

USAID/AFSA TOWNHALL: 22 October 2020

QUESTION ROLL

Note: AFSA has consolidated Questions from the October 22, 2020 Google Meets session. Responses are based on AFSA's understanding but on Agency policy/regulations, employees should also consult with HCTM, their Backstop Coordinators, and/or Assignment and Career Counselors. Thank you.

End of Global Authorized Departure

Q: Does AFSA think that declaring the end of G/AD in the midst of a pandemic makes sense?

A: AFSA, at both USAID and State, has made clear our concerns about a one-size-fits-all return to normalcy. We continue to press for no-fault curtailments for those who feel that they cannot return to overseas posts at this time. We are helping quite a few officers formulate requests for curtailments on compassionate grounds. AFSA recognizes that the pandemic has put enormous stress on all officers, and that the work burden on those who remained deployed overseas throughout the pandemic has been particularly heavy. Emergency Action Committees at individual posts have authority to look at country-specific circumstances and advise on authorized or ordered departure, based on pandemic-related or other circumstances.

Q: Will FSOs who curtail when G/AD ends become bidders in Update 1 of the 2021 cycle? Or if they receive directed assignments, will HCTM wait until after the 2021 bid cycle ends before they assign those who curtail?

A: This is a question for HCTM. Please open a ticket through the HR Help Desk (hr-helpdesk@usaid.gov) to get a definitive answer in your individual case. Some officers who are currently seeking curtailments have been told that they will become bidders in Update 1. AFSA will monitor this.

Q: What is the background regarding allowing five days of Home Leave rather than 20 days at a minimum?

A: The requirement that employees take Home Leave is a matter of law as well as regulation, so granting exceptions to it is difficult. The Agency offered employees an opportunity to take fewer days of Home Leave during the period of the G/AD because some officers and families found that taking large amounts of such leave during the pandemic was infeasible on grounds of safety and practicality.

Q: It seems that the Agency is stepping back from letting Operating Units make their own decisions about telework. State's guidance about the end of the G/AD implies that long-distance telework will not be a decision by Operating Units, even though in the RRB and at most posts, non-essential staff are still required to telework. Why can't a telework request be delegated to Operating Units?

A: AFSA is unaware of cases where an Operating Unit and an employee have agreed to have a telework arrangement but a higher authority has denied the opportunity. We are aware of several cases where employees wish to telework but leaders in Operating Units prefer to have staff present in country, either to work directly or to telework from a closer location. We are also aware of cases where officers wish to telework, but posts are not in a position to pay the costs of allowing officers to remain out of country. Per federal regulations, telework is not an entitlement. AFSA is in discussions with the Agency about the overall telework approach, and how we can apply lessons learned going forward.

Career Mobility

Q: When will promotions be announced this year?

A: HCTM is best placed to respond. Please open a Ticket through the HCTM Help Desk (hr-helpdesk@usaid.gov) and/or Launch Pad.

Q: Any idea when Tenured Officers who are still not commissioned can expect to receive their commissions? Is there any job security risk for tenured officers who are not commissioned and who choose to curtail at the end of G/AD?

A: AFSA has pressed the Agency to resolve this matter, which dates to 2018, for as long as we have known about it -- at least a year. The Agency has offered us and those affected a variety of bureaucratic explanations. It is AFSA's impression that the Agency is well aware that it could have managed the situation better. We continue to urge Agency representatives to reach out individually to persons affected and offer information. We do not believe that there will be adverse career impact on those who are not commissioned for the purely technical reason of the delay.

Q: Could you share any background on the new instruction that all bidders on given positions be ranked, as opposed to the former arrangement where only the top three Mission choices, plus alternates, were ranked?

A: AFSA is still waiting to see how this change will affect our members. We were not consulted about it in advance of the Agency's decision to change methodology. If the change has adverse effects on members, we would be happy to assist.

Q: Is the Agency considering/looking at FS-02 mid-level hiring into the Foreign Service?

