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PRIVATE LIVES, PUBLIC POLICY:
Foreign Service Families & Children

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SPEAKING OUT

Do Family Member Associates Matter?

BY REBECCA C. PARK

You've heard of the "Foreign Service National of the Year" award, mentoring for junior officers, maybe even the annual conference for office management specialists. But have you ever heard of special counseling or recognition for family member employees at post? I haven't, and I'm now in my fourth family member job overseas.

I appreciate how bewildering it is for junior officers to enter the strange workplace that is the State Department today, and I'm all in favor of efforts to help them acclimate. But as I watch management shepherd the JOs along, I think about how much more bewildering State is for family member associates, who get no orientation program of their own and who are now no longer even eligible to attend their spouses' A-100 classes. Even for veteran family member employees, the learning curve remains steep; every job is out-of-cone, and building on a base of expertise is a rare, lucky happenstance.

Over my husband's 14-year career, I've been everything from an FS-04 economic research analyst to an 09 administrative assistant. I've been an 07 systems manager and an 06 human resources specialist. I've worked on "SecState" and presidential visits at every post and lived through the same department crises as the rest of the workforce: the 1995 government shut-down, Y2K, and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. I've

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interpreted for senators and watched paint dry. I've spent hours at a stretch on airport tarmacs guarding cleared equipment, and I've worked late into the night finalizing guest lists for state dinners. I've inventoried representational china and revived failed computer systems. In fact, I'm so good at blending in that many people are surprised when I tell them that I am "merely" a family member appointment.

Second-Class Citizenship

There is a lot of talk these days about changing State Department culture and improving employment opportunities for spouses overseas. Looking at FMAs as an essential component of the workforce, and a constituency worth cultivating in its own right, would be a step in the right direction on both counts.

I remember the first time I

heard the term "PIT" — part-time, intermittent, temporary — and thinking, "How could the department come up with such an ugly acronym?! What does that say about their regard for these employees?" Unfortunately, my experiences over my 14-year non-career have only reinforced the perception that the term accurately reflects State's fundamental disregard for us:

- One of my bosses once summoned everyone to his office to confer a group meritorious honor award for assistance with a presidential visit. Midway through reading the citation, he noted that, although I had worked alongside the rest of the staff, my name could not be listed on the certificate because I was a mere personal services contractor.

- As an FMA/PIT, I am not automatically entitled to the two steps normally awarded when a direct hire employee moves to a higher grade. Although I eventually got the two steps when I went from FS-08 to 07 and from 07 to 06, it was not because of any protection in the regulations but rather because I qualified for a "previous highest rate" based on my salary as an 04 economic research analyst in Moscow.

- But the most extreme form of FMA ostracism I've encountered was in a human resources class at FSI. One day our class of about 20 FSNs and American direct hires



was split into two groups. The FSNs were given a classroom assignment while the Americans were invited to Main State to observe a paneling session. Imagine my dismay when told I would not be permitted to attend the paneling session! I was the lone American singled out for this exclusion — and no one tried to conceal the fact that it was due to my being an FMA. Never mind that I'd held a top security clearance for years and drafted many a classified cable: my "FMA-ness" evidently cast doubt on my loyalty and discretion.

Meanwhile, down in the trenches, management wants the visas adjudicated, the warehouse managed, the computer systems maintained, and, in my case, the Human Resources Office run. They're happy to have us perform all the work that was eliminated — on paper — back in the era of Do More With Less. The work still needs doing, but there simply aren't the permanent direct-hire positions to do it. However, thanks to a small army of FMAs, the work is getting done. And we're not exactly stealing the glam jobs either. We're doing what most direct hires prefer not to do: hauling classified pouches, delivering furniture and escorting repair personnel in controlled-access areas.

Fair Treatment

Yet not only are we FMAs doing what direct hires do, but we earn a lot less for it. Take my current family-member position in Human Resources. I started the job as an FS-08 (and without any of the differentials that a direct-hire employee gets) because, despite seven years of FMA experience overseas, I was told I brought "nothing" to the position. Being hired as an 08

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did not alter the expectations placed on me to work at the full-performance-level grade of 06, but my salary was kept at the 08 and 07 levels pending completion of formal training.

Following 18 months of work, and formal training at FSI, I have gradually worked my way up from the rank of 08 to a "full-performance" 06. Meanwhile, without any change in responsibilities, the job has been made a direct-hire position, which will likely be graded FS-03. So next summer, not only will a direct-hire officer walk into a higher position, but he or she will immediately start collecting a 15-percent hardship differential. The work will not have gotten harder, but the pay will certainly have improved!

Not only should the principle of equal pay for equal work be introduced, but benefits need to be beefed up as well. Take the Thrift Savings Program. A few years ago, FMAs were given the right to contribute to their TSP. But that benefit turns out to be of dubious util-

ity. Even I, the longest-serving FMA at my post, cannot meet the three-year vesting requirement to retain the automatic agency contributions to my retirement account — even if I started my job as early as I could and worked until the last possible day. Unless I am able to find another FMA position at my husband's next or subsequent post, I will not recover these lost U.S. government contributions to my TSP, through no fault of my own.

Or consider training. When FMAs are fortunate enough to get any formal instruction, it often comes piecemeal and well into the job. If the department can't offer training up front, it should at least stop financially penalizing family member employees who are brave enough to throw themselves directly into jobs without formal training. In particular, language incentive pay should be given to family members who have demonstrated linguistic proficiency in the workplace. Why shouldn't FMA visa interviewers get the same compensation as FS personnel for using a hard language? Those skills weren't any easier for us to acquire and are as valuable as those offered by our fellow consular officers.

And What About AFSA?

The AFSA take on FMAs seems to be that we're poaching on direct-hire positions, trying to get into the Foreign Service through the back door. This attitude doesn't make sense in light of AFSA's professed concern about the strain on direct hires caused by severe understaffing. Surely FMAs should be thanked for stepping into the breach!

It is true that AFSA recently proposed that married, direct-hire Americans assigned overseas be given an extra five percent of their

SPEAKING OUT



salaries if their spouses cannot find work. But the trouble is that this is a remedy for direct hires that does nothing for FMAs. It may even encourage family members to stay away from embassy work.

How about this novel idea, instead? Why not give the spouses who take FMA positions the same differential and incentive payments as their direct-hire sponsors? After all, is a spouse working full-time in the mission any less affected by hardship conditions than the sponsoring husband or wife? The current policy of depriving FMAs of differential and incentive pay only increases our sense of alienation.

The department needs to understand that family members make choices, and it should value those who opt to join the embassy work-


place. When I send my two girls off to school each day, I question my own choice to take an embassy job. Would I be doing more good by staying home and making myself available to my daughters as they return from school, supervising their homework and escorting them to after-school activities?

Until FMAs are seen as a class of employees — a distinct AFSA constituency — entitled to protections and incentives similar to those offered to other employee groups, many family members will hesitate to take jobs requiring American citizenship and security clearances. At my post, we have been struggling for months to recruit a Community Liaison Coordinator — one of the highest-graded positions that requires no formal train-

ing. And if it's that hard to fill a CLO position, what about less interesting FMA jobs?

I realize that some of my proposals would require new legislation. But with signs of renewed appreciation in Washington for the federal workforce — and U.S. diplomats in particular — why not begin setting that process in motion now? As the department wages its "War for Talent," I submit it is overlooking talent in its own midst. ■

During her 14 years as a family member associate, Rebecca C. Park, spouse of FSO Laurence E. Tobey, has lived in Krakow, Moscow, Halifax and Washington. She is currently a human resources specialist in Sofia.



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