



UNITED STATES
CIVILIAN BOARD OF CONTRACT APPEALS

February 20, 2025

CBCA 7988-RELO

In the Matter of CHRISTOPHER B.

Christopher B., Claimant.

Janet L. Morgan, Director, Office of Financial Policy, Department of State, Washington, DC, appearing for Department of State.

NEWSOM, Board Judge.

Claimant, a Foreign Service Officer with the Department of State (DOS or agency), was directed to undergo a permanent change of station (PCS) and was authorized to take a round trip house-hunting trip to his new duty station. Deviating from his travel authorization, claimant traveled to his new duty station and stayed, without taking the return trip, prior to starting his new job. He now seeks reimbursement for the cost of the house-hunting trip. The agency denied his claim. Relying on precedent, we find that because the claimant did not return from the house-hunting trip prior to his final departure for the new duty station, he did not complete his authorized house-hunting trip. We deny the claim.

Background

Claimant and his spouse are both DOS employees. Claimant's spouse was assigned to a tour of duty in Berlin, Germany, from 2021 to 2023. For the duration of this tour, the agency authorized claimant to accompany his spouse and work remotely from Berlin as a Domestic Employee Teleworking Overseas (DETO).

Following the Berlin tour, DOS directed claimant to undergo a PCS to a new duty station in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. On April 6, 2023, DOS authorized both claimant and his spouse to travel from Berlin to their home in Liberty, Texas, prior to travel to the new duty station in Florida. On April 19, 2023, DOS issued a separate authorization for claimant to take a ten-day house-hunting trip to Fort Lauderdale. Claimant was to start work at the new duty station on July 31, 2023.

DOS policy provides that a DETO is generally assigned an official duty station of Washington, D.C. Apparently, for that reason, the claimant's April 19, 2023, house-hunting authorization stated that claimant would travel from Washington, D.C.—not Texas—to Florida. That was so, even though, according to the claimant, he did not live or work in Washington, D.C., and had no reason to go there.

We have no evidence that claimant sought to correct his house-hunting travel authorization before he left Berlin. Claimant states that, at some point, the agency informed him that it was too late to correct the house-hunting authorization because he had “already traveled.” We infer that claimant did not attempt to correct the authorization until after he traveled.

On July 1, 2023, claimant traveled from Berlin to Texas. On July 6, 2023, claimant traveled from Texas to Fort Lauderdale on a one-way ticket. He stayed in Fort Lauderdale and did not return to Texas (or travel to Washington, D.C.) through the remainder of July 2023. Claimant states he was house-hunting in Fort Lauderdale from July 7, 2023, to July 16, 2023, which the agency disputes. Claimant started work at his new duty station on July 31, 2023.¹

Discussion

At issue are unreimbursed house-hunting expenses that claimant incurred from July 7 to July 16, 2023, while in Fort Lauderdale. Claimant contends that he was house-hunting during this period and that his authorization entitled him to recover these house-hunting expenses. DOS contends that claimant did not perform a true house-hunting trip, which, it asserts, required round-trip travel. DOS argues that because claimant booked a one-way ticket and did not return, he did not perform a house-hunting trip within the meaning of the

¹ Claimant was reimbursed for temporary quarters subsistence expenses (TQSE) while in Fort Lauderdale, including for the period he says he was house-hunting from July 7 to 16, 2023. He was not reimbursed for car rental expenses, which are not part of TQSE. See 41 CFR 302-6.20 (2022) (FTR 302-6.20). The car rental expenses are at issue here.

Federal Travel Regulation (FTR). We agree with the agency and deny the claim based upon the FTR, Board precedent, and DOS guidance.

The FTR states that a house-hunting trip “refers to a trip made by the employee and/or spouse to your new official station locality to find permanent living quarters.” FTR 302-5.1. A house-hunting trip must be completed by “[t]he day before you report to your new Official station.” FTR 302-5.12. In response to the question of “how many househunting trips may my agency authorize[,]” the FTR refers to a house-hunting trip as a round trip, stating “your agency may authorize only one round trip for you and/or your spouse in connection with a particular transfer.” FTR 302-5.8.

The FTR further provides that an employee will receive house-hunting trip expenses if, among other things, the employee “meet[s] any additional conditions [that the] agency has established.” FTR 302-5.6(d). Here, DOS guidance stated that a house-hunting trip must be completed before final departure from the losing duty station, stating:

A house hunting trip in connection with a domestic reassignment from a domestic location *must be completed prior to final departure from the losing duty station.*

DOS Message Reference Number (MRN) 23 STATE 62172 (May 31, 2023) at 42. This guidance contemplates that a traveler must return from house-hunting before “final departure” to the new duty station.

Furthermore, our predecessor board for relocation and travel matters, the General Services Board of Contract Appeals (GSBCA), interpreted the FTR to require that a house-hunting trip be a round trip, completed prior to final travel from the losing duty station, commonly called “en-route PCS travel.” *Perry F. Gayaldo*, GSBCA 16339-RELO, 04-1 BCA ¶ 32,578, at 161,193-94. *Gayaldo* is factually very similar to this claim. In *Gayaldo*, claimant was authorized to take a house-hunting trip but was unable to take the trip on the dates in the authorization. Instead, much like the claimant here, the claimant in *Gayaldo* began en-route PCS travel and stayed, claiming that a portion of his stay at the new duty station included house-hunting activities. In *Gayaldo*, the GSBCA held that “the FTR contemplates a separate househunting trip, the phrase ‘in advance of travel’ refers to a househunting trip performed in advance of PCS en-route travel.” *Id.* at 161,194; *see also Ricarda Herrera*, CBCA 998-RELO, 08-1 BCA ¶ 33815, at 167,392 (denying house-hunting expenses because claimant did not complete house-hunting trip prior to en-route PCS travel).

Here, claimant contends that it made no sense for him to return to Washington, D.C., and then fly back to Fort Lauderdale, as his house-hunting authorization stated. But claimant had at least two other reasonable options that would not have required him to travel to

Washington, D.C. First, he could have sought to correct his house-hunting travel authorization prior to leaving Berlin. Indeed, he received the travel authorization on April 19, 2023, well in advance of his July 1, 2023, departure from Berlin. Second, as the agency explained, he could have performed round trip travel from his home in Texas and sought reimbursement on a cost-construct basis, using his Washington, D.C./Fort Lauderdale orders. Having elected instead to book a one-way flight to Fort Lauderdale without a return, claimant does not qualify for house-hunting expenses.

Decision

The claim is denied.

Elizabeth W. Newsom
ELIZABETH W. NEWSOM
Board Judge