A: This is a question best posed to HCTM (hr-helpdesk@usaid.gov). As a matter of record, AFSA opposes mid-level hiring and conversions, as we believe that the practice contravenes the notion of merit-based advancement encoded in the Foreign Service Act. The Agency's "Interim Strategic Workforce Plan" (<https://pages.usaid.gov/HCTM/interim-strategic-workforce-plan>) envisions mid-level career conversions for USAID Civil Service colleagues to Foreign Service positions. While AFSA greatly respects all USAID employees, AFSA does not support such mid-level conversions and believes the Agency should look first to career FSOs for staffing needs, and better apply strategic workforce planning to ensure a steady flow of career FSOs into an effective structure.

Diversity and Inclusion

Q: How is AFSA approaching Diversity and Inclusion at the Agency?

A: Diversity and inclusion are important to AFSA not simply because a diverse and inclusive Foreign Service is a stronger Foreign Service, but because the Foreign Service Act calls for a Foreign Service that is representative of the American people.

The relatively recent GAO Report on USAID and Diversity (<https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-20-477>) flagged concerns at the Agency, including a weak Office of Civil Rights and Diversity (OCRD). Fortunately, OCRD is restaffing, and OCRD colleagues are passionate about their role. If you ever feel discriminated against, harassed, or are in a hostile work environment, please contact OCRD to talk to someone. Please know that retaliation for engaging in EEO activity is not allowed. You can find OCRD on the intranet or internet, or email EEOComplaints@usaid.gov or ocrdharassment@usaid.gov. Of possible interest, please refer to the recent Agency note on FY 2019 demographics found here: https://pages.usaid.gov/system/files/fy_2019_usaid_usdh_workforce_demographics_fact_sheet.pdf

AFSA President Eric Rubin issued an AFSA Net on October 25 on diversity, inclusion, bias, discrimination and how to improve workplace culture. It contained links to a number of AFSA efforts and initiatives, including a survey of members. That link is here: <https://www.afsa.org/afsa-member-survey-implicit-and-explicit-racial-bias-foreign-service-workplace>

Additionally, AFSA President Eric Rubin sent an AFSA Net on June 3 to members, entitled "AFSA Supports Racial and Social Justice." It is reprinted in the July/August Foreign Service Journal:

<http://afsa.org/foreign-service-journal> (along with other relevant pieces) and the recent FSJ issues focus on racism, diversity and inclusion in the Foreign Service.

AFSA also issued a press release in support of the Supreme Court's decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia* declaring that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects gay and transgender employees from workplace discrimination. <http://afsa.org/afsa-welcomes-supreme-court-decision-lgbtq-workplace-protections>.

In addition to these high-level public statements, AFSA works with the leadership of the respective foreign affairs agencies to advocate for diversity, including policies, training and engagement, a matter affected by a recent Executive Order. We advocate for unconscious bias training, particularly in relation to performance and promotion systems and for policies that help promote diversity in the FS. Related, the USAID AFSA team regularly engages with HCTM and other stakeholders to advocate for greater transparency in promotion statistics, including SLG data, to help raise awareness of diversity and potential biases.

On an individual level, AFSA supports FSO members when they face challenges. We work with officers who believe they face bias or discrimination. As AFSA does not have an investigative arm, we help our members understand and engage with OCRD, and support action if their claims are determined to have merit.

Q: What can you share about AFSA's role in this lawsuit?

<https://www.aauw.org/resources/legal/laf/current-cases/beth-paige-et-al-v-usaid/>

A: AFSA has long championed the principle of equal pay for equal work. The plaintiffs in the lawsuit have been granted access to AFSA's Legal Defense Fund, drawn from members' voluntary contributions, but AFSA has not been involved in arguing the merits of the case. We have communicated to the Front Office AFSA's position that the Agency should give this case proper attention and due diligence, considering its importance to AFSA members.

New Executive Orders on Schedule F Hiring and Firing; Payroll Tax Deferral

Q: Will AFSA be involved with determining which (if any) USAID (and State) positions would fall under the new Schedule F Executive Order? How might the order affect USAID?

A: AFSA's position is that the new EO does not apply to the Foreign Service.

