

Security Matters, Family Matters

Life in the Foreign Service is usually a family affair. In recent years, the State Department has provided increased services to family members. But we need still more help on the information front. Communication of security information and embassy news to families is a critical service that embassies must provide, but too often the information does not get through. Unfortunately, too many embassies still rely entirely on employees to pass information to their families. With today's technology, there is no excuse for maintaining this limited form of communication.

For family members, access to timely and accurate information can increase both safety and morale. There are more than 200 Foreign Service posts, and probably dozens of different methods used to communicate with family members. At best, it can be vexing for family members who feel they do not get adequate information from their missions. At worst, it can be dangerous. It is not unusual for family members to find themselves in the middle of a demonstration, or another dangerous situation, that embassy employees had earlier been warned to avoid.

Too often, we hear that it is the employed spouse's responsibility to get post information home. This is an imperfect system at best. Even the most dedicated employee is not always in a position to get critical information home in a timely fashion. People travel (this is becoming more frequent with the advent of regional posts), have meetings or get distracted by important embassy business, and critical information does not make it home

until too late. Related to the need for better communication on security issues is the need for posts to do better at getting other kinds of information to family members: community events notices, newsletters and job announcements, all of which have a tremendous effect on community morale.

It would be relatively easy to close the communications loop. With e-mail almost universally available, most families could receive regular and timely communication of embassy affairs with only the click of a key. A "Home E-Mail Group" could be created on embassy address books just as easily as an "Embassy E-mail Group." Outlook, almost universally available, makes this easy. After creating the address list, it is just a matter of prioritizing its use for any notices that need to go home to families. This does not mean only the CLO would be forwarding notices, however. For one thing, CLOs are not always available either. Messages could be sent by their originators, making it more likely that the message will get home in a timely fashion. Some missions have done this, but not enough.

Is this a perfect answer? No. But would it improve what is at best a shaky communication system for family members? Yes. And any steps to improve communications with all members of the embassy community can only benefit the Foreign Service as a whole. □

Victoria Hess is stationed in Harare. She has previously accompanied her FS husband to Baghdad, Bonn, Bombay, and Peshawar. Victoria is the Editor and Webmaster for Real Post Reports, at www.realpostreports.com.