

Travelgate

Ken Stromborg had a habit of giving humorous names to annoying situations. He called David Allen's early battle with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Finance Center, "Travelgate." It started as a bureaucratic inconvenience but surprisingly escalated until it involved two U.S. Senators, the U.S. Department of the Interior Inspector-General, and the Deputy Director of FWS. At first, Allen was mostly interested in recovering his thousand dollars. Then, the Finance Center started making crazy arguments that motivated Allen as much as Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources leaders had. By the end, Allen was using the situation to prove to his command line that he could endure extreme controversy as long as he had legal details on his side. Travelgate was like a high voltage wire, and Allen became the switch that delivered its shock to his whole command line. He wouldn't let go until they found a reasonable solution under the rules, even when he became the focus of their blame for causing pain. Allen was pretty sure the Green Bay damage assessment would be much more traumatic — better to acclimate everyone now.

The Finance Center in Denver, Colorado was one of the most powerful offices in the entire FWS. It controlled all of the budgets and money for every other office, and there were only a couple of FWS leaders in D.C. with enough power to overrule them. The center was also home to endless bureaucracy, including reviewers of every travel voucher submitted by the thousands of employees throughout FWS.

Allen had already received his approved paperwork for a summertime driving vacation to Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia when FWS assigned him to take mandatory training in Seattle, Washington during July 11-24, 1993. It would be tight, but some quick research showed that flying from Buffalo, New York would be cheaper than from Green Bay, and the timing of the return drive from Nova Scotia could be made to work. The work trip ended up costing \$1,700, but reimbursement from the Finance Center was ominously slow. When the check finally arrived, it was for only \$700 — the other \$1,000 had been disallowed.

As Allen appealed up the chain, sparks started to fly. Ken Stromborg never abandoned Allen, but he argued for the "rope-a-dope" as a better strategy to give FWS bureaucrats enough space to wear themselves out and eventually "do the right thing." Allen explained that the cost would be too high for that experiment. He had to stick close to the letter of the law, in this case the Diners Club agreement, the formal FWS policy on government credit cards, the travel regulations, and the Comptroller-General decisions cited by the Finance Center. It was probably already too late to rely on good will — Allen had already grabbed the wire for too long.

Stromborg's supervisor took a more direct approach with Allen: "Drop it. Now!" Allen offered to take \$1,000 from her personal funds, or from her office's, and then let her handle it however she wanted. She reconsidered her advice: "Why don't you just go ahead with your efforts."

Allen also heard from the regional office. The supervisor two levels above Stromborg said he would never let Allen be disciplined for late payment, but he was unable to explain to Allen how he would resist direct orders to do exactly that. Frank Horvath and others told Allen that the assistant regional director (three levels up from Stromborg) was so upset about Allen's escalation that Allen was endangering his professional reputation. Allen agreed, but that was the point. If Allen's reputation couldn't survive a \$1k dispute involving such clear facts and rules, why bother with a \$1B dispute over much more controversial facts and regulations?

It took 7 months from when the flights were charged to Allen's government Diners Club card until the Deputy Director of FWS ordered the Finance Center to pay the rest of the claim and

reassign the reviewer, who was no longer allowed to review vouchers from Region 3. Allen was pretty sure that Senator Feingold must have contacted the FWS Director. Feingold's staffer had phoned Allen and said it was one of the best documented cases their office had ever seen. Allen had recently sent his letters and attachments to elected officials and the DOI Inspector-General:

*"The Honorable Russell D. Feingold United States Senate, SD-B40 Dirksen Building
Washington, D.C. 20510*

Dear Mr. Feingold: I am employed as a civil servant by the Federal Government, but I am writing to you today as a private citizen and taxpayer of the United States and the State of Wisconsin. I am involved in a dispute with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), Finance Center (Center) in Denver, Colorado over reimbursement of expenses for official travel. My attempts to resolve the dispute have been unsuccessful for several months, as have my attempts to have the dispute reviewed. I believe that resolution of the dispute should have been straightforward and swift. However, extensive resources have been spent, unnecessarily, by Government officials, and there is considerable risk that the Center will set a precedent that could cost the Government considerable unnecessary expense. In these times of raising Government efficiency and reducing Government costs, I thought that you should be aware of this situation.

The facts leading to the dispute are these (please find supporting materials, attached). I was authorized to fly from annual leave status in Buffalo, New York to official business in Seattle, Washington, to my duty station in Green Bay, Wisconsin because the cost of the flights was cheaper than the cost of flying directly from and to my duty station in Green Bay. The Center contends that the cost of hypothetical travel from Buffalo to Green Bay must be deducted from my reimbursement claim because the Government is not responsible for returning me from annual leave to my duty station. While I agree that the Government has no such responsibility, I do not agree that any costs should be deducted from my reimbursement claim for the following reasons. First, I was specifically authorized to fly from annual leave status in Buffalo. Second, originating in Buffalo instead of Green Bay saved the Government \$94. Third, I could have travelled for free with my family from Buffalo to Green Bay, thus the cost of such travel would have been zero. Fourth, even if I could not have travelled with my family, I was able to return to my duty station at no cost by taking the official travel. Therefore, if the Center wishes to deduct the cost of travel actually available to me from Buffalo to Green Bay, that deduction should be \$0. Furthermore, in all cases in which travel from a location other than the duty station is available at a savings to the Government, and with no additional personal expense, the proper deduction is necessarily \$0.

I believe that the Center's contention in this matter will lead to considerable additional, unnecessary expense on future travel. For example, on November 14, 1993 I will fly on personal business from New York City to Chicago, Illinois. I am scheduled to attend a meeting on official business in Houston, Texas from November 15, through November 18, 1993. I could have booked flights from Chicago to Houston to Green Bay for \$339. However, in order to avoid further dispute, it was necessary to book flights from Green Bay to Houston via Chicago (cheapest flight connects there) for \$473. It is particularly distressing to take flights which both increase the cost to the Government and cause me the personal inconvenience of driving from Chicago to Green Bay in order to fly back to Chicago and on to Houston. In addition, I am particularly concerned with the Center's apparent lack of concern for savings to the Government and the responsibilities of officials in authorizing travel. In particular, please note the attached memorandum of October 18, 1993 from Gail Alley of the Center to me, which

states: ‘...The fact that costs may be less if travel is performed differently has no bearing on the regulations...;’ and ‘...administrative errors on the part of originators and authorizing officials do not remove the financial responsibility of the traveller...’

Please inform me if I can provide you with any further information. Also, please inform me if you are able to ascertain whether or not I have erred in my analysis of the situation. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely, P. David Allen II”

Near the end of Travelgate, Allen documented that several other people in the region were not being subjected to the same travel restrictions as Allen. Before he could launch those new arguments, the Finance Center paid his entire claim. Stromborg quipped that he was proud of Allen that he stopped “throwing bricks” as soon as the immediate dispute was resolved.