Q: What is the status of the payroll tax deferral? I understood that some unions were trying to have it be optional. Is that still a possibility?

A: AFSA has made the point on Capitol Hill and elsewhere that the arrangement is widely viewed as unhelpful by those it purports to assist, but an opt-out option is not expected under the current Administration. We do not know what evolution might take place in the months leading up to the period when pay-back becomes necessary, but we continue to represent member views with Members of Congress and others who could enact changes. The option to ask Congress for forgiveness of the taxes owed remains.

Q: I make more than the amount specified for OASDI COVID tax deferrals, but have been getting the run-around about how to correct the problem. Is there a POC other than payhelp@state.gov?

A: For payroll questions, AFSA suggests visiting the Payroll Division intranet pages here: <https://pages.usaid.gov/M/CFO/payroll-division-m-cfo-p>. This site advises you to send a detailed request to payroll@usaid.gov.

Reorganization

Q: Should we record the conversations we will be having about our new positions under reorganization in case anything that comes up is problematic for us from an employment perspective?

A: AFSA recommends taking notes in any meetings with a supervisor, and as appropriate, sharing with the supervisor what one has understood. AFSA is prepared to help individuals who feel that their conditions of work have changed in a detrimental fashion as a result of reorganization, for example, if supervisory responsibilities disappear.

Q: Have any FSO employees been slotted to the complement as part of the Reorganization because onward assignments are not clear?

A: AFSA knows of no such cases, but we are happy to advise persons who feel that they have been adversely affected by reorganization.

Q: Are there any updates on what BHA backstops are/will be? There used to be Food for Peace Officers, or DG Officers, filling most of those positions. RFS still seems to be following the past and call its officers Ag Development Officers, despite the Bureau's large mandate.

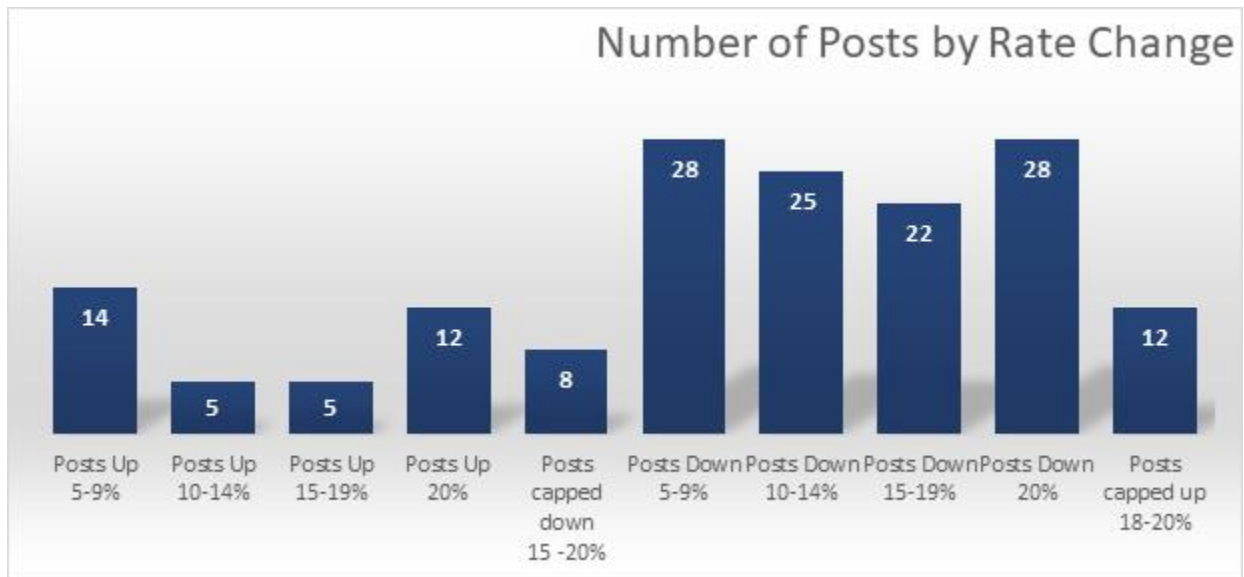
A: Any official response or updates should be from Agency officials. AFSA recommends that members contact their Assignments and Career Counselors as well as Ms. Elisabeth Kvitashvili with BHA and Ms. Sharon Carter with the DRG Center. AFSA understands that the Agency intends to split the Foreign Service's (FS) Crisis, Stabilization, and Governance Backstop (BS-76) into three separate backstops: (1) humanitarian assistance, (2) conflict mitigation, and (3)

