

GAO Topic of the Month – February 2023

Travel Exceptions



Background

The State of Arizona Accounting Manual (SAAM) Topic 0015, covers *Exceptions to Policy*. The most common type of exception requested by agencies are exceptions to Travel Policy (SAAM Topic 50).

SAAM 5006-13, *Reducing State Travel Costs*, states, “Advance planning is a key factor affecting the cost of travel.” All agencies are required to conduct necessary travel as economically as circumstances reasonably permit. This means that travel should be planned as early as possible in order to have the most cost-effective options available. Proper planning can help prevent the need for an exception. If a travel exception is still needed, policy requires that if practicable, requests should be submitted at least ten (10) business days prior to travel. An earlier request helps reduce the cost to the State as well as the administrative burden on the agency. Exception requests submitted after travel has already occurred require more documentation than requests submitted in advance. Travel exception requests require the approval of the agency head or deputy agency head **and** the agency’s CFO. Completed travel exception requests must be submitted on a form GAO-515 and emailed directly to GAOtravel@azdoa.gov.

Types of Travel Exceptions

- Meals and/or lodging within fifty (50) miles of home and/or duty post
- Meals and/or lodging exceeding the maximum published reimbursement rate
- Issuance of travel advance
- Conference lodging cost greater than the lowest published rate in the conference brochure/conference notification
- Long-term subsistence (in-state/out-of-state) lodging and/or meals exceeding published reimbursement rates
- Conference hosted by a State agency where meals and/or lodging costs exceed published rates
- Blanket - Describe the requested exception in Detailed Explanation section
- Other - Describe the requested exception in Detailed Explanation section

Required Documentation

Requests for an exception must contain enough information to reasonably permit a determination to be made. Such information includes, but might not be limited to:

- A detailed explanation
 - Why the exception is necessary
 - Steps taken to comply with policy or to mitigate costs to the State

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- Name and rate of lodging establishment being requested if the exception is for lodging
- The total amount of the exception (i.e. \$40/night plus taxes)
- Reason for any delay if the request was not submitted in advance
- Print screens of travel and lodging websites consulted or other proof of research done (should be a comprehensive list, not just three options)
- Completed and signed GAO-503EZ, 509, 509A and/or 509S, if applicable
- Conference brochure, if applicable
- Proper authorization by Director/Deputy Director **and** CFO. This authority cannot be delegated.

***Exception requests submitted after travel has occurred require additional documentation. This includes an executed GAO-503EZ and all applicable receipts.

Tips for Success

- Submit travel exception requests at least ten (10) business days before travel.
- Audit travel claims before submitting. Exceptions will not be considered if the travel claim has errors. Incorrect travel claims must be corrected before the exception request can be reviewed.
- Document and submit all research completed.
- Combine exceptions for multiple employees with the same travel itinerary on one form to reduce administrative burden.
- Attach a memo if the Request for Travel Policy Exception form GAO-515 does not allow room for all required information.
- Provide all required information, documentation, and authorizations. Incomplete requests require additional communication and time which delays the approval process.

Conclusion

While exceptions to policy should be rare, situations may arise that merit exceptions to policy. The form GAO-515 was developed to assist in the approval process. Approved travel exception requests must be maintained for audit purposes in accordance with record retention policies and should be attached to the related travel claim(s). Blanket travel exceptions generally expire at the end of the fiscal year and, therefore, must be requested annually if the situation is continuing.

If you have any questions about this topic, reach out to your agency contact who can provide assistance or contact your agency's AFIS Liaison or GAO Travel, at GAOtravel@azdoa.gov, if any questions remain.