

GLOBAL LINK



Association of American Foreign Service Women

AAFSW in the New Millennium

Terri Williams, with the support of Gerre Lee Craig, recently led a meeting of numerous AAFSW members to discuss the future of AAFSW.

Topics included the role of AAFSW in today's foreign service, the structure of the organization, and how it can best help its members deal with issues relating to the foreign service community.

The participants agreed that AAFSW needs to play more of an advocacy role on its members' behalf. The next step will be to figure out how to do this effectively.

I came away with the feeling that people are enthusiastic about AAFSW and willing to face the challenges of reorganization. If you would like more information, please contact Margaret Teich, the AAFSW Office Manager (contact information on page 2).

The next meeting will be held on **Sunday, January 17, 1999, from 3 to 5 p.m.** at the AAFSW office. Come along, or send your ideas on the structure, leadership, committees, and priorities of AAFSW to Terri Williams at the AAFSW office (see page 2 for details).

Suzan Al-Mutawa

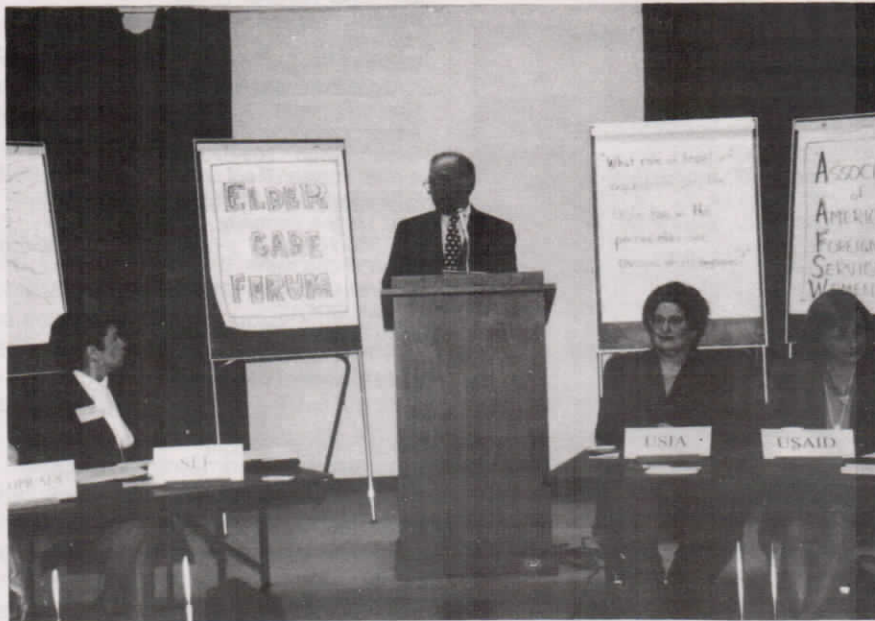
Don't

^ Carry On, Jeeves

It is a Foreign Service rite of passage—or perhaps we consider it a right of passage (we are moving to another country, after all): the search for a place to stow the mountains of carry-on luggage that represent the necessities we dare not check. This labor-intensive strategy may soon prove impossible. U.S. airlines have begun enforcing new, strict rules concerning carry-ons.

Following are some general points to consider when planning your next trip.

(See "Airlines," page 5)



Director General Edward ("Skip") Gnehm indicates his commitment to finding elder care solutions at the FORUM Elder Care Round Table.

FORUM Elder Care Round Table Report

On November 3, 1998, the AAFSW FORUM convened an inter-agency Elder Care Round Table in the Department of State. The panelists represented five functions within the Department and six other U.S. government agencies: USIA, AID, DIA, DEA, FSC, and the FBI. The Senior Living Foundation was also represented. Terri Williams, AAFSW Membership Chair, kindly donated her professional services as facilitator. Discussion quickly revealed that, although everyone present accepted that elder care was going to become an increasingly pressing concern, agencies differed widely in their approaches. Everyone was interested in working together on an inter-agency basis to propose solutions to employees' elder care concerns. Since State would seem to have some of the most concrete proposals in mind, the panelists and audience were also interested in reconvening to measure progress.

