

# GOING IT ALONE: FAMILY LIFE IN THE ‘NEW’ FOREIGN SERVICE

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MOST FS EMPLOYEES WILL SERVE UNACCOMPANIED TOURS DURING THEIR CAREERS. WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT CAN THEIR FAMILIES EXPECT?

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BY KELLY BEMBRY MIDURA

The Foreign Service has undergone profound changes in the last several years, but the most dramatic is a rapid increase in the number of assignments to unaccompanied posts. These fall into three categories: fully unaccompanied; limited-accompanied (adults only); and Iraq or Afghanistan (colloquially known as “Afrac”), for which there are special benefits.

Immediately prior to 9/11, there were approximately 200 unaccompanied and limited-accompanied (adults only) State Department positions worldwide. As of this writing, there are more than 900 such slots at 16 overseas posts. The trend is clear: Most current Foreign Service employees can expect to serve at a post without their families at some point in their careers.

While the majority of the positions designated unaccompanied (350) are in Iraq, employees also serve without their families in countries ranging from Algeria to Yugoslavia (see sidebar, p. 32). My own husband is serving in an adults-only post, Pristina. Because I’m staying in Washington with our children, he is unaccompanied.

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A family with an employee doing an unaccompanied assignment may be eligible for either an Involuntary or a Voluntary Separate Maintenance Allowance — or even embassy housing and overseas school tuition, if the employee accepts a tour in Iraq while serving at an overseas post. And the employee may be eligible for home leave, Rest & Recreation travel, Family Visitation Travel, or some combination thereof.

According to State’s Bureau of Human Resources, as of February there were about 220 families contending with the difficulties of an unaccompanied tour. Yet State has lagged in developing a support network for us. Currently, there is just one position in the Family Liaison Office dedicated to unaccompanied tour support. (A slot for an assistant, funded by the Iraq supplemental appropriation to the department’s budget, is in the works.) And to date, no funds have been added to the FLO general budget for unaccompanied tour support. All existing UT-related programs have been funded out of the general FLO budget, with grants from the Una Chapman Cox Foundation, or by the Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide.

## Information, Please

First and foremost, unaccompanied spouses and partners need information about the support available to

them and how to obtain it. State's policies are a mish-mash of provisions and exceptions, so answers to even simple questions can be difficult to come by — especially if, like most family members, you lack easy access to the department intranet.

The information deficit is compounded by the fact that in many cases procedures have not been established, so the employee (or spouse) may have to be quite proactive in pursuing benefits. My husband, for example, was initially told that he would not qualify for family visitation travel from Pristina. He took his case to the Bureau of Human Resources, making the point that if his children are not allowed at post, he is, in fact, unaccompanied. FVT was then funded to visit his children (visiting me was apparently an optional extra) and, because the travel was not R&R, he received hardship differential for the duration of the visit worth several hundred dollars.

Benefits for Iraq are clearer because they have been codified, to some degree, in an "Iraq Service Recognition Package." A similar package exists for Afghanistan. Two cables sent last year, 07 State 98727 and 07 State 115815, spell out these programs' provisions, but here is a summary of benefits that service in "Afraq" triggers:

- Involuntary Separate Maintenance Allowance;
- Two R&Rs over a 12-month tour, plus home leave at the end of the tour;
- Removal from "fair share" bidding status after six months at post; and
- Classification as a full overseas tour for purposes of the 5/8 rule regarding continuous domestic service.

In addition, if an employee leaves his or her current overseas post to serve a year in Iraq mid-tour, the family may remain in embassy housing, with embassy-paid school tuition for children. This is only possible because of extra funding through the Iraq supplemental appropriation, and does not apply to any other post in the Foreign Service, including Afghanistan.

### **Keeping in Touch**

Along with information, spouses cite a need for communication, both with the State Department and each other. Because most unaccompanied families do not reside in Washington, D.C., this presents a challenge. Nan Leininger, the Family Liaison Office's unaccompanied tour specialist, estimates that only about 25 percent of UT families live in the Washington area, while 10 percent live overseas, either at the employee's post or inde-

pendently. The remaining 65 percent live at various locations throughout the U.S.

