

AFSA NEWS

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VIEWS FROM INSIDE THE SERVICE

AFSA Opinion Poll Results Highlight Disturbing Trends

BY STEVE KASHKETT, STATE VICE PRESIDENT

AFSA's third annual electronic opinion poll attracted a record number of respondents — nearly 4,300 active-duty State Foreign Service members at virtually every overseas post and in every domestic bureau — and provides a window into the thinking of our colleagues worldwide on the major issues facing our profession.

As was the case in our analysis of survey results in past years, the thousands of often lengthy personal comments entered by respondents were at least as interesting and revealing as the basic statistical data, which are shown in the charts.

The poll data and comments reveal a Foreign Service frustrated by the growing overseas pay disparity, struggling with Iraq staffing concerns, disturbed by perceptions of pervasive unfairness in assignments/promotions and diminishing family-friendliness in the department and largely dissatisfied with the 7th floor's leadership in many key areas.

Overseas comparability pay continues to rank as the top priority for our members. Numerous respondents expressed outrage that they now have to accept close to a 20-percent cut in base salary when they leave Washington to serve overseas, while senior officers and employees of other U.S. agencies do not. A whopping 70 percent of members attached "high importance" to the effort to correct the inequity, while another 21 percent gave it "medium importance."

With regard to Iraq, a clear majority believes that war-zone postings should remain voluntary; some 68 percent oppose directed assignments as unnecessary and undesirable. More than 2,000 FS members — including 110 currently serving in Iraq and 295 who said they had

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previously done tours of duty there — provided comments on ways to encourage more people to volunteer for Iraq assignments. Many themes emerged repeatedly: increasing the Separate Maintenance Allowance, getting tax exemptions for war-zone service, awarding meritorious step increases, shortening the length of a standard unaccompanied tour. But a large number of comments suggested a fundamental disagreement with the whole approach of seeking ever greater incentives to staff an escalating list of Provincial Reconstruction

Teams and an expanding embassy; instead, many hundreds of employees urged a downsizing of the U.S. mission there, both for practical and policy reasons.

The survey comments reflect widespread resentment over a perceived lack of even-handedness in our assignment/promotion system, an issue that ranks a close second to the growing overseas pay disparity in our members' priorities. Numerous respondents cited glaring examples of preferential treatment of certain senior officers, people in key staff positions and inside "favorites" in certain bureaus. This mood clearly has an impact on people's views of Secretary Condoleezza Rice's call on the Foreign Service to do its duty by volunteering for Iraq, which many decried as selective.

The steady shift towards greater hardship and unaccompanied service has highlighted the apprehensions of many of our colleagues about their ability to manage their family life during the course of a Foreign Service career. The survey comments indicate a pervasive desire for the department to take a much more active, long-term approach to addressing the problems of family member employment overseas, the lack of status for members of household, the dwindling school options for children at many posts and the urgent need for a better support structure for families separated by unaccompanied assignments. Many respondents

linked this latter issue to their willingness to serve in Iraq, as well.

This electronic opinion poll suggests one reason for declining morale: relatively few members appear to believe that the senior department leadership is working on their behalf. Only a small percentage of respondents rated as either “very good” or “good” the efforts of Sec. Rice and other senior officials to defend the Foreign Service (18 percent), to secure resources for the department and its people (14 percent), or to get Congress to authorize overseas comparability pay (12 percent).

Professional issues, while typically of less immediate import to members than “bread and butter” concerns, nonetheless remain very much on the minds of our colleagues. Nearly half of the

respondents listed “freedom to express dissent at State” and “role of FS careerists in U.S. foreign policymaking” among their top five priorities for AFSA advocacy over the coming year.

