

DECISION

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

Mr. Tipton
PLM-I
31148

FILE: B-217372

DATE: August 2, 1985

MATTER OF: Paul J. Clemens - House-hunting Trip -
Telephone Calls and Maps

DIGEST:

Employee, who was authorized a house-hunting trip in connection with a permanent change of station, claims reimbursement for expenses incurred in making telephone calls and purchasing maps while on that trip. Telephone calls and maps are not reimbursable under the house-hunting trip authority but may be reimbursed, if properly documented, as miscellaneous expenses under Federal Travel Regulations paras. 2-3.2 and 2-3.3. Employee must demonstrate that the telephone calls related to otherwise allowable expenses. It appears that the maps were necessary in locating suitable permanent living quarters in unfamiliar suburban area. Fact that these expenses were incurred prior to employee's change of residence is not relevant since house-hunting trip is an integral part of relocation process.

This decision is in response to a request by Mr. C. E. Tipton, Authorized Certifying Officer, Forest Service, United States Department of Agriculture, for a decision on the propriety of certifying for payment, a reclaim voucher submitted by Mr. Paul J. Clemens an employee of the Forest Service. The claim is for expenses incurred in making telephone calls and purchasing maps during a house-hunting trip preceding a permanent change of station from Falls Creek, Oregon, to Seattle, Washington. For the reasons hereafter stated, the claimed expenses may be paid within the limits set forth in this decision.

The record shows that by travel authorization dated April 18, 1984, Mr. Clemens was authorized to make a house-hunting trip for the purpose of locating suitable housing,

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incident to a change of official station. Mr. Clemens left his old official station on April 6 and arrived in Seattle on the same day. He spent about 9 days seeking residence quarters in the area.

We note that the house-hunting trip actually occurred before the travel order was issued. The travel order itself states that the house-hunting trip is authorized and that prior oral approval of the trip had been given. We have held that house-hunting trips may be authorized in this manner. Georgie M. Bond, B-192440, August 8, 1979.

In connection with his attempts to locate suitable quarters, Mr. Clemens incurred local telephone expenses of \$34.14. In addition, he is claiming reimbursement for the cost of two maps, \$6.83, of the area around the new official station. These maps were of King (Seattle) and Snohomish counties. Mr. Clemens was looking for housing primarily in the surrounding suburban areas of Seattle where houses are more economical in cost. Mr. Clemens purchased a residence in Fall City, Washington, which is located east of Seattle.

The basic authority for reimbursement of expenses incurred during a house-hunting trip incident to a permanent change of official station is 5 U.S.C. § 5724a(a)(2) (1982). The implementing regulations are found in Chapter 2, Part 4, of the Federal Travel Regulations, FPMR 101-7 (Supp. 4, October 1, 1982) (FTR), incorp. by ref., 41 C.F.R. § 101-7.003 (1983). Paragraph 2-4.1a of the FTR provides only for the payment of travel and transportation expenses of the employee and spouse on a house-hunting trip. There is nothing in these regulations specifically providing for reimbursement of miscellaneous expenses as part of the entitlements of a house-hunting trip.

With respect to reimbursement for the \$34.14 spent by Mr. Clemens for telephone calls while on the house-hunting trip, such expenses are not reimbursable under the house-hunting trip authority. However, the costs of telephone calls concerning otherwise allowable expenses may be reimbursed as miscellaneous expenses under the authority of FTR paras. 2-3.2 and 2-3.3. Thus, if Mr. Clemens can demonstrate that the telephone calls related to otherwise allowable expenses, the claimed amount may be considered for reimbursement under the miscellaneous expenses authority. Ganesh C. Bhuyan, B-202906, September 15, 1982, and cases cited therein.

The \$6.83 spent by Mr. Clemens in purchasing two county maps of the area around Seattle while on the house-hunting trip is similar to the expenses incurred for telephone calls. Such expenses are not reimbursable under the house-hunting trip authority; they are, however, reimbursable as miscellaneous expenses. We are of the view that, in the circumstances of this case, the use of the two county maps by Mr. Clemens was necessary in locating suitable housing in the Seattle area. Inasmuch as he was unfamiliar with the area and housing in the county areas was, in all probability, scattered over a large geographical area, maps were needed to minimize the mileage reimbursement and to promote the expeditious location of a new residence for Mr. Clemens and his family within the time allotted for the house-hunting trip.

The certifying officer does not feel that the expenses for telephone calls and maps may be considered as part of the miscellaneous expenses allowance authorized under FTR para. 2-3.2, since the employee, during the period of the house-hunting trip, had neither discontinued nor established residences in connection with the change of official station. However, the basic reasoning underlying our holding in Bhuyan, cited earlier, is that the house-hunting trip is an integral part of the whole relocation process. Inherent in the idea of a house-hunting trip is the fact that it will be taken before an employee is actually transferred, before he has changed residences. It is not relevant that miscellaneous expenses are incurred before an employee either disestablishes his old residence or establishes his new residence. As long as otherwise allowable miscellaneous expenses are incurred after an employee is notified of his impending transfer and there is eventually a change in residences, then reimbursement is authorized.

Accordingly, both of the claimed expenses are reimbursable as miscellaneous expenses. To receive the maximum reimbursement, 2 weeks' basic pay, all claimed miscellaneous expenses must be documented. If Mr. Clemens has documented all of his miscellaneous expenses and has not exceeded the maximum limitation, then he may be reimbursed for the expenses discussed in this decision. If he has already received the maximum documented reimbursement, then no further reimbursement may be allowed.

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The reclaim voucher may be processed in a manner consistent with the conclusions set forth in this decision.

for *Milton J. Arnold*
Comptroller General
of the United States