State does offer some UT resources (see sidebar, p. 34), such as a voluntary registry of unaccompanied family members. By registering, family members can sign up to receive newsletters and notifications of events and services for unaccompanied families. (Register by e-mailing [FLOAskUT@state.gov](mailto:FLOAskUT@state.gov).) Events include monthly brown-bag lunches at FSI, online "webinars" and the occasional picnic or coffee.

Spouses may also join HomeFrontUS, a listserv sponsored by FLO for current and previously unaccompanied family members. The group provides a forum to ask questions and share experiences. It also features FLO announcements for UT family members. This is a moderated Yahoo! Group with restricted membership. To join, visit <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/HomefrontUS/>, click "Join this Group," and include your name and where your family will be (or has been) serving.

Communication on a logistical level is important, but spouses also cite a deeper need for emotional support that can often extend to professional counseling, particularly when an employee has been posted to a very dangerous country. In general, spouses do not seem to depend on the State Department for this type of support, relying instead on friends, family and their own health-care network for the mental health needs of their families. Capie Polk, whose husband is currently serving in Iraq, typifies this perspective:

"I have not availed myself of any State services specifically designed for UT spouses or otherwise, although I appreciate Nan Leininger's e-mail updates and offers. She has made a real effort to keep me in the loop, and I do find some comfort in knowing that she and her office are there should I need help. In general, however, I do not feel part of any special State Department 'family' this year and probably would not turn to State first should I need assistance."

This feeling of isolation from the Foreign Service community is experienced at every level. Diana Negroponte, wife of Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and an active advocate for support services for unaccompanied families, recounts her family's experience in 2004-2005, when her husband was serving as ambassador to Iraq, and her children were exposed to daily media reports of the dangers of life in Baghdad.

"For some of our four children, the consequence was

trouble with the police; and for all of them, tumbling grades in school and college. They were scared, and no one knew how to help them. The only support that I received was the much-appreciated occasional telephone call and lunch meeting with Ambassador Pat Kennedy, who traveled to and from Baghdad, and a wonderful visit from Sheila Casey, General George Casey's wife," says Mrs. Negroponte. "Otherwise, from the State Department perspective, I might not have existed. I was alone in New York, our previous post, with no support. ... The stiff upper lip worked more or less for me. It did not work for our children."

It should be noted that although a formal structure for regular counseling of unaccompanied family members has yet to develop, FLO personnel are available for informal counseling. In addition, State Department unaccompanied spouses were recently made eligible for a limited number of free telephone or face-to-face counseling sessions through MHN, a health-care network contracted by the Department of State and funded by a grant from the Cox Foundation. For more information on this service, contact FLO.

***The Family Liaison  
Office has just one  
unaccompanied tour  
support position —  
and no funds dedicated  
to that purpose.***

For foreign-born spouses of Foreign Service employees, the problem of isolation may be compounded. About a third of all FS spouses are foreign-born, and they represent a comparable percentage of unaccompanied spouses. In addition to the other difficulties described here, they may be unfamiliar with life in the U.S., and also more isolated from their own families. As such, some choose to live in their home countries for the duration of the tour, despite the potential additional expense.

Silvia Froats, an Austrian-born spouse whose husband served for a year in Banja Luka, chose this route. "As a foreign-born spouse, I did not have a good support system of family and friends in the U.S., and I therefore chose to take the kids to my home country for the duration of the tour. From talking to other foreign-born spouses, I think this would be the natural choice for most of them," she says.

Spouses who choose to live in their home countries are still a part of the U.S. Foreign Service community, however, and would like to stay connected. Froats suggests that "if foreign-born spouses elect to spend an unaccompanied tour in their home country, there should be a way to include them in the mission's community, so they can get some support from the Community Liaison Office and the Local Employment Adviser."

The Transition Center offers a course called "Transition to Washington for Foreign-Born Spouses."

