

NIH Policy Manual

1500-13 - Premium-Class Airline Accommodations

Issuing Office: OD/OM/OFM **Phone:** [\(301\) 435-3051](tel:3014353051)

Release Date: 11/24/2003 ? **Technical Revision Date:** 3/09/2020 ?

Transmittal Notice

1. Explanation of Material Transmitted: The material transmitted to NIH Travel Policy updates the conduct of official travel, employees and others who receive approved medical waivers are to be authorized only business-class seating unless the circumstances are such that first-class accommodations can be properly justified. Partial Revision include: 1/16/2020 Section D, 2, g was updated to reflect information on acceptance of payment from a nonfederal source.

2. Filing Instructions: This 6/7/04 partial revision of Chapter 13 includes: (1) a new NOTE under Section D(1)(b) and revised reference material in Section D(2)(c).

Partial Revisions: 6/7/04, 8/11/08*, 10/17/11**, 7/3/2019***, 1/16/2020****

*8/11/08 revision was made to the note after Section E 1. The amended language in that note addresses the updated 2008 HHS policy regarding authorization for the use of premium class common carrier accommodations due to medical disabilities, and the corresponding waiver period in some cases. Specifically, the NIH was granted an exception to the policy and as a result, will be able to provide waiver approvals for three different time intervals, i.e., 6-month, 1-year, 3-years, based on an OD/Office of Medical Service evaluation of an employee's medical records.

**10/17/11 revision updates the 14-hour rule under Section D.2.h aligning the NIH Travel Manual with the HHS Travel Manual

***7/3/2019 Section D, 2, h was updated to reflect Section 6.4.3 of the HHS Travel Manual.

****1/16/2020 Section D, 2, g was updated to reflect information on acceptance of payment from a nonfederal source.

FTR Links: GSA has recently modified it's web site display of FTR Chapters 300-304. As a result, a new GSA Portal page is available at: <http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/104790>.

PLEASE NOTE: For information on:

1. Content of this chapter, contact the Office of Financial Management on 301-435-3051 or 301-402-8831
2. NIH Manual System, contact the Division of Management Support (DMS), OMA on 301-496-2832, or enter this URL: <http://oma.od.nih.gov/manualchapters/>

1500-13-00. Premium-Class Airline Accommodations

A. General

This chapter describes the policies and procedures for authorization and approval of premium-class airline accommodations for official travel. In accordance with the Federal Travel Regulation (FTR), employees who perform official business travel, both domestic and international, must use coach-class accommodations (See FTR 301-10.122). However, there are limited exceptions when first-class or premium-class other than first-class airline accommodations may be used (See FTR 301-10.123 to 301-10.124).

NOTE: This chapter only addresses premium-class airline accommodations. For information on train accommodations, see FTR 301-10.160 to 301-10.164.

NOTE: The guidance in this chapter applies to, 1) appointed officers and employees; 2) appointed Federal Advisory Committee members and Special Government Employees; 3) Commissioned Officers; 4) "Invitational Travelers", i.e., nonfederal persons providing a direct service who are serving without pay or at \$1 a year; and 5) Non-FTE Persons, i.e., Visiting Fellows, IRTAs, CRTAs, Special Volunteers, and Guest Researchers.

B. Delegations of Authority

(See NIH Delegations of Authority, [Travel No. 15](#), Premium-Class Travel).

C. Definitions

1. **Coach-class airline accommodations:** The basic class of accommodations offered by an air carrier to passengers which includes a level of service that is available to all passengers regardless of the fare paid. "Coach-class airline accommodations" apply when an airline offers two or more classes of accommodations; which includes tourist-class accommodations and economy-class accommodations.
2. **Premium-class airline accommodations:** Any class of accommodations above coach-class, e.g., first-class or premium-class other than first-class.
3. **First-class airline accommodations:** The highest class of accommodations on a multiple-class commercial air carrier. When an airline flight has only two classes of accommodations, the higher class, regardless of the term used for that class, is considered to be first-class.
4. **Premium-class other than first-class airline accommodations:** The class of accommodations between coach-class and first-class airline accommodations, e.g., Business class.

D. Policy

1. **The Use of First-Class airline accommodations** will only be authorized or approved under the following circumstances:

- a. **"Reasonably Available" - Regularly scheduled flights between the authorized origin and destination points include only first-class airline accommodations.** The use of first-class accommodations may be authorized or approved when coach-class accommodations or premium-class other than first-class accommodations are not reasonably available. (For purposes of this paragraph, "reasonably available" means airline accommodations scheduled to leave within 24 hours of the employees' proposed departure time or scheduled to arrive within 24 hours of employee's proposed arrival time. "Reasonably available" does not include any airline accommodations with a scheduled arrival time that is later than the employee's required reporting time at the duty site, or with a scheduled departure time that is earlier than the time the employee is scheduled to complete duty).
- b. **Travel by an employee with a disability or special need.** The use of first-class airline accommodations may be authorized when it is necessary to accommodate an employee's disability or other special need. The employee's condition must be substantiated in writing by a competent medical authority. The use of first-class airline accommodations may also be authorized for an attendant, under FTR 301-13.3(a) to accompany the employee in order to provide the requisite services en route.

