

PREMIUM-CLASS TRAVEL ACCOMMODATIONS

1. REASON FOR ISSUE

a. A Government Accounting Office (GAO) report (GAO-07-1268) found improper use of premium-class travel accommodations by Government employees. Although the GAO did not identify the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in their report, all VA employees are reminded that improper use of premium-class travel results in an unnecessary additional cost to the taxpayers and must be avoided to the maximum extent possible. Accordingly, all VA travelers, supervisors, and approving officials must exercise appropriate fiduciary responsibility when making, reviewing, or approving VA travel arrangements.

b. This handbook establishes procedures for requesting, using, and managing oversight of premium-class travel accommodations by VA employees and travelers. This handbook supplements the travel regulations issued by the General Services Administration (GSA) in 41 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.) Chapters 300 - 304, also known as the Federal Travel Regulation (FTR).

2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES

a. Incorporates new procedures on authorization of premium-class travel. This policy supersedes related guidance found in MP-1, Part II, Chapter 2, dated February 28, 1995.

b. Emphasizes the need to use less than premium-class (first-class/business-class) travel accommodations for all official Government travel. Coach-class travel is required for all official Government travel, unless approved by the appropriate authority on an exception basis before beginning travel.

c. Includes a new format for requesting premium-class accommodations.

d. Requires travelers to report and justify the use of premium-class travel for which they did not have prior approval from the Assistant Secretary for Management (ASM) because of extenuating circumstances or emergency situations.

e. Eliminates sections that are already located in the FTR.

f. Requires Under Secretaries or their designee to review all requests for employees within their Administration.

3. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE: Charge Card Oversight and Travel Policy Service (CCO & TPS) (047E3), Office of Financial Business Operations, Office of Finance. Comments, questions, or suggestions may be addressed to CCO & TPS at 810 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20420 or travelpolicy@va.gov.

4. RELATED DIRECTIVES AND HANDBOOKS: VA directives and handbooks in the 0631 series.

5. RESCISSIONS: MP-1, Part II, Chapter 2, paragraphs 8f, 8g, 8h, 8i, line 1m of Appendix A, and Appendix L (in its entirety), dated February 28, 1995.

CERTIFIED BY:

**BY DIRECTION OF THE SECRETARY
OF VETERANS AFFAIRS:**

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/s/
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Distribution: Electronic Only

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PREMIUM-CLASS TRAVEL ACCOMMODATIONS

1. PURPOSE. To revise Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) procedures for requesting, using, and managing oversight of premium-class travel accommodations in connection with official Government travel.

2. SCOPE

a. All VA approving officials and travelers are reminded that they travel for official Government purposes at taxpayer expense. Accordingly, they shall ensure that their activities are prudent in terms of cost, location, and appropriateness.

b. VA requires the use of coach-class travel accommodations when performing official Government travel. Premium-class (first or business class) travel at Government expense is only permitted on an exception basis and may only be granted by the Assistant Secretary for Management (ASM). Requests for premium-class travel must be justified according to the FTR and VA policy.

c. These procedures apply to all premium-class travel accommodations to be purchased in connection with official Government travel with appropriated (i.e., VA) funds or funds donated from a non-Federal source.

d. Employees and local authorizing/approving officials who do not comply with the guidance in the FTR and VA policy pertaining to the use of premium-class travel accommodations may be subject to administrative and/or disciplinary action.

3. RESPONSIBILITIES

a. Employee Travelers

(1) Minimize costs of official travel by exercising the same care in incurring expenses that a prudent person would exercise if traveling on personal business and expending personal funds. Excess costs, circuitous routes, delays, or luxury accommodations and services unnecessary or unjustified in the performance of official business are not acceptable under this standard. Employees will be responsible for excess costs and any additional expenses incurred for personal preference or convenience.

(2) Perform official travel correctly, pay any charges incurred through failure to comply with the provisions of this handbook (regardless of who may have assisted them in making travel arrangements), and remit timely payment for expenses purchased in connection with official travel.

(3) Sign and submit to Facility Director, Supervisor, or Authorizing Official, all requests for the use of premium-class travel accommodations using the appropriate format (see paragraphs 6 - 9), including all applicable medical or other supporting documentation, at least 30 days in advance of travel.

