

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Mr. Klatsky:

I feel compelled to write concerning the article "Cash for Frequent Flyers?" in Volume 97-2 of the Newsletter. The article summarized a memorandum from Mr. Matt Reres, the Army Deputy General Counsel (Ethics & Fiscal) "addressing the availability of Army appropriations to pay cash awards to employees who enroll in commercial "Frequent Flyer" programs." Mr. Reres concludes that such awards would not be an allowable expenditure of appropriated funds, because "enrolling in [such programs] does not entail the quality and degree of personal effort for which Congress intended to authorize monetary recognition under the [Government Employees' Incentive Awards Act]." Although that opinion is technical correct, I think it discourages an innovative solution to what has been a long standing problem.

First, I would point out that the TACOM proposal was to provide awards to employees who enrolled in frequent flyer programs AND obtained free tickets which were used for that employee's official travel. It is not merely the act of enrolling. Consider what is required of the employee to obtain this free ticket. Not only a lot of travel, which is generally not much fun, and not just the bureaucratic hassles of maintaining a different frequent flyer account for each airline and making sure your travel is accurately recorded each time you fly. The real burden is that the employee must either keep detailed records of which miles are personal and which are official, or forego any chance of obtaining a ticket for personal use on that airline. The airlines will not allow a person to have two accounts, one personal and one official, and we all know that commingling personal and official miles in one account means that the miles will all be considered official unless you can document otherwise. Add to this the real challenge in actually using the free tickets which are offered under these programs, with their many blackout dates, advance notice requirements, etc., and I believe that the degree of "personal effort" expended by an employee in saving the government money is significant, if not downright heroic.

Further, the GAO supports creative agency efforts to reward their employees for saving the government's travel dollars. In a recent opinion to the General Counsel of the Railroad Retirement Board (B-27640, May 19, 1997) GAO endorsed a plan to allow an employee who had two frequent flyer accounts to exchange personal miles in one for official miles in the other (this employee obviously had kept good records of which were which), thus allowing two tickets to be issued: one for the employee's personal use, and one for official use. In the course of the opinion, GAO noted the GSA's efforts to encourage the use of frequent travel programs by federal employees in order to conserve travel dollars, including the issuance of GSA Bulletin FTR 17, October 24, 1995, which "encouraged agencies to use their authority under the Government Employee's Incentives Awards Act . . . to develop incentive awards programs under which cash awards may be paid to employees who accrue travel savings to the agency through participation in frequent traveler programs."

Bottom line: payment of an incentive award to an employee who jumps through all the various hoops to use frequent flyer mileage to reduce government travel costs, is legal. What is more important, it's an incredibly good idea. Perhaps the view expressed in this Letter to the Editor should be forwarded to DA for their consideration.