be signed into law by the President each year that the Federal government spends money on discretionary programs (programs not mandated, such as Social Security, Medicare, or Veterans’ benefits). In other words, the appropriations bills determine how much money will be spent each year, and where that money will go. The appropriations process is often long and complicated, with trade-offs being made in light of the budgetary constraints under which the federal government may find itself. Going back again to our example, then, even though Congress and the President agreed that they should spend $1.75 billion on after-school programs, the appropriators may determine that in light of cost of the war in Iraq and the continuing bad economy, that they only have $600 million (or less than 35% of the amount committed) to spend on the 21st Century Community Learning Centers in 2004.

**SUMMARY**
Thus, you need both an authorization and an appropriation for most federal programs to become reality. Some programs skip the authorizing step, but that is rare since legislators do not like to enter into the sometimes contentious debates surrounding program details during consideration of an appropriations bill.