Our survey results point to one very disturbing trend. In response to the question, “Have developments in the last few years made you more or less likely to remain in the Foreign Service for a full career?”, some 44 percent said they would be *less* likely to remain. Significantly, this percentage was the same for those respondents still in the entry-level ranks. This raises serious questions about the long-term health of the Foreign Service — and argues for immediate action to deal with many of the concerns highlighted above. □

Are you currently serving overseas or in a domestic assignment?
(mandatory - must provide an answer)

Overseas		3007	70%
Domestic		1277	30%
Total		4284	100%

What is your current grade? (mandatory - must provide an answer)

FS-05 or below		451	11%
FS-04		886	21%
FS-03		1037	24%
FS-02		928	22%
FS-01		650	15%
Senior Foreign Service		332	8%
Total		4284	100%

Are you a Foreign Service generalist or specialist?

Generalist		2687	63%
Specialist		1566	37%
Total		4253	100%

If the Department fails to get volunteers for all the positions at our posts in Iraq, including Embassy Baghdad and the Provincial Reconstruction Teams around the country, how would you react to a decision to begin identifying employees for “directed” assignments?

Strongly support		306	8%
Support		996	24%
Oppose		1341	33%
Strongly oppose		1437	35%
Total		4080	100%

If you have served in Iraq or would be willing to volunteer to serve there, what factors would motivate you to do so? (check all that apply)

Patriotism/duty		1182	59%
Career enhancement		964	48%
Adventure/challenge		796	40%
Extra pay and benefits		1347	68%
Other, please specify		432	22%

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If you would NOT consider volunteering for an assignment in Iraq, what factors would prevent you from doing so? (check all that apply)

Security concerns		2037	61%
Separation from family		2113	64%
Obstacles to performing assigned duties		1398	42%
Disagreement with policy		1592	48%
Other, please specify		788	24%

How much importance do you attach to our continuing efforts to obtain Overseas Comparability Pay for our members, which would bring FS overseas salaries up by more than 18% to Washington levels.

High importance		2983	70%
Moderate importance		903	21%
Low importance		270	6%
No importance		113	3%
Total		4269	100%

How would you rate the efforts of Secretary Rice and senior Department officials to get Congress to authorize Overseas Comparability Pay?

Very good		50	1%
Good		442	11%
Fair		1643	40%
Poor		1326	32%
Very poor		666	16%
Total		4127	100%

Have developments in the last few years made you more or less likely to remain in the Foreign Service for a full career?

More likely to remain		234	5%
No change		2147	50%
Less likely to remain		1877	44%
Total		4258	100%

How would you rate AFSA's effectiveness in representing the interests of our members and advocating on your behalf?

Very good		384	9%
Good		2015	48%
Fair		1410	33%
Poor		320	8%
Very poor		91	2%
Total		4220	100%

Rank-Order Priorities

* median score is the score above which are 50 percent of the responses and below which are 50 percent of the responses. The lower the score, the more votes for that priority.

Priority for AFSA Advocacy	Median Score	Rank
Overseas comparability pay	3.7	1
Fairness in assignments/promotions	3.8	2
Family-friendliness within the Foreign Service	4.8	3
Iraq staffing and security concerns	5.1	4
Opposition to directed assignments to war zones	5.3	5
Freedom to express dissent at State	6.2	6
Role of FS careerists in U.S. foreign policymaking	6.3	7
Unqualified political appointees	6.6	8
Members of Household	7.9	9
Excessive penalties for security infractions/investigations	7.9	10

How would you rate the job that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is doing in defending the professional Foreign Service?

Very good		99	2%
Good		684	16%
Fair		1597	38%
Poor		1170	28%
Very poor		657	16%
Total		4207	100%

How would you rate the job that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is doing in securing resources for the Department and its people?

Very good		66	2%
Good		513	12%
Fair		1531	36%
Poor		1323	31%
Very poor		769	18%
Total		4202	100%

Based on what you know of AFSA's efforts on behalf of Foreign Service members until now, do you believe that AFSA should be MORE vocal and assertive -- or LESS vocal and assertive -- in its future dealings with State management and the administration?

MORE vocal and assertive (even if it causes more friction with Management)		2805	67%
LESS vocal and assertive		56	1%
Stay the same		1346	32%
Total		4207	100%