

Budget Stretching Travel Subcommittee Write-up

4.1. Travel is vital to the mission of NIH. It allows NIH investigators to learn new information that will help facilitate or promote research or patient care at NIH and in turn allow NIH scientists and physicians to disseminate to their colleagues around the world information about the scientific advances that have been made at NIH.

Recommendation: ICs should encourage appropriate travel but should nevertheless save money on the cost of travel whenever possible. Saving on the cost of travel can either allow more funds for travel or help to cover the costs of additional scientific projects. (1)

ORS/OFM: ORS and OFM are willing to work with the ICs on how to disseminate this information.

4.2. Artificial administrative limits on travel are not appropriate as a cost-savings mechanism. For example, it seems unreasonable to have artificial limits placed on the number of individuals that can attend a particular conference.

Recommendation: Travel decisions are best entrusted to NIH tenured scientists and section/lab/branch chiefs in consultation with their respective Scientific Directors and IC Directors. (3)

ORS/OFM: This is HHS policy. Changes must be made within HHS and requested from senior management from NIH.

4.3. There may be the potential for budget savings associated with the authorizing of either a Conference Lodging Allowance (CLA) or an Actual Expense Allowance (AEA). At times, however, there is considerable value in staying at one of the headquarters hotels for a major meeting due to being able to facilitate networking with colleagues and the convenience of getting to sessions.

Recommendation: Travelers/travel planners might economize if they were to spend more time attempting to find a hotel within per diem. Travel preparers should work with Omega to receive discounted rooms for travelers. (1)

ORS/OFM: Omega agents can help travelers and planners identify hotel rooms in the vicinity of the conference within per diem rates. ORS is willing to work with ICs to disseminate this information to the program areas in an effective manner.

4.4. There was general discussion that there are a range of problems with the service provided by Omega World Travel. It has been the experience of some that Omega does not always identify the least expensive airfare available, nor does it uniformly provide the desired seat assignments, etc. Our understanding is that the contract with Omega is an HHS contract that does not define specific performance standards.

Recommendation: The Omega contract should be reviewed for service improvements. Periodically, forums have been held with Omega Travel representatives and NIH travel officials to

discuss service and how to improve the service that Omega provides to NIH. Continued forums on a regular basis might improve performance. (3)

ORS/OFM: All problems with the services of Omega should be reported immediately to Ms. Joy Gaines, Program Specialist, ORS/DATS at Gainesj@mail.nih.gov or 301-451-9299. Ms. Gaines is the liaison between NIH and Omega and reports directly to HHS/PSC (the owner of the contract) all issues concerning the contractor whether or not they are resolved at her level. The service contract is reviewed annually.

Omega provides the lowest contracted government fare negotiated between the airlines and GSA. Although some travelers may find lower fares on internet searches, the contracted government fares Omega provides are fully refundable and exchangeable.

Ms. Gaines will be hosting travel fares throughout the year providing refresher training for staff on Omega procedures for IC delegated travel officials. As needed she facilitates meetings between Omega and the IC for further clarification on Omega policies and procedures.

4.5. Omega charges more when the initial contact is by telephone instead of by Fax or Email. Once a ticket has been released, Omega charges an additional fee to change the ticket. These fees should be reviewed.

Recommendation: Travelers/travel planners should be encouraged to use fax or e-mail to make reservations. Fee structure can be found on the ORS website under Employee Travel. (1)

ORS/OFM: Regardless of how Omega is contacted the service fee structure does not change. Once a ticket is release there is an additional service charge to changes made to the ticket, making it important to know exactly what the travelers' plans are in advance. If those plans are subject to change, in order to avoid an additional service charge, the travel planner should wait before requesting the release of the ticket via the travel order. ORS is willing to help ICs to disseminate information to their program areas.

4.6. Savings might result if travelers could purchase tickets directly from airlines on their US Government Visa travel card; however, this is not currently allowed except under special circumstances. A change in this policy might be beneficial.

Recommendation: Fares through the internet might be cheaper for many trips. Due to the policy of using the TMC for all transportation tickets, the NIH is spending far more on tickets. The policy should be reviewed to see if there can be exceptions, especially if using a reputable internet travel service and the savings are at least a certain percent. At the present time, GSA requires that we go through Omega. (3)

ORS/OFM: This policy has been reviewed and prohibited by HHS.

4.7. Similarly, savings could result if NIH were allowed to use any non-contract carrier that charged less (rather than only allowing another carrier if 40% less).

Recommendation: OFM is presently working on this issue with the Department to see if we can take advantage of these lower costing airfares, as long as they are procured through Omega and the 40% savings rules is met. The 40% savings rule itself should be discussed with the appropriate

individuals to see if a policy change to allow a lower percentage savings would permit use of alternative airfares, as this still would enhance the amount of money that NIH might save. (3)

ORS/OFM: Policy has been reviewed and prohibited by HHS

4.8. Savings could result if tickets were purchased earlier. There have been overseas trips where the flight cost increased more than \$1000 from the time the tickets were booked until ticketed.

Recommendation: Travelers/travel planners should be encouraged to book overseas airline tickets as soon as possible when planning a trip.