(4) Arrange travel, as soon as possible, after it is authorized in order to secure accommodations or desired schedules and to obtain the lowest available fares for transportation.

(5) Maintain a record of expenses properly chargeable to VA funds.

(6) Submit a claim for reimbursement of expenses within 5 working days upon completion of authorized travel. Travelers in a continuous travel status will submit vouchers at least once each month when travel period exceeds 30 days.

(7) Retain documentation for 6 years and 3 months for audit purposes.

(8) Try to participate in various frequent traveler programs offered by airlines, hotels, car rental vendors, etc., in order to reduce overall travel costs by using benefits earned through these programs for future official travel.

(a) Participation in such programs will not be seen as a basis for overriding the requirement to adhere to GSA programs (e.g., city-pair contracts).

(b) Participation in such programs will not relieve the employee of the responsibility for minimizing official travel costs by exercising the same care in incurring expenses as a prudent person would exercise if traveling on personal business.

b. Facility Directors, Supervisors, and Authorizing Officials (AO)

(1) Authorize only official travel that is necessary for the purpose of carrying out VA's mission.

(2) Review all premium-class travel accommodations requests forwarded by employees, and determine whether the request complies with the guidance in the FTR, VA policy, and the procedures in this handbook. When reviewing requests, ensure all such travel is performed in the most economical and effective manner, giving consideration to each leg of the travel separately, and to the use of a reasonable rest stop/period in lieu of premium-class accommodations without a rest stop/period.

(3) Recommend approval/disapproval. If recommending approval, forward the request to Network Director/Chief Officer, Area Director, Director of Field Programs or Associate Director, or Assistant Secretary, as appropriate. If disapproved, return request to the traveler through proper levels of management.

(4) Ensure that all travel is authorized and performed consistent with the FTR and VA directives.

c. **VHA Network Director/Chief Officer, VBA Area Director, NCA Director of Field Programs or Associate Director, and Assistant Secretaries (Senior Official)**. Review all requests for the use of premium-class travel accommodations forwarded by AOs. If disapproved, return request to the traveler through proper levels of management. If approved, forward request to the Charge Card Oversight and Travel Policy Service (047E3) at VACO. Requests may either be scanned and emailed to travelpolicy@va.gov, or may be faxed to 202-273-6996.

d. **Charge Card Oversight and Travel Policy Service (CCO & TPS), Office of Financial Business Operations, Office of Finance**

(1) Develop policy and procedures on the use of premium-class travel accommodations.

(2) Review all premium-class travel accommodation requests forwarded by Senior Officials (paragraph 3c above), and determine within 3 business days whether the request complies with the FTR and VA policy.

(3) Draft a recommendation package for submission to the Office of the Under Secretary or Assistant Secretary, as determined by the hierarchy of the employee. Recommendations will provide documentation and the statutory authority for the recommendation made.

(4) Submit annual report to GSA on the use of premium-class accommodations within VA. The format of this report is determined by GSA.

e. **Under Secretaries (or their designee)**. Review premium-class travel requests approved by AOs and Senior Officials (paragraph 3c above) within the Administration and forwarded by CCO & TPS. Review to include CCO & TPS's review/recommendation, and then forward the request to the Assistant Secretary for Management.

f. **Assistant Secretary for Management (ASM)**. The ASM is the approving official for the use of premium-class travel accommodations by VA employees.

NOTE: The ASM will not approve his/her own premium-class travel accommodations. The ASM will request approval for his/her use of premium-class travel by a senior official within the office of the Secretary of VA.

4. DEFINITIONS

a. **Coach-class**: The basic class of accommodations offered to travelers regardless of fare paid.

b. **Premium-class**: Any class of transportation service above coach, e.g., business class or first class.

c. **Rest period**: Duration of rest not to exceed 24 hours at either an intermediate point en route or at the destination and must allow for appropriate overnight lodging. Begins upon arrival at the lodging accommodation and ends at departure from the accommodation.

d. **Rest stop**: See rest period.

