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DECISION



**THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL
OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20548**

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FILE: B-192691

DATE: February 20, 1979

MATTER OF: Mary H. Smith--Long distance telephone calls

DIGEST: Employee of Drug Enforcement Administration claimed payment for long distance telephone call from Bogota, Colombia, to residence in Arlington, Virginia, to notify her family of her location in event of emergency. Since she had no advance notice of travel required or where she would be staying, and since agency official designated under 31 U.S.C. 680a (1976) has certified that such call was in interest of Government, payment may be made. See 56 Comp. Gen. 28 (1976).

This action is in response to a request from Mr. Edwin J. Fost, Chief, Accounting Section, Office of the Controller, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Department of Justice, for a decision on the reclaim voucher submitted by Mrs. Mary H. Smith, a DEA employee, for reimbursement of a long distance telephone call (\$26.33) from Bogota, Colombia, to Arlington, Virginia.

The pertinent facts are reported as follows:

- "1. Mrs. Smith was sent to Bogota, Colombia in connection with the fatal shooting of one of our agents on December 13, 1976.
- "2. At the time of departure from Washington, DC enroute to Bogota, Colombia, Mrs. Smith had no knowledge of where she would be staying since she had no advance notice of the assignment.
- "3. The country was in a state of revolt when she arrived and certain precautions were advised because of this. She felt her family should be notified of her exact location in the event of an emergency. A telephone call was made to her family and the cost has been vouchered by her for reimbursement (\$26.33)."

Mrs. Smith departed for Bogota from her residence on December 14, 1976 (under orders issued the same day), and returned to Washington on December 16, 1976.

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The employee explained that the telephone call from Bogota was to inform her family of the name of her hotel in case of emergency, and that she had left her residence with no notice and had no idea where she would be staying. The cost of the telephone call involved was disallowed by the DEA Accounting Section on her original travel voucher as being an expenditure of a personal nature. However, decision is now requested by DEA as to whether the reclaim voucher submitted may be properly certified for payment in view of the extenuating circumstances described.

Under 31 U. S. C. 680a (1976) appropriated funds are available only for long distance telephone calls made in the transaction of public business. That section requires the head of an agency or his designee to certify that such calls are necessary in the interest of the Government before payment for said calls is made.

In decision 56 Comp. Gen. 28 (1976), dealing with certification (under 31 U. S. C. 680a) of travel vouchers containing long distance calls, question 2(a) asked whether telephone toll charges may be approved by an official and certified by a certifying officer when the traveler notifies his family of his safe arrival and the place he may be contacted in an emergency, or his travel arrangements. In answer thereto, it was stated at page 30, that the telephone call in question 2(a) would normally be considered a personal call since travel plans are generally known well in advance of travel and most travelers arrive safely at their destinations. It was further stated, however, if after investigating all of the facts involved in a given situation, an official designated under 31 U. S. C. 680a determines and certifies that such a call was in the interest of the Government, we would not question such a determination.

The original voucher submitted by the employee on March 22, 1977, shows an approving officer certification dated March 23, 1977, approving the long distance telephone call claimed on the voucher as necessary in the interest of the Government. The reclaim voucher submitted on August 14, 1978, is not signed by a designated approving officer.

In view of that certification and since the facts given show that the travel involved unusual circumstances in which the employee's travel plans were not known, payment for the telephone call

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involved may be made under the rules established by 56 Comp. Gen. 23 (1976).

The reclaim voucher, which is returned, may be certified for payment.

Deputy


Comptroller General
of the United States