When possible, travel authorizations, especially foreign, should be prepared and rapidly approved and sent to Omega to ensure the lower ticket fare. (1)

ORS/OFM: ORS and OFM agree and will work with the ICs to support their efforts on this item.

4.9. Expenses for trips to visit biotech/pharmaceutical companies used to be covered by the companies in most situations. Due to current ethics-related policies, if for official duty-related travel, generally these trips now must be paid by NIH if there is any chance of a collaboration. With tightening budgets, this is more and more of an issue.

Recommendation: The ethics-related issues should be reconsidered. Many scientists do not understand why a reasonable person would consider having the company cover the expenses of these trips as constituting an actual conflict of interest. (3)

ORS/OFM: ORS and ORF agree this is an ethics issue and should be pursued through ethics channels.

4.10. Related to the above-mentioned trips to visit biotech/pharmaceutical companies, one should reconsider when expenses can be paid by an outside sponsor. Whenever this occurs, travel funds are saved.

Recommendation: Sponsored travel should be encouraged in order to save government funds. This would allow travelers to be able to travel on more scientific trips or have additional funds for important scientific research. (1)

ORS/OFM: ORS and ORF agree this is an ethics issue and should be pursued through ethics channels.

4.11. Travel in October or spanning October 1 is problematic due to the inability to use fiscal funds from one year to cover travel in the next fiscal year. This can result in late purchasing of tickets and higher cost. This is a situation where money might be saved and travel facilitated if a traveler were allowed to purchase directly from the airline a refundable ticket on his/her US Government travel Visa card.

Recommendation: Current policy states that travelers are allowed to use their Government Travel Card to purchase a ticket directly from the airline only under emergency circumstances. Allowing travelers to purchase tickets from the airline directly on travel could result in increased savings on individual trips. According to OFM, GSA uses airfare purchase information from Omega in order to negotiate the city-pair airfare, which reputedly saves the Government considerable funds.

However, given the frequency with which non-government fares are less than government fares, this possibility should be further evaluated. GSA negotiates fares each year. (3)

ORS/OFM: This is a two part issue. Travelers cannot purchase tickets directly from the airlines in a non emergency situation. If they were it would make accounting practices of government airline tickets even more difficult. In addition it is prohibited by HHS travel policy.

Secondly, regarding GSA contracted fares: If there is a particular travel pattern that NIHers must travel frequently for business eg: Washington DC to Albany, GA that should be evaluated, please notify Ms. Gaines in the beginning of each calendar year so that she can inform GSA that this particular destination should be evaluated so that perhaps a less expensive fare can be negotiated.

4.12. Tax exemptions should be applied for whenever possible. These are applicable in a number of states related to hotel room tax.

Recommendation: The travel planner should attach the tax exempt form when applicable to the travel authorization that the traveler takes on his/her trip. This should be an added step on the travel planner's checklist in the completion of a travel authorization. This could result in substantial savings. (1)

ORS/OFM: ORS and OFM agree with this recommendation and will assist the ICs in anyway they can to accomplish this item.

4.13. IC policies differ on travel budgets. When post-docs are limited to a specific travel amount, they often are creative about finding ways to economize.

Recommendation: IC Directors and PIs should set priorities on the travel authorizations for the year. They should consider allowing more trips and reduce costs per trip. This would allow the scientists to attend more trips. (1)

ORS/OFM: ORS agrees.

4.14. Foreign travel leave policy is problematic. When travel is part of official duty, there are restrictions on annual leave, especially for sponsored travel. This is restrictive to NIH employees out of proportion to others attending the same conference but in addition can cost NIH more money. For example, if a traveler is invited to a conference in Europe, it is common for the speaker to be invited to give another talk 2-3 days later at a nearby university. Generally, the NIH employee would intend to be on vacation for the intervening days; however, because of the inability to take annual leave, NIH must pay for the intervening days, deny a valid and potentially important opportunity to speak at a second site overseas, or suggest that the employee return home first and then fly back to Europe, which would be particularly expensive and burdensome.

Recommendation: When possible, NIH should allow travelers to remain in the foreign country instead of returning to the US and having to return to the foreign country, as the additional per diem cost would be less expensive than buying an additional airfare ticket to return overseas. The policy related to leave associated with official travel should also be re-discussed, as revision of the policy could additionally save NIH travel funds. (3)

4.15. Overnight parking permits for travelers. Money can be saved if travelers use the subway or NIH Airport Shuttles rather than driving or taking taxis. Leaving a vehicle on campus requires an

overnight parking permit. The current procedure requires an inconvenient visit to the NIH Police office in Building 31 with vehicle registration.

Recommendation: Work with the NIH Police to develop an easier procedure for leaving cars on campus. As a result of the dollar stretching efforts, there is a newly posted on the ORS website is a Temporary Overnight Parking Request Form located at http://dtts.ors.od.nih.gov/parking/dttsOnlinePermit_form.htm. However, the current policy only allows overnight parking in locations that are not conveniently located for many scientists. We need to discuss with NIH Police. (1,3) COMPLETE