Notes from AFSA Open House on FSOs and BHA/CPS December 11, 2019

- On December 11, AFSA held an open house with FSOs to gather thoughts on FSO roles within the envisioned BHA and CPS bureaus. AFSA's goal is to ensure FSO perspectives are included and incorporated into the redesign process, to maximize the opportunity of the redesign to address long-standing concerns among FSOs serving in the DCHA Bureau and to ensure the new bureaus recognize and fully utilize Foreign Service staff within USAID. These notes are AFSA's capture of the session and the sentiments (and supplemental communications), and are not ascribed to any single individual.
- FSOs expressed concern there had been relatively little/no systematic Foreign Service input into the Bureau redesigns and proposals being circulated among Senior Management for decision/recommendation. In this context, FSOs would like the following concerns and requests voiced to Management, and seek specific responses from Agency leadership.
- 3. These issues have been raised repeatedly over the years and are not specific to any single Administrator or Administration. However, the current re-design offers an opportunity to make real, lasting improvements; Agency and Bureau Leadership to date have avoided openly recognizing and addressing most of these cultural issues, expecting the re-design or structural changes alone will resolve them. This is not likely.

FSOs hope for specific and transparent responses from Agency leadership regarding:

- Address Cultural Concerns in Coordination with Structural Concerns: FSOs acknowledge that the transformation may address numerous structural concerns and appreciates management's desire to resolve long-standing structural issues, such as insufficient quantity and quality positions for FSOs to build a career on humanitarian and stabilization work. However, FSOs caution that this must be done in concert with addressing cultural concerns.
- Address "Cultural" Concerns: FSOs request Agency leadership take proactive steps to acknowledge and correct misconceptions that FSOs are "not capable of" or "not interested" in doing humanitarian work. Staff and managers need to understand that humanitarian and stabilization experience and skills were, and are, a core part of the BS-76's hiring selection, evaluation, core competencies, and were intended to fill Agency staffing gaps in these areas. Years of cultural and structural impediments to FSOs meaningfully engaging in humanitarian and stabilization efforts has created something of a self-fulfilling prophecy in terms of deterring many FSOs from seeking assignments in these areas.
- **Empower FSOs:** The dearth of FSO positions in the humanitarian/transition areas has resulted in FSOs being blocked from opportunities to cultivate relevant skills and in

some cases it may take time to rebuild these skills. Adding FSO positions to the new bureaus is one step to resolving this structural concern but will not address cultural concerns or problematic perceptions about FSOs working in this space. Agency leadership should acknowledge this situation, and the fact that this legacy – and current *status quo* -- will make it difficult for FSOs taking these new positions to succeed. Agency leadership should openly recognize this context and actively recruit FSOs with the commitment that leadership is committed to change.

- Set the Tone from Top: Bureau and Agency explicit leadership is necessary to reversing a culture that does not welcome and recognize FSOs as critical part of the humanitarian and stabilization workforce. In some cases, FSOs perceive leadership as re-enforcing an anti-FSO culture. Unless and until the "tone from the top" changes, these issues will continue and the Transformation objectives will not be achieved.
- Look at the hard and soft Data: An analysis on attrition of FSOs from positions throughout DCHA (particularly OFDA and OTI positions in Washington) (e.g. number of officers requesting re-assignment prior to end of tour) underscores that FSOs have long been considered unwelcome to this work/uncomfortable (to an extreme level sometimes) in the offices. Many of the FSOs that request re-assignment do so because a) they are not given work or responsibility commensurate with the position grade for which they're assigned, b) realize that remaining in such situations could be detrimental to their careers (either through multiple poor reviews by line managers that don't understand the FSO performance management system or due to limitations to the position's the scope of work or availability of future positions) and c) they are treated differently from peers and made to feel unwelcome in numerous small ways until it becomes difficult to remain in the position.
- Address lower- and mid-Management Issues that impede FSO Career Paths: FSOs should not be line-managed by PSCs or others who don't have the skillsets and experience to supervise FSOs. This includes knowledge of how FSO promotions work (including the up or out system of career advancement, FS precepts, etc.), how FSO assignments are managed, FSO work objectives, performance evaluations, entitlements to overtime/comp-time, etc. FSOs invest their lives/careers in the Agency they are held to higher standards; they are worldwide available; they are rated by merit-driven performance precepts; they are commissioned; they are governed by the Foreign Service Act, i.e., there should be a distinction not discrimination in their roles.
- Improve HR support to FSOs in the existing/new Bureaus: Often, FSOs receive little or no support in resolving questions and HCTM/HR issues because offices that support crises and humanitarian response disproportionately serve PSC support staff. The staff are not familiar with FSO systems and regulations and are unwilling or unable to address FSO concerns while serving on humanitarian/crisis response efforts (e.g. comp time, etc.). FSOs are too often forced to find answers individually. The new BHA Bureau and/or HCTM should have a dedicated HR person for managing FSO HR issues, which