democracy, human rights and governance. AFSA is in discussions with Agency leadership and counterparts on these plans, and has encouraged Agency representatives to hold some form of town hall on the status and progress of the BS-76 reforms.

Cuts to COLA; Overseas Financial Matters

Q: Why did the State Department decide to use a contractor for these surveys? Loss of COLA really does affect morale as well as lower the attractiveness of some posts.

A: The goal of the new process was to standardize data collection across the range of posts, a goal AFSA supports. Post Allowance (COLA) is designed to compensate for differences in prices between those in the Washington DC area and those in other locations, so drops in COLA at given posts represent drops in the degree to which costs are higher at those posts than in Washington. This said, large COLA drops do feel like cuts in income. AFSA is engaging with the Office of Allowances to get a better understanding of the methodology used, particularly in island nations and other small nations where many goods have to be imported. From figures provided to AFSA (see chart below), 103 posts saw a reduction in COLA, 72 posts stayed the same, and 36 posts saw an increase. While there may be some kinks to work out – including some precipitous drops in places like Curacao, Haiti and Cuba -- AFSA believes that the basic concept is sounder than the old system.



AFSA continues to press Congress to adopt federal pay scales that result in adequate wages for employees at all pay levels.

Q: Could future bid lists be released with household member bilateral or de facto work permit status listed in a column?

A: We think that would be a very good idea, and will share it with HCTM. AFSA suggests that members also open tickets asking for this change (hr-helpdesk@usaid.gov).

Parity with State re Training

Q: How does USAID determine posts for DSID? Back in August, there was a SMART cable outlining State's DSID posts for FY2021, and there were a number of countries for which USAID does not grant DSID (Madagascar, Malawi, Benin, Egypt, etc.). Why is that?

A: Posts that are difficult for State to staff may not be difficult for USAID to staff, and vice versa. DSID payments are incentives to attract officers to hard-to-fill posts. Thus they are tied to posts that are actually hard to fill for the agencies involved. Please review the Agency's pages on DSID here: <https://pages.usaid.gov/HCTM/difficult-staff-incentive-differential-dsid-program> and here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1K8ZBig3HtRByGvFz7WWWSAh5HakJhUelmBfdnIbOTXY/edit?ts=5ec1dc4e#>

Q: When I was at the War College, my State Department colleagues were assigned there while I was on TDY on a sliding scale. Have we looked at standardizing our policies for LTT (beyond language training) so that they are in line with those at the State Department?

A: AFSA will raise with HCTM the issue of parity. Please also see the Agency's pages on Long Term Training here: <https://pages.usaid.gov/CPS/CMC/long-term-training-opportunities-dod-institutions>. State students in training at the various war colleges have differing statuses depending on how long their training lasts, whether it is connected with an onward assignment, and where they transfer from when they undertake training.

Q: State students are eligible for promotion while on long-term at war college and other locations, while USAID specifies that officers in long-term training will get automatic B grades. Why is this?

A: The paperwork required for promotion at State and USAID differs in that USAID officers must submit PIF packages as well as AEFs in the years that they wish to be considered for promotion, whereas State officers are automatically considered to be eligible for promotion two years after their most recent promotion, based on their succession of AEF-equivalent documents alone. State officers are seldom promoted from training positions, but promotions of officers in such positions -- based on work written up in AEF-equivalent documents from

years prior to training – can occur. Members may wish to contact HCTM (hr-helpdesk@usaid.gov) and their Assignments and Career Counselor for additional details.