

Too Many Defense Officials Fly Business Class, Report Says

by Crystal K. Wiebe - Scripps Howard Foundation Wire

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WASHINGTON - Too many Defense Department officials use business class tickets in violation of department policy requiring coach flights, according to a report issued Thursday.

The highly critical report released by the General Accounting Office documents a multimillion dollar abuse of travel policies within the Department of Defense.

According to the audit, the \$124 million that Defense personnel spent on premium class air travel in the last two years is more than the combined transportation costs of 12 other major agencies, including NASA, the Department of Education and the Social Security Administration.

At a Senate permanent subcommittee on investigations hearing, Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., testified that this latest revelation is part of widespread financial mismanagement in the department.

"Of about \$7 trillion in accounting entries at the Pentagon, at least \$1.2 trillion ... were not supported by sufficient evidence to determine their validity," she said. "That is almost 20 percent."

Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., the subcommittee chairman, said the report was evidence that some Defense personnel were "living the high life."

Sen. Chuck Grassley, D-Iowa, recalled a report he issued about credit card misuse at the department in the 1990s. "I came away from that experience convinced that stealing money at DOD was a piece of cake," he said.

Like his own report, Grassley said, the GAO travel report revealed an "unending litany of horror stories," such as an employee who flew from Washington to Los Angeles on a first-class ticket that cost \$3,000 more than a seat in coach.

Another example brought up repeatedly during the hearing involved a family of four that relocated from London to Honolulu. The total cost of their first- and business-class airfare was \$18,443 more than coach.

Except for special circumstances dictated by health or time restraints, Defense employees are expected to fly coach.

Gregory D. Kutz, director of the GAO financial management and assurance team, said that, although only about 1 percent of all airline tickets were premium, they accounted for 5 percent of the department's total travel costs.

Based on statistical sample testing, the GAO estimated that nearly three quarters of premium class travel was neither properly authorized nor properly justified.

Of the 28 most-frequent premium class fliers, 27 were senior Defense officials, the report said. The GAO estimated that senior civilian and military employees accounted for almost 50 percent of premium class travel.

Most upgrades were from coach to business. Kutz said of the approximately 68,000 premium tickets, about 66,000 were business and 1,200 were first class.

His report, which questions the Defense Department's policies, procedures and monitoring of

premium class travel, includes 16 recommendations. Kutz said the department needs to resolve inconsistent department policies, perform better oversight and do a better job documenting when premium travel is necessary.

Charles S. Abell, assistant secretary of Defense, told the committee that his department was already responding to the audit with a special task force, similar to one set up for employee credit card problems.

He predicted that premium class problems would be a thing of the past once a new Defense travel system is fully operational by 2007.