are unique and distinct from PSC and institutional contractor issues. The new CPS Bureau may wish to consider the same.

- Ensure FSOs have opportunities for professional growth within the new Bureau: FSOs need to be able to contribute the multi-faceted skillsets they bring from years of Embassy-based experience. Currently, the quality of the work FSOs are assigned to do in OFDA and FFP is significantly below the quality and level of work FSO peers in other Bureaus are assigned to do. The new Bureau needs to address this by ensuring BHA and CPA FSO positions are matched to the skills FSOs possess.
 - While this is an Agency-wide issue in Washington, it is particularly acute and disproportionate in OFDA. In other Bureaus, comparable FSOs encumber much more senior positions (including at the DAA, Division Director, Deputy Division Director levels etc.); the new Bureau should empower FSOs to contribute the interagency, diplomatic, strategic, analytical, and programmatic/operational skills they develop over years working in Embassies to better advance BHA's mission. Conversely, the new Bureau should ensure professional development opportunities to enable FSOs to grow and build on these and new/other skills.
- Inclusively Analyze and Approach Backstop 76 Question: The 76 Backstop¹ was designed to capture and reflect the skills appropriate for the envisioned BHS and CPS Bureaus; FSOs were specifically recruited for those skills. Neither BS-02 Program Officer backstop nor the BS-12 General Development Officer are automatically substitutable backstops for OFDA's humanitarian work, and using them as such can have FSO promotion impacts. Some resistance to changing the backstop within OFDA perpetuates a serious barrier to attracting/retaining qualified FSOs, and penalizes those who currently work within it.
- At the same time, it is critical that the process be inclusive, as there are others who do not support splitting the backstop and believe there is an existing cadre of strong 76'ers prepared to assume greater responsibility in these areas. Just as there is a range of Economic Growth focus areas within the BS-21 backstop, or areas of focus within the Global Health backstop, there are areas of focus within the BS-76 backstop that FSOs are already trained for and/or, the same as any other backstop, be trained/gain experience <u>if</u> afforded the opportunities and culture.
- HCTM and the new BHA Bureau leadership should lead an inclusive exercise, in coordination with other stakeholders, to explore splitting the 76 backstop in order to establish more focused backstops that better align with the work of the new bureaus (note: for BHA this may be a hybrid of the old Humanitarian Affairs Officer Backstop and the old Food for Peace Officer Backstop). There have been some efforts already underway to solicit input and perspectives from the BS-76 cadre.

¹ <u>https://pages.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/consolidated_cs_fs_fsn_competency_catalog_-june_2018_2.pdf</u> See the Agency's Backstop Competency and Proficiency Catalog and specifics for BS-76