NOTE: For employees and others who have approved medical waivers -- Scenario 1) In line with either a domestic, non-foreign, or international trip, if a carrier offers first-class and business-class seating in addition to coach, only business class seating shall be authorized. Scenario 2) In line with either a domestic, non-foreign, or international trip, if a carrier offers only first-class seating in addition to coach, every effort must be made to obtain business-class seating. The Travel Management Center (TMC) staff will assist you in this regard. A) If there is no business class seating available to your destination on any carrier, you may be authorized first-class seating. B) If however, TMC is able to find a carrier with business-class seating to your destination, then only business-class seating shall be authorized. This policy extends to all trips, 1) strictly within the Continental U.S.; 2) that begin in the Continental U.S. and have an ultimate destination of either a non-foreign or international destination; and 3) that begin overseas with an ultimate destination of a site in the Continental U.S. or a non-foreign area. Should the trip begin overseas and have an ultimate destination of another overseas site, due to the different flight rules that come into play, e.g., foreign flag carrier use, limited number of air carriers, etc., first-class seating may be authorized on a flight w/ only two levels of seating. Otherwise, only business-class seating may be authorized. Please be advised that the GSA City-Pair Program Guidelines do not mandate use of a contract carrier when

premium-class accommodations are authorized. In both scenarios, mandatory use of the TMC remains in effect unless one of the exceptions contained in NIH Manual 1500-02-01 can be applied.

- c. **Security Reasons.** The use of first-class airline accommodations may be authorized or approved when such accommodations are required for exceptional security purposes. Exceptional security circumstances include, but are not limited to:
 - 1) Travel by employee whose use of any other class of accommodations would endanger the employee's life or government property;
 - 2) Travel by agents on protective details and who are accompanying individuals authorized to use first-class accommodations; or
 - 3) Travel by couriers and control officers who are accompanying controlled pouches or packages.
- d. **Agency Mission.** The use of first-class airline accommodations may be authorized or approved when required for the agency mission.

2. **The Use of Premium-Class Other Than First-Class airline accommodations, i.e., Business Class,** may be authorized or approved under the following circumstances:

- a. **Regularly scheduled flights.** Premium-class other than first-class airline accommodations may be authorized when regularly scheduled flights between origin/destination points (including connecting points) provide only premium-class accommodations and you certify such on your Travel Authorization.
- b. **No space available in coach-class.** Premium-class other than first-class airline accommodations may be authorized when there is no space available in coach-class accommodations in time to accomplish the mission which is urgent and cannot be postponed;
- c. **Travel by an employee with a disability or special need.** (For corresponding guidance, see NOTE above in D(1)(b) and paragraph E(1) below);
- d. **Security reasons.** Premium-class other than first-class airline accommodations may be authorized for security purposes or exceptional circumstances as determined by the appropriate official if the use of such accommodations is essential to the successful performance of the IC mission;
- e. **Inadequate sanitation.** Premium-class other than first-class airline accommodations may be authorized when coach-class on foreign carriers do not provide adequate sanitation or health standards, and the use of foreign flag air carrier service is approved in accordance with the Fly America Act.
- f. **Overall cost savings.**

Premium-class other than first-class airline accommodations may be authorized when such accommodations would result in an overall savings to the Government by avoiding additional subsistence costs, overtime, or lost productive time that would be incurred while awaiting availability of coach-class accommodations.

NOTE: The HHS Chapter 6 "Cost Analysis" form must be completed for international and domestic trips and is to be recorded along with the NIH Form at

Appendix 8 "Individual Trip Authorization, (Non-Medical) Authorization for Use of First class or Premium Other Than First-class Travel Accommodations" in the IC official travel files.

g. Acceptance of payment from a nonfederal source.

1) First-class – There is no authority for acceptance of in-kind first class accommodations. Please refer to 1500-08-01(A)(3).

2) Premium Other Than First Class, e.g., Business Class - Such accommodations may be authorized per sections 6.6.4 and 7.5.1.8 of the HHS Travel Manual provided the non-Federal source makes full payment for such transportation in advance of travel (in-kind) and transportation accommodations furnished are comparable in value to those offered to other similarly situated attendees at the meeting. A STO waiver is required when a flight does not meet the 14-hour rule.

h. Travel in excess of 14 hours. Premium-class other than first-class airline accommodations may be authorized when travel is between authorized origin and destination points, and either the origin or destination point is outside the continental United States (CONUS), and the scheduled flight time is in excess of 14 hours. Travel should be urgent because of the nature of the task and not driven by an employee's personal reasons. Furthermore, travel will be conducted by the most direct and regularly traveled route in the most expeditious means possible. When this authority is exercised, an employee shall not be eligible for a rest stop en route or a rest period upon arrival at the duty site.

