

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Work in progress: Audit description

Evaluating State Agency Use of Travel Agents

Washington's travel policies for state agency staff and management allow them to travel by air, for example when that is the most sensible or cost-effective way to conduct agency business or attend national conferences. Air travel requirements are set by the state's Office of Financial Management (OFM) in the State Administrative & Accounting Manual. Among the Manual's requirements is one stating that agencies must use vendors approved by the Department of Enterprise Services (DES) when booking air travel for state business. Agencies may purchase tickets directly from contracted airlines or through a contracted travel agent.

Travel agents can provide benefits to agencies: they have experience managing complex travel arrangements and can help state employees if they encounter problems that arise during travel, such as delayed or missed flights. However, their services typically come with additional fees beyond the ticket price. Although these fees are generally under \$30, they can add up when applied across hundreds of bookings. During fiscal years 2021 through 2025, Washington state agencies spent more than \$1 million on travel agent fees.

Preliminary scope and objectives

This audit will review state travel data to compare the cost of air travel booked directly against the cost of travel booked using travel agents, including associated fees. We also plan to survey a selection of state agencies to better understand their policies and practices for booking air travel, and to learn why and under what circumstances they use travel agents to book flights. We will also review how OFM and DES inform state agencies about travel requirements and available options. This audit seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Does the cost of booking air travel through travel agents differ significantly from booking flights directly?
2. What advantages or disadvantages do state agencies encounter when booking flights through travel agents?
3. Do state agencies comply with OFM requirements when they book travel through DES-authorized vendors?



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