**Coping Mechanisms**

Unaccompanied spouses, particularly those with children, all speak of a need for more hours in the day. Capie Polk describes the life of a busy unaccompanied spouse:

"In addition to caring for my child, myself and our pets, I service two cars, maintain our house, manage all the finances, plan vacations, and communicate with my family and husband's family. By that I mean I buy and send all holiday, birthday gifts, cards, etc., plus call them all to relay whatever my husband has communicated to me. And I manage health care for myself, my son and my husband, making appointments for when he is here on leave. You get the picture. The only thing I find I do less of this year is laundry, and I make up for that when my

**Unaccompanied Posts as of March 2008**

**Unaccompanied**

AFGHANISTAN: Kabul  
IRAQ: Baghdad  
PAKISTAN: Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar  
SAUDI ARABIA: Riyadh, Jeddah, Dhahran

**Limited-Accompanied**

ALGERIA: Algiers  
BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA: Banja Luka  
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: Bangui  
CHAD: N'Djamena  
KENYA: Kisumu  
KOSOVO: Pristina  
LEBANON: Beirut  
LIBERIA: Monrovia  
REPUBLIC OF CONGO: Brazzaville  
SUDAN: Khartoum  
YEMEN: Sanaa

## F O C U S

husband is here on leave and his family all come to visit!”

While State can't solve this problem, it would certainly help to significantly increase the Involuntary Separate Maintenance Allowance, as AFSA has repeatedly advocated. Spouses are not on the bread line, but they are pulled in many directions, and ISMA disappears quickly, especially in the Washington, D.C., area. While the recent increase in the allowance (approximately 14 percent for a family of four; see State 27884 for details) is welcome, the total amount still falls short of what is truly needed to maintain a separate household.

According to the Foreign Affairs Manual (3 FAM 3230), the purpose of SMA is “to meet the additional expenses of maintaining, elsewhere than at the post, the employee's spouse or dependents, or both.” Clearly, this is open to interpretation, but it is a fact that my husband spends roughly the amount we receive in ISMA at post on everything from 220-volt household items to separate cable TV and telephone bills. This does not leave much for me to hire the Jeeves Handyman Service, as suggest-

ed in FLO's booklet, “Learning to Manage a Temporary Separation.”

We were posted to Washington, D.C., when my husband's current tour began, and because we were already paying a mortgage and other household bills, we did not have to deal with a move on top of my husband's departure. But for a family posted overseas immediately prior to the employee's unaccompanied tour, a prolonged separation can be a much greater jolt, financially and otherwise.

Melodie Gage, whose husband is currently posted to Kabul, points out that “For some of us, ISMA means two involuntary separations: the first from our spouse, and the second from housing at our previous post. We don't have the option to stay in government housing. ... I'd recommend that the option be opened up for families to stay at post in U.S. government housing when spouses are assigned to any unaccompanied post. This not only would ease the personal financial cost of a separation, but would help minimize the huge stresses that come from

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uprooting a family for just one year.”

Deborah Sisbarro, whose tandem husband will be staying in the U.S. on unpaid leave with their son while she is posted to Kabul, suggests another way to address this discrepancy. “If SMA is intended to offset additional expenses, it is sufficient if you are in overseas housing, but insufficient in the States. The department might want to consider two rates: one for those who are in embassy housing, and one for those who aren’t, along the lines of SMA + Living Quarters Allowance based upon Washington, D.C., housing.”

### **Capital Expenses**

I am lucky: my children are old enough so that child care is not an issue. But for many spouses, child care — especially in the Washington, D.C., area, where babysitting starts at \$10 per hour — can be a major logistical and financial problem during an unaccompanied year. Lack of it can even interfere with attendance at UT functions. Virpi Salin, whose husband is currently in Afghanistan while she stays in Washington with their three children,

## ***Most families of unaccompanied employees do not reside in Washington, D.C.***

describes her situation:

“I do feel that the State Department is seeking and trying different kinds of support for spouses and families that are left behind. In my experience, however, it does not reach the goal. There are unaccompanied tour family meetings, which we have attended and have enjoyed a lot; but as far as I know there are perhaps two a year, which is not enough. There are UT spouse luncheons at the State Department, but for me they are in a difficult place and children are not welcome. . . . There are meetings at Main State and classes offered at FSI, which I would love to take. But what do I do with my children?”

