FEDERAL TRAVEL

Opportunities Exist to Improve Data and Information Sharing

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies rely on travel to achieve a broad range of missions. GSA helps agencies develop travel policy by providing guidance to agencies, including issuing and revising the FTR. The administration and GSA have encouraged agencies to take steps to adopt cost-savings efforts and promote efficient travel spending.

House Report 112-136 included a provision for GAO to report on whether FTR revisions resulted in measurable reductions in travel costs. This report: 1) describes selected agencies’ actions taken to address FTR revisions; 2) determines the extent to which FTR revisions led to cost savings; and 3) determines any cost savings achieved during fiscal years 2012 to 2015. GAO reviewed information from six selected federal agencies with the largest amount of travel spending in fiscal year 2015. GAO also reviewed how these agencies responded to GSA’s FTR amendments and travel bulletins to achieve cost savings.

What GAO Found

The Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, State, and Veterans Affairs, the six federal agencies with the largest travel spending in fiscal year 2015, pursued a variety of cost-saving efforts that generally aligned with regulations and guidance issued in either Federal Travel Regulation (FTR) amendments or General Services Administration (GSA) travel bulletins from fiscal year 2011 to fiscal year 2015. GSA administers and revises the FTR—which interprets statutory and other policy requirements to ensure that official travel is conducted responsibly—and minimizes administrative costs. Although GSA does not have the authority to enforce the FTR, it issues FTR amendments and travel bulletins to help federal agencies manage their respective travel programs and achieve travel cost savings through the provisions contained in the amendments and travel bulletins. GSA FTR amendments and travel bulletins issued between fiscal years 2011 and 2015 contained a total of 27 cost-saving provisions. Agency officials at each of the six selected agencies stated that their respective agencies either had policies in place that already addressed the cost-saving provisions; developed new travel policies or issued guidance that reinforced the provisions or updated existing policies related to the provisions; or advised employees to follow the FTR without implementing an agency-specific policy.

The six agencies reported that GSA’s review of the FTR to revise obsolete and outdated policies influenced their actions and resulted in cost savings. However, most of these savings could not be quantified. Only four cost-saving efforts at two agencies—the Departments of Defense and Justice—could be quantified. These agencies reported that a wide range of factors influenced their cost-saving efforts. In addition to FTR-compliance efforts, these agencies reported that administration actions on reducing travel costs, cutting waste, and promoting efficient spending influenced their approaches to managing travel costs. Agency officials also reported that broader efforts to improve operational efficiency, and efforts to responsibly use resources, also influenced their agency-specific policies and practices to promote efficient travel spending.

According to GSA and officials from the six selected agencies, data limitations existed both within the selected agencies in terms of their ability to quantify travel-related cost savings, and government-wide in terms of comparing and aggregating travel data across agencies. Without standardized reporting practices, the federal government lacks common metrics for identifying, comparing and evaluating travel spending across federal agencies. The Senior Travel Official Council (STOC) was formed in 2015 to identify efficiencies and discuss best practices related to travel cost savings. According to its charter, the STOC allows agencies to work toward more consistent reporting of travel data and share information on cost-saving efforts. Although the STOC has taken some initial action to bring agencies together, additional efforts to facilitate agencies’ information sharing and identification of promising practices could further enhance these efforts to encourage and achieve travel cost-saving across the federal government.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Administrator of GSA should work with the STOC to: 1) develop a travel data management approach that would provide GSA with more consistent travel cost data; and 2) as chair of the STOC, identify and implement promising practices to help agencies leverage travel resources and achieve cost savings.

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