5. GENERAL

a. Justified upgrades to premium-class travel are provided incrementally. If coach-class is not available, then business-class travel may be requested; if business-class accommodations are not available, then first-class may be requested.

b. All requests for the use of premium-class accommodations must be signed by the traveler. Signature authority will not be delegated.

c. The approval for an employee to use premium-class accommodations does not extend to other family members or medical attendant unless specified in writing by a competent medical authority, and subsequently approved by the ASM. In the absence of such approval, family members and medical attendants shall be limited to less than premium-class accommodations.

d. If extenuating circumstances or emergency situations prevent advance authorization/approval from the ASM, the employee must include an explanation in his/her request justifying why ASM approval could not be obtained before beginning travel. The request and required documentation must be submitted within 5 business days of returning from travel, or the employee will be responsible for the cost difference between the premium-class accommodations used and the transportation class for which the employee was eligible.

e. When requesting premium-class travel accommodations due to a disability or special need as described in FTR §300-3.1 (Glossary of Terms), the traveler must obtain a statement from a competent medical authority, which briefly describes the condition along with a recommendation for a specific class of transportation accommodations for the traveler. If the employee will require the assistance of a medical attendant en route, the medical authority's statement must specify this requirement and a recommended class of travel accommodations for the attendant. In all cases, the statement must be written in English and dated within 6 months of travel.

f. When requesting premium-class travel accommodations due to a special need, the traveler must describe the reason why commercial coach 'bulkhead,' aisle seating, two adjoining seats, or other less expensive accommodations cannot be used in lieu of the higher cost premium-class accommodations.

g. ASM approval is not required for premium-class transportation costs paid in full through agency acceptance of payment from a non-Federal source in accordance with FTR Chapter 304 and travel upgrades at personal expense, including redemption of frequent travel benefits.

h. All requests for premium-class accommodations will specify the purpose of the travel involved. The travel purpose will specify one of seven general purpose categories (Appendix A).

i. A copy of the ASM's decision must be attached to the travel authority and expense report for audit purposes.

6. AIRLINE ACCOMMODATIONS

a. Reason for Requesting First-Class Accommodations

(1) No coach or business-class accommodations are reasonably available. "Reasonably available" means available on an airline that is scheduled to leave within 24 hours of your proposed departure time, or scheduled to arrive within 24 hours of your proposed arrival time.

(2) To accommodate a disability or special need, and such condition is substantiated in writing by a competent medical authority.

(3) When required because of exceptional security circumstances or when required because of the VA mission.

b. Reason for Requesting Business-Class Accommodations

(1) Regularly scheduled flights between the authorized origin and destination points including connection points provide only premium-class accommodations, and the employee certifies this circumstance on the travel voucher.

(2) No space is available in coach-class accommodations on any scheduled flights in time to accomplish the purpose of the official travel, which is so urgent that it cannot be postponed.

(3) To accommodate a disability or special need, and such condition is substantiated in writing by a competent medical authority.

(4) Required for security purposes or because of exceptional circumstances, as determined by the AO, which makes the use essential to the successful performance of the VA mission.

(5) Coach-class accommodations on an authorized/approved foreign air carrier do not provide adequate sanitation or health standards.

(6) The use results in an overall savings to the Government by avoiding additional subsistence costs, overtime, or lost productive time while awaiting coach-class accommodations.

(7) Origin and/or destination are OCONUS; the scheduled flight time, including layovers and change of planes, is in excess of 14 hours; the purpose or mission for the travel is so unexpected and urgent it cannot be delayed or postponed; and a rest period cannot be scheduled en route or before starting work.

NOTE: The length of a traveler's flight, including layovers, is not a justification for using premium-class travel. Travelers will make every effort to schedule a rest period either en route or at the destination before starting work. A rest period negates the use of premium class travel. Premium class travel should be the exception, not the rule, for flights over 14 hours.

c. **Request Procedures.** Prepare VA Form 0899 Request for Premium-Class Travel Accommodations (Appendix B) and include a competent medical authority's statement, when applicable. Requests will be reviewed by Authorizing Officials (paragraphs 3b and 3c) before forwarding to CCO & TPS for review, Under Secretary or Assistant Secretary for concurrence, and ASM for decision.

7. HELICOPTER SERVICE

a. **Reason for Requesting Use.** The use of helicopter service is considered premium-class and must be specifically authorized or approved by the ASM as being advantageous to the Government. In making such determination, the ASM will consider the following:

(1) The need for this type of transportation.

(2) The availability of other types of less costly transportation which would get the traveler to the destination in time to perform the authorized purpose of the travel.