Washington, D.C., is the logical choice of residence for many UT families, particularly if they were posted here immediately prior to the unaccompanied tour. But while employees posted in the D.C. area receive a nearly 21-percent “locality pay” adjustment as part of their base pay, overseas employees do not. Thus, an employee transferring from Washington to an unaccompanied post loses that 21-percent locality pay adjustment, even if the rest of the family will be living

### **UT Resources Online**

#### **[www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c14521.htm](http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c14521.htm)**

Unaccompanied Tours Support page from the Family Liaison Office. Under “Resources to Get You Through,” the most important documents are probably Chapter 25 of the Foreign Service Assignment Notebook, “Unaccompanied Tours,” and “Long-Distance Relationships and Separated Tours: When Couples Live Apart.”

#### **[www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c24529.htm](http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c24529.htm)**

The Comprehensive Continuum of Support summarizes support options for unaccompanied officers and family members.

#### **[www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c23131.htm](http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c23131.htm)**

This page includes quick links to FAQs about the Separate Maintenance Allowance.

#### **[www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/1846.htm](http://www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/1846.htm)**

FSI courses include “Maintaining Long-Distance Relationships,” a well-reviewed half-day seminar for employees and family members.

#### **<http://members.mhn.com>**

FLO has contracted with MHN, a health-care company,

to offer a limited number of telephone and face-to-face mental health consultations to UT family members. To obtain a login, e-mail FLOASKUT@state.gov. (M/MED’s Employee Consultation Services also offers support, but contact information is not available on the Internet.)

#### **<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/HomefrontUS/>**

FLO sponsors this listserv for unaccompanied family members. Click “Join this Group” and in your message to the moderator, state your name and your family member’s current post.

#### **[http://aafsw.org/una/una\\_main.htm](http://aafsw.org/una/una_main.htm)**

The Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide (AAFWSW) offers “Going It Alone,” a collection of useful links and articles for unaccompanied family members.

#### **[www.aafsw.org/aafsw/fbspouses.htm](http://www.aafsw.org/aafsw/fbspouses.htm)**

AAFWSW’s Foreign-Born Spouses Group welcomes all foreign-born spouses. While group activities are based in the Washington area, the e-mail list is open to foreign-born spouses of Foreign Service employees worldwide.

## FOCUS

in D.C. with its high housing prices and other costs. According to "Frequently Asked Questions" about ISMA on the State Department Web site ([www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)), SMA is calculated as follows:

"The rates for Involuntary SMA are based on data provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the average cost of maintaining a household in the continental United States. The costs include average rent, utilities, miscellaneous furnishings and supplies. Because individual circumstances vary and most people do not live in the 'average' area in CONUS [the continental United States], the rates may not fully cover each family's costs."

It is clearly inconsistent for the many UT families staying behind in D.C. to have their ISMA allowance based on a cost-of-living calculation that includes small-town and rural America. Adjusting SMA upward for UT families living in Washington is yet another way to bring it into line with the real costs of maintaining two households.

### **An Institutional Response Is Needed**

Unaccompanied spouses are unanimous in their appreciation for the efforts made by many individuals in the department to support their families. However, one cannot ignore the lack of institutional recognition of the challenges posed by this "new" Foreign Service:

- Infrastructure to support unaccompanied tours, and especially unaccompanied tour families, is minimal and underfunded.
- The Separate Maintenance Allowance falls well short of covering the costs of maintaining two households.
- The State Department should not rely on outside organizations to provide support that is integral to a Foreign Service in which families must expect to be separated at least once in the course of a career.

Decisive action to address these issues would be a great boost to morale. It would also encourage Foreign Service members to volunteer for the many unaccompanied positions that the department is already having trouble filling. ■



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