- Ensure Field-Based Operations integrate FSOs, including in Leadership Roles, for the good of the Agency, sector and beneficiaries: Senior Agency Leadership needs to ensure the Foreign Service is included and appropriately utilized in the field-based overseas operations of BHA and CPS. The new Bureaus need to ensure field-based career tracks and pathways exist for FSOs. Until now, FSOs have been systematically excluded from OFDA positions overseas there is one single overseas FSO position in all of OFDA, in Afghanistan.
 - o FSOs should be included in field staffing in Costa Rica, Budapest, Bangkok, Nairobi, and other hubs. These regional offices should be a mix of PSC and FSO hiring mechanisms. FSO's expressed concern that field-based PSCs do not rotate on a periodic basis the way the rest of State and AID overseas staff up to and including the Mission Director and Ambassador levels do. Agency leadership needs to understand that current PSCs have been in place for up to two decades, and in some cases have created "fiefdoms" in their regions.
 - Routine rotation, fresh blood, and fresh ideas are particularly important in the humanitarian sector, and it reduces the risks of "going local" and showing favoritism among partners (this is why FSOs up to and including Ambassadors and other senior decision-makers in the U.S. Government rotate periodically). The "fiefdom" capture problem is particularly acute for OFDA and FFP because their Regional Advisors are able to give out money on a non-competitive basis. Including FSOs in the field staffing structure will be healthy for USAID overall, and improve the quality and integrity of how USAID expends its \$4 billion in humanitarian funding.
 - o FSOs requested a proportion of the existing Regional Advisor (RAs) and Senior Humanitarian Advisors (SHAs) NSDD38 field slots be converted from PSC to FSO positions. OFDA senior management currently suffers from the perception they are defending and protecting individual PSCs in the field out of personal loyalties to individuals - particularly in the Costa Rica, Budapest, and Bangkok regional offices - rather than making responsible decisions for the best interests of the Agency. <u>A clear signal and actions are needed from leadership to reverse this perception.</u>
- Acknowledge and Embrace FSO Skills: Throughout many years, OFDA leadership has made the argument that they "need" PSCs to fill field positions because FSOs don't "know" humanitarian work. This is incorrect. There are numerous FSOs with OFDA and FFP experience, and prior humanitarian experience, including with UN and humanitarian agencies, who are fully qualified to serve in BHA field positions.
- Utilize FSOs Appropriately and Effectively for the Agency's and US taxpayer Benefit: Permanent/long-term DARTS (defined as having field-based NSDD-38 slots assigned to them with Embassy Housing and ICASS benefits equivalent to any other FSO assigned to that post) are currently staffed by PSC positions that take, on average, 529 days to hire. In the interim, they are usually staffed with a mix of short-term TDYers who are often serving several levels above their skills and experience level, and/or are inserted into the response without adequate knowledge of the context and

internal/external relationships. This is inefficient and prevents USAID from operating as a world leader in the humanitarian space.

- The new Bureau should utilize FSOs and the FSO assignments process to staff long-term responses with qualified Officers, and can do so far more quickly and flexibly than OFDA can particularly if the Agency creates a new Humanitarian Backstop.
 - o FSOs expressed concern at the pace of hiring of RAs and SHAs in the field using PSC mechanisms, vice filling these roles using FSOs. At most posts, there is an external review process to approve the use of a PSC for an NSDD-38 slot vice an FSO. FSOs requested the Agency leadership establish a review process to ensure visibility and management checks on OFDA's hiring if new PSCs for positions FSOs might be qualified and interested in filling. Where is this external review process for OFDA? Who has visibility on the number of new field-based PSC hires, and whether they could be filled by competent FSOs instead of PSCs?

• "Set the Table" for FSOs in the new Bureau:

- o FSOs asked how the new Bureau will recruit and hold FSO positions, before pressures arise to convert them back to PSC positions; there is a decade+ of cultural/structural bias to work through/overcome.
- FSOs sought clarity on the Agency Leadership's position on maintaining/protecting/ensuring space for FSOs during the transition and as the new Bureau solidifies/refines/tunes its structure over the next 2-4 years.
- o FSOs do not understand why BHA will not use the model piloted in Afghanistan, which has been quite successful, particularly for long-term responses and permanent field offices? [In Afghanistan there is an Office of Humanitarian Assistance, led by a Foreign Service Officer who represents both OFDA and FFP and serves as the Senior Humanitarian Advisor.]