(3) Whether the time and cost factors are advantageous to the Government.

b. **Request Procedures.** Travelers will prepare a memorandum justifying the criteria in 7a above. Requests will be reviewed by Authorizing Officials (paragraphs 3b and 3c) before forwarding to CCO & TPS for review, Under Secretary or Assistant Secretary for concurrence, and ASM for decision.

8. TRAIN ACCOMMODATIONS

a. Reason for Requesting First-Class Accommodations

(1) No coach or business-class accommodations are reasonably available. "Reasonably available" means available and scheduled within 24 hours of your proposed departure time, or scheduled to arrive within 24 hours of your proposed arrival time.

(2) To accommodate a disability or special need, and such condition is substantiated in writing by a competent medical authority.

(3) Exceptional security measures are necessary.

(4) Coach-class accommodations on an authorized/approved foreign rail carrier do not provide adequate sanitation or health standards.

b. **Extra-Fare Trains.** The use of the lowest class of service available on any Amtrak Acela train service (including Acela Express) is deemed advantageous to the Government and does not require advance authorization from the ASM. However, first-class accommodations on Acela do require advance authorization from the ASM.

c. **Sleeping Car Accommodations.** Slumber coach accommodations are allowed when night travel is involved. When coach-class accommodations are not reasonably available, first-class accommodations may be authorized by local approving officials upon certification by the traveler on the travel voucher. This certification will be accepted as prima facie evidence of the facts and does not require advance authorization from the ASM. Sleeping accommodations may be obtained when more economical to the Government.

d. **Request Procedures.** Prepare VA Form 0899 Request for Premium-Class Travel Accommodations (Appendix B) and include a competent medical authority's statement, when applicable. Requests will be reviewed by Authorizing Officials (paragraphs 3b and 3c) before forwarding to CCO & TPS for review, Under Secretary or Assistant Secretary for concurrence, and ASM for decision.

9. SHIP ACCOMMODATIONS

a. Reason for Requesting First-Class Accommodations.

- (1) Lowest first-class (i.e., coach equivalent) accommodations are not available.
- (2) To accommodate a disability or special need, and such condition is substantiated in writing by a competent medical authority.
- (3) Exceptional security measures are necessary.

b. **Request Procedures.** Prepare VA Form 0899 Request for Premium-Class Travel Accommodations (Appendix B) and include a competent medical authority's statement, when applicable. Requests will be reviewed by Authorizing Officials (paragraphs 3b and 3c) before forwarding to CCO & TPS for review, Under Secretary or Assistant Secretary for concurrence, and ASM for decision.

10. REFERENCES

- a. GAO Report to Congressional Requestors (GAO-07-1268) dated September 2007, PREMIUM-CLASS TRAVEL, Internal Control Weaknesses Governmentwide Led to Improper and Abusive Use of Premium Class Travel.
- b. OMB Letter dated January 8, 2008, Use of Premium Class Travel.
- c. Title 41 CFR, Chapters 300 – 304.

APPENDIX A

PURPOSE FOR TRAVEL

Site Visit: Visit to a particular site in order to personally perform operational or managerial activities; e.g., oversee programs, grant operations, or management activities for internal control purposes; carry out an audit, inspection, or repair activity; conduct negotiations; provide instructions; provide technical assistance.

Information Meeting: Attend a meeting to discuss general agency operations, review status reports or discuss topics of general interest. If a site visit was conducted as part of the same trip, consider the entire trip to be site visit.

Training Attendance: To receive training.

Speech or Presentation: To make a speech or presentation, deliver a paper, or otherwise take part in a formal program other than a training course.

Conference Attendance: To attend a conference, convention, seminar or symposium for purposes of observation or education only with a formal role in the proceedings.

Relocation: To move from one official duty station to another (same as a permanent change of station (PCS)).

Entitlement Travel: Travel to which an employee (or dependent) is entitled as a result of an assignment; e.g., official vacation or home leave; medical, emergency, and education travel.

APPENDIX B

VA FORM 0899 REQUEST FOR PREMIUM-CLASS TRAVEL ACCOMMODATIONS

NOTE: When preparing or reviewing VA Form 0899, employees and approving officials should refer to the appropriate paragraph pertaining to the mode of travel for which premium-class accommodations are being requested. Not all blocks listed in Section III pertain to every mode of conveyance.



VA0899.pdf