

P.M.-W

DECISION



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

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FILE: B-192781

DATE: April 24, 1979

MATTER OF: Mr. James Ridgell - Relocation -

[Claim for Househunting expenses of spouse Incident to official change of Duty Station]

DIGEST: Permission for a househunting trip given verbally to an employee by official not vested with authority to authorize travel after preparation and receipt of travel authorization which did not authorize such trip under Federal Travel Regulations, para. 2-4.1 (May 1973), may not be paid under orders amended after travel was performed.

This action is in response to a letter dated August 31, 1978, from Mr. Sol Cohen, Director, Finance Division, General Services Administration (GSA), Region 9, San Francisco, California 94105, requesting a decision concerning the propriety of making payment to an employee, Mr. James N. Ridgell, on a voucher in the amount of \$576.40. The voucher represents expenses incurred by the employee's wife in connection with a househunting trip incident to an official change of duty station.

The submission indicates that Mr. Ridgell was selected for transfer on April 18, 1978, from Sterling, Virginia, to San Francisco, California. His orders were prepared on April 24, 1978, in order to get advance approval at the regional and central offices, with a transfer date of May 14, 1978. Before his orders were issued, the Regional Commissioner requesting his transfer orally indicated that appropriate authorization of a househunting trip would be sought if necessary. However, item 8a(1) of his travel orders authorized by the Acting Regional Administrator shows round-trip travel to seek permanent quarters was not authorized. The Regional Commissioner states that at the time Mr. Ridgell's orders were prepared a househunting trip was intended, but such travel was not indicated in his travel orders because the dates of such househunting travel were not known due to Mr. Ridgell not knowing when his house would be sold. After Mr. Ridgell determined that his house could not be sold immediately, his request for a househunting trip by his wife was verbally approved by the Regional Commissioner. However, the travel orders were not amended prior to Mrs. Ridgell's travel during the period June 8 through June 13, 1978.

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The Regional Commissioner contends that the failure to amend the travel authorization prior to the househunting trip was an administrative oversight and that the Acting Regional Administrator indicates that he will approve an amended travel authorization if payment of the househunting expenses may be made.

Under the provisions of subsection 5724a(a)(2) of title 5, United States Code, which is implemented by Federal Travel Regulations (FPMR 101-7) (FTR), Chapter 2, Part 4 (May 1973), an employee and his spouse may be authorized one round trip to seek permanent residence quarters at a duty station. FTR para. 2-4.1 (May 1973), establishes the general policy for authorizing travel to seek residence quarters and provides payment of the travel and transportation expenses of the spouse traveling in lieu of travel by the employee for one round trip between the old and new duty station when authorized and accomplished at any time before relocation of the family to the new duty station. Such trip shall be authorized when the circumstances indicate it is actually needed and it may be less costly to the Government and more convenient to the employee to complete arrangement for new residence quarters before the move actually takes place.

It is Mr. Ridgell's contention that when he accepted employment with GSA in San Francisco, it was agreed that his wife would be allowed a househunting trip and that it was after the trip had been completed he discovered that the written approval had not been accomplished. He further states that his wife's househunting trip resulted in a saving to the Government exceeding the amount reimbursable if he had located a residence at a later time after his family's occupancy of temporary quarters.

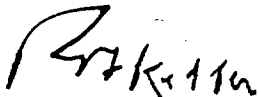
The record shows that Mr. Ridgell went to San Francisco on May 14, 1978, while his wife's househunting travel was performed during the period June 8 through June 13, 1978. We have held that subsequent authorization for a househunting trip given only on the basis of an after-the-fact determination that authorization of such expenses would have resulted in reduced cost to the Government furnishes no basis for payment. B-185511, May 3, 1976.

Federal Travel Regulations, para. 2-4.1(c) requires that the permanent change-of-station order be issued to include authorization for the trip for finding residence quarters in order to be made at Government expense. We have held, however, that househunting

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expenses may be paid where advance written authorization was not made in cases where lack of proper authorization is the result of administrative error. Administrative errors which may be retroactively corrected by subsequent authorization are those in which the failure of advance authorization does not comport with the specific intent of the appropriate officials. B-179449, November 26, 1973, and B-185511, supra. The submission indicates that the Acting Regional Administrator, not the Acting Regional Commissioner, was vested with authority to authorize travel. If the Acting Regional Administrator intended before preparation of the initial travel authorization to allow a househunting trip for Mr. Ridgell, then postapproval of this trip would constitute correction of an administrative error. B-185511, supra, B-182508, June 3, 1975; and B-179449, supra. However, there is nothing in the record to indicate that the Acting Regional Administrator was aware that a househunting trip was contemplated before the trip was performed.

Accordingly, on the record before us, the employee may not be reimbursed the expenses claimed and the voucher accompanying the submission will be retained in this Office.


Deputy Comptroller General
of the United States