

AAFSW

ASSOCIATES OF THE AMERICAN
FOREIGN SERVICE WORLDWIDE

May 17, 2021

Dear Ambassador Perez:

We want to take this opportunity to express the AAFSW's (Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide) concern about the proposed name change and rebranding of the Family Liaison Office (FLO).

As you may know, AAFSW is a non-profit, volunteer organization that supports the Foreign Affairs Community. Since our founding in 1960, AAFSW has placed a strong emphasis on family members and community. Our organization and membership have evolved through the years, but our focus on mutual support remains the same. Beginning in the 1970's, AAFSW's advocacy has been rooted in our FORUM, a think tank for new ideas. The Forum Committee of AAFSW tackles inequities in the Foreign Service affecting our community, including family members, and attempts to ameliorate them.

A direct result of the 1976 FORUM was the establishment of the FLO in 1978. The FORUM sent out 4,000 surveys to officers and spouses. Former FLO Director, Faye Barnes states in her oral history: "They (AAFSW) got back a tremendous response and the overwhelming response was they needed to have someone or an office that was paying attention to things like education for children, employment for spouses, those things we call quality of life today that did not necessarily have anything to do with the career path of the employee but it was factors affecting families and life style." This remains true in 2021.

As we understand, the goal of changing the name of FLO is to provide greater inclusion and be able to resonate with more people. AAFSW strongly supports the Department of State's initiative to be more diverse and inclusive and applauds the Department's forward thinking. However, AAFSW is concerned that changing the name of a long-established office to an unidentifiable, bureaucratic sounding name with yet another acronym will result in an even greater disconnect between family members and the Department of State. The Department risks alienating family members with the name change because its family members already struggle both to have an advocate within the Department and also to navigate the bureaucracy. Foreign Service Officers have AFSA, Civil Service employees have the Civil Service Association and Foreign Service family members have FLO.

During the focus group I (Lara Center) participated in, FLO representatives indicated the mission and services of the FLO will not change. The participants all identified key services FLO offers and the examples given are services that provide assistance to family members (employment, naturalization, and education being the top services mentioned). In fact, one participant indicated they were single and asked FLO what services do you offer for me? The answer: CLO services

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overseas are available to everyone in the mission. For an evacuation FLO and the CLO cooperate closely to provide information and assistance to everyone. This is but a small part of FLO's services and doesn't necessitate a name change or rebranding of an office in existence for 43 years.

So, we must ask – what is the driving force behind this name change? Why the urgent need to select a new name merely weeks after focus groups were conducted? From where we stand, Family Liaison Office captures the mission of the office and the clientele it serves. Family in this sense is the greater Foreign Service Family.

If “Family” is the key word that is cause for concern, an alternative to “Family” is “Community”. FLO overseas underwent a successful name change in 1981. Mette Beecroft (who opened the Department FLO on March 1 of 1978) had moved to Bonn in 1981. Because of her past experience, she was asked to direct the Embassy's office which was still called the FLO! Soon after she started the job, singles began to complain that they could not use the office because the name referred to families and they felt excluded. Mette met with a number of the singles and all they wanted was for “Community” to be substituted for “Family” – which was done immediately. There was no discernible increase in the number of singles who used the office but they felt better about it and that was important.

We urge you to pause this effort to ensure that such a radical name change is well thought through and necessary. Substituting “Community” for “Family” in the current office name would indicate inclusivity but would also provide continuity and familiarity since CLOs are literally known and appreciated worldwide at approximately 260 posts.

Sincerely,

Lara L. Center
President

Mette O. Beecroft
State Liaison