NOTE: A statement must be included on the NIH Form at Appendix 8 explaining the urgency of the mission that precludes the traveler from using coach class accommodations and taking a rest stop at an intermediate point. ("Urgency" refers to the agency assignment and not personal reasons). As noted in Section 6.4.3 of the HHS Travel Manual, the rationale supporting the urgency of the mission often is satisfied on the outboard flight whereas the return flight will not generally be subject to identifiable mission urgency. In these instances, the traveler will return home on a coach class ticket as a rest stop will be available upon arrival back home.

i. Agency Mission. Premium-class other than first-class airline accommodations may be authorized when required for the agency mission.

E. Procedures

1. Medical Reasons. Authorization for the use of both first-class and premium-class other than first-class airline accommodations due to medical reasons shall be made in advance of the actual travel unless extenuating circumstances or emergency situations make advance authorization impossible. If advance authorization cannot be obtained, the employee shall obtain written approval from the authorizing official at the earliest possible time. Without specific approval, travelers will be held responsible for all additional costs resulting from the use of first-class or premium-class other than first-

class air accommodations minus the difference of the cost of coach-class accommodations. When requesting approval to use premium-class airline accommodations solely because of a medical reason, the guidelines contained in OFM Transmittal Nos. 118 and 118A must be followed. In this guidance, you will note that the NIH Form at Appendix 7, "Request for Premium Class Common Carrier Travel Accommodations for Employees With Medical Conditions" must be properly completed for all such requests. (A copy of NIH Form Appendix 7 can be accessed at the following web site address):

https://oma.od.nih.gov/Lists/DMSFormsList/Attachments/667/NIH-2945_10-18-18.pdf

NOTE: Employees with permanent disabilities as assessed by the OD/Office of Medical Service (OMS) may be authorized use of premium-class airline accommodations not to exceed a three year interval. Employees with disabilities that are assessed by OMS as serious, but where the medical records do not substantiate a permanent condition, may be authorized use of premium-class accommodations not to exceed a one year interval. Employees with a temporary disability as assessed by OMS may be authorized use of premium-class accommodations not to exceed a six-month interval. After these respective time frames have elapsed, a request must be resubmitted for approval. This re-submission is necessary to ensure that there continues to be a need for the approval and to keep authorization records current. Authorizations that have exceeded the expiration date should not be considered valid and must be reissued.

2. **Non-Medical Reasons.** All Travel Authorization requests for first-class and premium-class other than first-class accommodations for non-medical reasons must be accompanied by the NIH Form at Appendix 8, "Individual Trip Authorization, (Non-Medical) Authorization for Use of First class or Premium Other Than First-class Travel Accommodations", (A copy of NIH Form Appendix 8 can be accessed at the following web site address: <https://oma.od.nih.gov/forms/NIHE-Forms/NH2934.pdf>)
3. All employees authorized to use first-class or premium-class other than first-class airline accommodations for official travel shall include a copy of the Appendix 7 or Appendix 8 in the IC official travel files in accordance with the specifications outlined in NIH Manual 1500 Appendix 4. In addition, a copy of the Appendix 8 must be submitted to the respective Travel Management Center (TMC) along with a copy of the Travel Authorization for the release of airline tickets to employees requesting such service.

You are **not** required to submit a copy of the Appendix 7 to the TMC. However, if the employee's name does not appear on the corresponding Medical Waiver Approval listing, the TMC is under no obligation to release an upgraded ticket to the employee.

NOTE: The Office of Financial Management (OFM) Division of Policy and Quality will prepare the Medical Waiver Approval listing based on OD/Office of Medical Services assessments and Deputy Director for Management, NIH approvals.

4. A copy of all first-class approvals must be submitted to the OFM Travel, Fellowships, and Cashiers Office, Building 31, Room B1B31. That office will compile the Annual

Premium-Class Travel Report in accordance with DHHS reporting requirements.

F. References

1. GSA Federal Travel Regulations 41 CFR, Chapter 301, Sections 10.121 through 10.124.
2. HHS Travel Manual Chapter 1-70
3. Memorandum from the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health Management Operations, OHS, dated April 30, 1991
4. Memorandum from Deputy Secretary for Health Operations and Director, Office of Management, PHS, dated February 1, 1990.
5. Memorandum from the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Finance, Office of the Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services, dated March 6, 1996, entitled "Delegations of Authority".
6. NIH Delegations of Authority, [Travel No. 15](#), Premium-Class Travel.