The session opened with discussion of the question: What role or level of responsibility is appropriate for the U.S. government to assume in the elder care concerns of its employees? Basically, the role of the government is seen as one of *facilitating* elder care, but not of becoming involved in each and every cost and detail.

Introduction: The Director General Comments

Ambassador Edward Gnehm, Director of the Foreign Service and Director of Personnel, launched the discussion by indicating his commitment to finding elder care solutions. Those present were pleased to learn that he has added elder care

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FORUM Suggests Possible Changes

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to the list of "Personnel Priority Issues" and established an Elder Care Working Group tasked with exploring options to address the special concerns of Foreign Service families caring for aging parents. (Though it is unusual for the AAFSW to sit on a State Committee, the FORUM Chair is a member of that working group.)

The Director General went on to comment that State should work to reduce the extra expenses that employees incur for elder care responsibilities and to make the situation "financially neutral" by comparison with people who live and work in the United States.

Elder care has an institutional aspect as well. Ambassador Gnehm stressed

State should make the situation "financially neutral"

that foreign affairs agencies take retention of employees seriously, stating that we have many employees with desirable skills, and that State will be raided unless we take precautions—which might include offering good benefits to facilitate elder care.

The Director General gave generously of his time and delivered a message that was basically positive and that made participants hopeful that action will be taken.

Agencies Report on Action

At that point, the facilitator, Terri Williams, asked agency representatives to state briefly what each was doing. One agency said that "nothing much is being done," and another commented that they avoid problems by preventing families from taking elders abroad. Yet another finds it easy to reassign people to the U.S. if there is a need.

As for USAID, it is experiencing problems both because of a reduction of personnel and because of the graying of the agency. As employees grow older, they are more apt to have elder care

concerns and thus more apt to request extensions of U.S. postings to meet their responsibilities. However, because of the reduction of senior personnel, the agency is less able to be compassionate because there are not enough people to do the job overseas.

Possible Adjustments

The basic purpose of the Elder Care Round Table (and of the three sessions of the FORUM that preceded it) was to point out adjustments that the U.S. government might make to better support employees who have elder care responsibilities. It is important to remember that even if the Department might want to take action, funding is always a constraint. Furthermore, because some of these changes require inter-agency consensus, it may require many months to see results.

✓ **Dependency**

Currently a parent must be 51% financially dependent upon the employee before he or she can be placed on orders. However, the Federal Travel Regulations (FTR) requires only that parents cannot reasonably live on their own, even if they have income greater than 51% of what it takes to support them. If State's regulations were similar to the FTR, it would be easier for employees to include parents on orders.

✓ **Separate Maintenance Allowance**

At present SMA may be paid only for people who have resided with the employee overseas. Dropping the foreign residency requirement would make it possible for dependent parents residing in the U.S. to receive this assistance, which would help defray the cost of running two households when the employee goes overseas.

✓ **Emergency Visitation Travel (EVT)**

At this point, MED restricts EVT to cases where the family member is near death or dying. The use of the EVT could be broadened to include travel to monitor the condition of a family member who is hospitalized or who needs to be placed in a nursing home or in an assisted living facility. It would also include the parents of foreign-born spouses.

✓ **Rest and Recuperation (R&R)**

Only 30% of posts have R&R. At non-R&R posts, an elder care R&R could be added to make it possible for employees to fulfill their elder care responsibilities in the U.S. It would also be helpful for employees to receive R&R travel beyond the port of entry to the residence of the elder person.

✓ **Medical Concerns**

Insurance: Even if parents are on orders, MED does not do physicals or provide clearances for elderly dependents, nor are elderly dependents covered by any Department medical insurance. Thus, insurance for the elderly has to be obtained privately, which is very expensive. AFSA has been discussing this with MED. Perhaps the AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired People) could provide group insurance rates. Sometimes (in Belgium, for instance), it is possible to obtain local insurance at post after a one-year residency.

