

Department of Veterans Affairs

Memorandum

Date: March 30, 2017

From: Assistant Inspector General for Investigations (51)

Subj: Administrative Investigation – Alleged Misuse of Travel Funds, Health Resource Center, Topeka, KS (2017-01003-IQ-0095)

To: Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management (10N)

Purpose

The VA Office of Inspector General Administrative Investigations Division investigated an allegation that the Acting Director for Member Services, Mr. Matthew Eitutis, misused VA travel funds when he and his colleagues frequently travelled from Topeka, KS, to attend short duration meetings in various states and then travelled back to Kansas.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

To assess this allegation we interviewed Mr. Eitutis; Mr. Steven Young, Deputy Under-Secretary for Health for Operations Management (DUSHOM); Ms. Janet Murphy, former Acting DUSHOM; and other VA employees. We also reviewed travel, email, and personnel records, as well as relevant Federal laws and regulations and VA policy.

Results

Frequent Travel was necessary for Mr. Eitutis and his colleagues.

Background

Personnel records reflected that Mr. Eitutis began working as Chief Business Officer, VA Health Resource Center (HRC) on November 3, 2013, and he was promoted to HRC Director on February 9, 2014. Mr. Eitutis told us that in September 2015, he was given responsibility for the Health Eligibility Center (HEC). He said that the Deputy Secretary appointed him to bring the HEC into compliance with an OIG's recommendations associated with their review of alleged mismanagement at the HEC.¹ On January 14, 2016, he was detailed as the Acting Director of Member Services. In February 2016, the Deputy Secretary

¹ VA OIG report: *Veterans Health Administration, Review of Alleged Mismanagement at the Health Eligibility Center*, 14-01792-510, September 2, 2015.

designated him as the lead to resolve OIG findings with the Veteran Crisis Line (VCL) as a result of an OIG report regarding VCL caller response and quality assurance.²

Alleged Misuse of Travel Funds

The Federal Travel Regulations state, “Agencies may pay only those expenses essential to the transaction of official business” and “Employees must exercise the same care in incurring expenses that a prudent person would exercise if traveling on personal business.” 41 CFR §§ 301-2.2 and 301-2.3.

VA policy states, “Employees traveling on official business will have approval in writing or electronically from a direct line supervisor.” VA Travel Administration, Volume XIV, Chapter 1, Paragraph 010201A1, (May 2013).

Travel records reflected that between September 2015 and December 2016 Mr. Eitutis traveled 72 times.

- Of the 72 trips, 19 were to the HEC in Atlanta, GA. When asked about his travel to Atlanta, Mr. Eitutis said, “Starting in September [2015] I was on an airplane nearly every single week with the exception of a couple of weeks until about February to be in Atlanta to understand the issues and to begin to put together an implementation plan to resolve all the [OIG] findings for the HEC.”
- Of the 72 trips, 7 were to Canandaigua, NY. Ms. Murphy, the then Acting DUSHOM, said responsibilities associated with the VCL were given to Mr. Eitutis, because she and the VA Deputy Secretary discussed who should take over the VCL call center, with both agreeing it would be Mr. Eitutis based on his experience with the HEC and HRC.
- Of the 72 trips, 32 were to VA Central Office (VACO) to brief the Deputy Secretary, face-to-face, on the progress of the HEC and VCL. In reference to these trips, Mr. Eitutis told us, “I’ve spent a lot of my time in Washington, DC, doing my job, and that is finding resources, briefing leadership, and de-escalating issues and problems inside VHA for the sheer fact of me reporting to the Deputy Secretary.” Ms. Murphy said Mr. Eitutis’ travel to Washington, DC, was primarily to brief the Deputy Secretary, and was “absolutely” a part of his official duties.
- Of the 72 trips, 14 were to various locations for training and site visits of which he had oversight responsibility as the Acting Director of Member Services.

² VA OIG Report: *Veterans Crisis Line Caller Response and Quality Assurance Concerns*, Canandaigua, New York, 14-03540-123, February 11, 2016.

In addition to travel records, we found several blanket travel authorizations that were valid for 1-month increments allowing Mr. Eitutis and his teammates to travel as required. When we asked a Member Services employee about the travel authorizations she said:

“It’s part of VA policy that any time, travel, regardless of whether it’s to go for training or conferences, if it exceeds a certain dollar amount, it needs to have a higher approval than just the local approval, and so this is what this particular travel fell under because of the number of people, the amount that it was going to cost for them to travel because adding airfare and hotels, meals, the normal expenses that come with traveling, you know rental cars for them to get around in Atlanta, this is just kind of standard approval for this type of travel.”

Ms. Murphy additionally said, “I signed several memos authorizing blocks of travel for him and his team.” VA policy states:

Blanket authorizations will only be used for a named employee whose duties require travel of a repetitive nature. Blanket authorizations will not be used for conference travel, foreign travel, travel received from a non-Federal source (donated travel), permanent change-of-station travel, other-than-coach class travel, training-related travel or invitational travel (e.g., pre-employment interview travel, volunteer travel). Both unlimited and limited blanket authorizations will include an estimate of the travel costs to be incurred over the period covered by the authorization. Except for no-cost travel, blanket authorizations will be created using the electronic travel system. VA Travel Administration, Volume XIV – Chapter 1, Section 010203, (May 2013).

Conclusion

We did not substantiate that Mr. Eitutis or his colleagues misused travel funds. There was a need for Mr. Eitutis to travel frequently to GA, NY, and VACO for his official VA duties, as well as his support staff. We found that travel authorizations for Mr. Eitutis and his colleagues were within VA travel policy and approved accordingly. Although three Member Services employees and one HEC employee felt that it was not necessary for Mr. Eitutis to travel this frequently, his leadership, Mr. Young and Ms. Murphy, as well as multiple other Member Services and HEC employees stated that frequent travel was necessary in order for Mr. Eitutis to fulfill his official VA responsibilities.



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