

# Test Group Gives Thumbs-Up to New DoD Travel System

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WASHINGTON—DoD's new temporary duty travel pay system is faster than a speeding bullet and more gentle than a lamb compared to the old system, in the words of one enthusiastic agency budget officer.

DoD's POW/Missing Personnel Affairs Office was one of 29 organizations at 27 sites worldwide that recently tested DoD's re-engineered travel system. Budget officer Angela M. Talaber praises that new system and believes most of her customers agree with her. One such customer is office spokesman Larry Greer.

"I'm a customer who is old enough to remember the old system, where you had to type or press down on a seven-page claims voucher with a ball point pen," he said. "I know how long it took to get paid. I know what it was like standing in a long military pay line praying that someday, somebody would cut you a check. Or even give you cash, if you wanted to wait long enough.

"With streamlining, the electronic transfers have certainly made my life a lot easier," Greer said. "You need a system that's fast and easy to work to beat inbound credit card bills. This system beats it. You can get paid before your credit card bill comes."

Feedback from the 29 sites revealed a 65-percent decrease in administrative costs, a 31-percent decrease in payment cycle time, and a 100-percent [increase] in customer satisfaction, according to Deputy Secretary of Defense John H. Hamre. The team that rebuilt and streamlined DoD's \$3 billion-per-year travel system introduced many private-sector business practices. The new system:

- Reduced complex travel regulations from 220 pages to 17.
- Simplified reimbursement regulations for meals and incidental expenses, and eliminated requirements

for receipts for expenses less than \$75, except for lodging.

- Established a travel card program to pay for most official business travel expenses — advances, lodging, transportation, rental cars, meals and other incidentals.
- Created one document to serve as the orders, itinerary, voucher, and record of any changes.

Talaber said her office worked with the voucher claims part of the system, but not yet with the electronic travel order phase. She said she expects her management to approve the move soon. "We'll cut costs and save time by using electronic orders instead of paper orders," she noted.

"Our people go all over the world, and the least the government can do is pay them in a timely fashion," Talaber said. "I'd seen a couple of demonstrations of how the new system works. I knew it was something that worked well and management here said, 'OK, we'll try it.'

"So we went into the federal automated travel system in October 1996 as one of the test agencies," she continued. "The first couple of vouchers were experiments. I didn't [try] it with anybody who went overseas or who had a \$3,000 or 4,000 reimbursement coming. We got our feet wet with the little bitty baby vouchers, a couple of hundred dollars. Then we realized, hey, they're actually being paid — fast! I've had folks who have filed a voucher at 7 a.m. and it was processed and paid the same day."

She said the only complaints about the new system have been from a few people who've had problems learning new computer software.

"Some of them say, 'I can't remember my password,' 'I can't remember my signature,' 'I don't like this,'" Tal-

aber said. "I guess they perceive it as scary. You have to have a password to get into the system and a signature code password. Sometimes people just get confused. If you don't use something daily, you can become afraid of it."

Vouchers from the POW/Missing Personnel Affairs Office are approved electronically and wired to the finance office at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, where they're reviewed electronically. Then they're transmitted to the Defense Finance and Accounting Service Center in Indianapolis for immediate payment, Talaber said. "If finance pays the voucher in the afternoon, most times the money goes to the Federal Reserve Bank the next day," she said. "Within two days, the voucher is direct-deposited in the traveler's bank account. The traveler doesn't even have to go to the bank."

"Before, it was a frustrating, time-consuming paper process," she said. "You filled out a seven-page carbon form and attached all the little bits of trash paper you saved during your trip – receipts for everything," she said. "Then you sent it to finance, where it sat in an inbox until somebody got ready to look at it. Then, two weeks to three months later, you got a check in the mail."

In the search for information to account for America's missing personnel, specialists in the POW/Missing [Personnel Affairs] Office travel to many locations most DoD employees never visit – Vietnam, Laos, North Korea. Under the new system, a DoD globetrotter's major currency is a government-contracted charge card, currently American Express but due to change to NationsBank Visa in the fall. Employees are expected to pay expenses with the card whenever possible and to use it in cash machines to draw pocket money when necessary.

"Every hotel I've stayed in, in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Russia, and all over the United States, accepts the American Express card," Greer noted. "Not every street merchant accepts it – you have to have a little bit of money in your pocket to take care of meals and incidentals."

Talaber said finance doesn't routinely pay travel advances anymore but does provide cash advances when people head to places where cash machines are nonexistent. On those occasions, the transaction is a simple electronic one. "We send the paperwork electronically one day and the money is electronically posted in the traveler's checking account the next day," she said.

"We're finally treating people like the adults they are," Talaber said. "We're making people responsible, as they should be, instead of treating them like children and saying, 'I don't believe you, show me those receipts for \$2.'"

"The new system makes my job much easier, too," she said. "In the old system, you'd tell people, 'Well, wait two weeks.' Then, 'Maybe give it another week.' And then, 'We'll call finance.' Under the new system, if you're not paid in two days, there's a problem." Even the few complainers she meets love the part about being reimbursed in two days, she said.

Though mountains of paperwork of old are gone, travelers using the new system are supposed to maintain a file of their receipts. "Random audits are conducted on about 10 percent of vouchers over \$2,500," Talaber said. "Those audited must provide receipts of expenses of \$75 or more." She said she has had only one glitch since implementing the system, and the customer did it to himself. "He'd closed his old checking account and failed to tell finance," she said. The bank couldn't make a direct deposit because the man no longer had an account, so the money went back to finance. "They had to cut a check."

"Guys like me have filed a claims voucher in the morning and, by the end of the day, the money was in the bank," Greer said. "And I didn't have to leave my desk, no trip to a pay window, and didn't have to fill out a seven-copy voucher. People are happy to be treated responsibly."

Editor's Note: This information is in the public domain at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news> on the Internet.