Medicare: Another big concern is that Medicare is not available overseas. Changing Medicare policy to cover the elderly overseas might be a long-term advocacy goal. Certainly, the numbers involved are only a small percentage of those covered by Medicare.

Medical facilities at post: Elderly parents (whether on orders or not) should be able to use the post health unit facilities on a fee-for-service basis with the understanding that the health unit is not equipped to assume responsibility for highly complicated geriatric medical needs.

✓ **Other facilities**

Communications: The U.S. government could offer support by making its communications facilities available to people who have elder care responsibilities. This would include the use of e-mail and tie-lines to stay in touch with elderly parents in the U.S. It would also include allowing non-dependent parents residing with the employee to use the APO in their own names—especially to receive business correspondence and medications.



Panel participants listen as AAFSW President Gerre Lee Craig addresses the FORUM.

Other post facilities: In reality, parents are usually made to feel welcome and appreciated at post. However, so that employees know what they will find at post, it would be useful to have a uniform policy for housing, commissary use, club use, pool use (senior citizen rates?), trip participation, and shuttle use.

✓ Personnel issues

Six/eight extension policy and curtailment: Much of the information PER/DCA has on existing requests for extensions or curtailments is anecdotal. Without making sweeping policy changes, the Six/Eight Committee and panels might concentrate on a more generous interpretation of the current regulations and requirements.

The workplace: In some offices, people are made to feel guilty or uncomfortable for taking time off for elder care responsibilities. It should be acceptable to do so. In the U.S. at least, employees should be able to use the Family Medical Leave Act for meeting their responsibilities. In addition, if emergency complications arise, it should be possible to make use of flex time, job sharing or a part-time schedule while the complications are being dealt with.

Information: From numerous comments, it is clear that obtaining information is a problem. For some, there is too little. FLO might develop a ques-

tionnaire for CLOs to survey conditions at post that would be favorable or unfavorable for an elderly person. In the Department and locally, there are already many sources of information, but people are not sure what is where. Thus there is a need to gather together and organize all the good information and resources that exist.

✓ Finances

Salary advances: A number of people have spoken about needing to use IRAs or other undesirable funding to meet the expenses of elder care. Currently advances on salary are limited to a permanent change of station. Advances should be available to meet the costs of elder care as well.

Retirement benefits: As the Senior Living Foundation will confirm, some single retired members of the staff corps do not have sufficient income. In addition, many elderly Foreign Service widows are living at the poverty level because their pensions are insufficient. If a deceased spouse retires at the O3 level or below, the widow's share of 55% of the pension is not sufficient. To advocate for raising the portion from 55% to 75% would require a major and long-term advocacy effort.

AAFSW's Role

Discussion also centered on what AAFSW can do:

1. Join with AFSA to lobby for over-

seas Medicare coverage for elders.

2. Use *Global Link* to inform our members about sources of elder care information.

3. Put basic information together on a web site so that it could be accessed by anyone anywhere.

4. Use our own advocacy potential more fully in the Department.

Since people are reluctant to be absent from work for more than a half day, the session ended at 1 p.m., although there was still much to discuss. Participants were satisfied to have clarified concerns and to have discovered others with similar interests.

Mette Beecroft
FORUM Chair

Airlines Restrict Carrying On

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Some bags that previously qualified as carry-on luggage are now too large. Do not assume that the battered pack you have carried for years will still be acceptable. (New acceptable sizes vary, but many airlines are using a 16" by 10" by 24" rule. Others require carry-ons to be considerably smaller.) Stores cannot guarantee that the bags they sell you as carry-ons will actually be accepted under the new policies.



Flight attendants will enforce the rules more strictly on crowded flights. Furthermore, once the overhead bins are full, any passengers who have not boarded may be forced to check bags that do not fit under their seats. Possible solutions: get a seat near the back of the plane, since passengers are normally boarded from back to front, and board as early as you can.



In some cases, even cameras, duty-free purchases, and handbags will be counted in the carry-on allowance. The safest way to avoid problems is to check with the specific airline you will be using to determine its new carry-on rules before traveling.