

Volpe

14979 PLMI

DECISION



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

FILE: B-197266

DATE: September 22, 1980

MATTER OF: Dr. Stuart T. Brown - [Claim for long distance telephone call and postage expenses]

DIGEST: Public Health Service doctor was transferred from Georgia to Switzerland. Claim for long distance call to wife to discuss housing situation may be paid where agency official certified call was in interest of Government under 31 U.S.C. § 680a. GAO will not question such certification. See 56 Comp. Gen. 28 (1976). Claim for postage for mailing documents related to relocation may not be paid since it is personal in nature and does not involve "official matter."

This decision is in response to a request from Claude F. Pickelsimer, Jr., Director, Financial Management Office, Center for Disease Control, Public Health Service, concerning a voucher submitted by Dr. Stuart T. Brown for a long distance telephone call and postage costs incurred incident to his transfer to an overseas duty station. The issues are whether Dr. Brown may be reimbursed for a long distance call which appears personal in nature and for postage costs for mailing documents in support of his claim for relocation expenses.

Dr. Brown was transferred from Atlanta, Georgia, to Geneva, Switzerland, on January 29, 1979, and incident to that transfer he submitted a claim for reimbursement of a long distance telephone call from Switzerland to Georgia in the amount of \$89.29. Although the call has been certified by an appropriate agency official as necessary in the interest of the Government, the agency questions payment of the claim since Dr. Brown admitted the call was not for official business but was to discuss housing decisions with his wife. In addition, Dr. Brown is unable to furnish a receipt for the telephone call since it was lost in the exchanges of correspondence in connection with his transfer.

Under 31 U.S.C. § 680a (1976) appropriated funds are available only for long distance telephone calls made in the transaction of public business. That section requires the head of an agency or his designee to certify that such calls are necessary in the interest of the Government before payment for such calls is made.

~~0/2/31~~

113383

B-197266

Our Office has held that section 680a imposes on the appropriate agency official the responsibility to determine, after investigating all of the facts involved in a given situation, whether a long distance call was on public business and was necessary in the interest of the Government. 56 Comp. Gen. 28 (1976); and 44 id. 595 (1965). We will not substitute our judgment for that of the official designated under section 680a because the agency official is in a better position than we are to examine the facts involved in each case and determine whether a call is in the interest of the Government. 56 Comp. Gen. 28, supra; 44 id. 595, supra; Mary H. Smith, B-192691, February 20, 1979; and Thomas P. Woll, B-186820, February 23, 1978.

However, it should be emphasized that the authority vested in the agency official to approve a long distance call also carries with it the responsibility to ascertain that the call involved the transaction of public business and is not merely personal in nature. While we have not attempted to impose standards to distinguish personal calls from official calls, our decisions should not be construed to sanction reimbursement for personal calls. The ultimate responsibility for ensuring that only official business calls are approved rests with the appropriate agency official. Where such an official has made the appropriate certification, no liability rests with the certifying or disbursing officer. See 56 Comp. Gen. 28, supra.

The voucher submitted by Dr. Brown shows an approving official certified the call as necessary in the interest of the Government. However, since the record before us suggests that this call may have been personal in nature, the approving official may wish to reexamine this certification to be certain that the facts support the determination made on this call. If, upon reexamination, the approving official reaffirms that the call was on public business and necessary in the interest of the Government, we will not overturn that determination, and the claim may be paid. With regard to absence of a receipt, we know of no requirement under the Joint Travel Regulations, Vol. 1, for a receipt or other evidence of the expenditure unless the employing agency has such a requirement. See, however, Federal Travel Regulations, para. 1-11.3c(16).

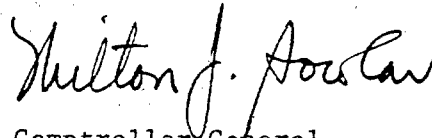
Dr. Brown has also submitted a claim for postage in the amount of \$4 for mailing letters and documents to support his claim for moving expenses. Dr. Brown explains that in Switzerland he did not have access to the franked envelopes of the Center for Disease

B-197266

Control and he could not charge this cost to the World Health Organization, where he was currently assigned.

We can recall no prior decisions on this question, and we know of no authority by which this item may be paid. This appears to be an expense of a personal nature rather than an "official matter."

Accordingly, the voucher may be partially paid in accordance with the above discussion.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Milton J. Fowler".

For the Comptroller General
of the United States