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Contact: Diane.Shinn@dc.gov, 202-727-8991

D.C. Employee Travel Payment Policies Need Improvement

Errors in calculation of travel costs resulted in over-/under-payments to government travelers; oversight of repayment process needs refinement to ensure accuracy

WASHINGTON, December 20, 2018 – Even with oversight by multiple reviewers, errors were found in a small sample of travel payments for D.C. government employees who were either over- or underpaid for travel costs, according to a new report released today by the Office of the District of Columbia Auditor (ODCA).

The report, ***Accuracy and Consistency Needed in Travel Advances and Reconciliations***, was prompted by the personal experience of an employee of ODCA who, when completing a travel form from the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO) after returning from government travel, discovered that the pre-filled formulas on the travel form miscalculated the amount owed, twice crediting the amount of the advance payment.

Among the report's findings:

- Errors in calculating travel costs resulted in inaccurate payments to travelers.
- A lack of sufficient oversight resulted in unjustified and unapproved costs and significant delays in reconciling travel expenses.
- A lack of consistent travel policies resulted in significant variation in how agencies and government agency clusters processed travel advances and reconciliations.
- D.C.'s travel policies did not address sale and use tax exemptions, resulting in unnecessary travel expenses.

The Office of the City Administrator has drafted but not yet released new travel guidance. In comments on the draft report, the administration indicated the new policy would be issued shortly.

The District of Columbia government spends a significant amount of money on employee travel. Between October 1, 2016, and April 30, 2018 (19 months), the District awarded over \$2 million in advance payments to government employees for nearly 3,500 trips based on estimated travel costs, representing only a subset of total costs. This report covered travel advances issued between January 1, 2018, and April 30, 2018, and any subsequent payments to employees or amounts due resulting from the travel for which the advances were granted.

The report's recommendations are:

- The OCFO should institute additional checks on travel payments, including regular spot audits of travel documentation by Associate Chief Financial Officers, and deliver periodic training to employees who approve and process travel payments.

- The Office of the City Administrator (OCA) should finalize updated District-wide travel regulations and forms with particular emphasis on provisions that address sales and use tax exemptions and proper calculation of per diem payments and ground transportation costs.
- The OCA should work with OCFO clusters and agency leadership to educate District government travelers on travel policy and best practice when booking, conducting, and submitting documentation for travel.

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