

**U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT  
FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE**

**ADVOCATING FOR YOUR CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS:  
OVERSEAS SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKSHOP**

**SUMMARY POINTS**

**SPEAKER:  
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AMBASSADOR ROSE LIKENS: First of all, I'm so excited to see all you here for a variety of reasons. One – we love to share the bounty that is FSI, and getting you into this lovely place is always a good thing, but also because I'm so excited by the energy and the sharing and the collaborating that I know has gone on in this room today. And I do apologize that we had technical scheduling issues that somehow this didn't get on my schedule, so we're remedying that now.

I'd love to hear from you about whatever questions you have, what worked about this day, what you'd recommend that we do differently for the future. I would just share a few thoughts, because, one, my lessons as the mother of two children, two boys with two very different learning challenges, and now 28 years in the Foreign Service, I've seen it at the beginning, the middle and hopefully now we're getting near the end, with one graduating in about three weeks from high school and set for college, we hope, and all of those kinds of college issues ahead of us.

I think there are a couple lessons I've learned, and hopefully you've heard some of this stuff already today. I'm going to come at it a little bit from a management perspective in addition to being a mom. My first lesson as a manager – when I got to Salvador as chief of mission, I was, within months, faced with the realization that about 10 percent of the children in my embassy community, which was a fairly large embassy community, had learning challenges. And because the department's approach is so fragmented, is so broken down, members of my team, who I needed to be productively engaged in their full-time diplomatic missions, weren't. They were partly distracted because they're running around dealing with all of the different allowances, and schools and testing kinds of issues.

And so just as a manager you kind of think, wait a minute – there's got to be a better way to do this, that all of these people should not have to invent this for themselves. So we did a couple things. One thing was to say to the management team, and to the management counselor particularly, hey, this is part of your job; this is not something that families should have to do for themselves. And so you need to organize yourselves so that there's better communication with the CLO, and IMO, and the financial management folks and whoever else needs to be part of creating a packaged solution for our employees, so that our employees can do what they were assigned to this embassy to do, which was not run around and do all this other stuff for themselves.

So from a management perspective, I will tell you that it was not easy, that the management team – and Diana was there with me, and we experienced this together – there was some pushback from the management team who said, oh no, no, no. That's not what we do. And I said, well, in fact, here are all these people who need this help, so it is what you do. But it was hard, and we got some pushback, and I think by the time we left, they had a different perspective. But it literally took someone – you know, if you have a situation where the ambassador, the chief of mission, is telling them, this is in your job requirements, and they're

pushing back, what does that tell you about our institution? So I literally did write it into their job requirements, and I literally did include it in their ratings, to get their attention.

I'm not going to pretend to you that every ambassador at every mission is going to have that, but with 10 percent of my workforce impacted, it was stupid not to. As a mom, the thing that I learned in El Salvador was the power of a group like this, from a variety of perspectives. We realized that there were so many of us, and we were having all kinds of different experiences, and different schools and it really was our sanity check on so many days, when you're having a bad day with whatever the problem is that you're grappling with, whether it's testing, or a teacher, or a school that's being not very helpful, just having that group that met regularly.

And I didn't own it, Diana was our president for a while, but people in the community owned it and we moved it around to different people's houses, but it really did help all of us. And so if you're not part of a community like that at your post, when you go to your next post, whether you're going immediately or down the road, I really encourage you – even there are only five of you. That sanity check to have somebody else to bounce information off, to trade tips with, or sometimes just to listen, even if they don't have the solution for you, just to have somebody to listen – that, for me, was a really, really powerful experience. So I encourage you to think of yourselves as not just a source of support but a source of talent, and expertise and ability.

Finally, the last thing I will say is on the topic of the department and how the department is organized around this topic. It's getting better. It's still not where it should be; there is still no one-stop-shopping. You, as you all know in this room, have to go from place to place to place to get your issues dealt with. I think we all have to continue to raise these issues, to not be afraid, and to not be reluctant to say, hey, this is an important issue for my family, and I need a realistic solution. And to say – wherever you find the obstacles and the problems – to say, this is a real problem for my family and we need help. And I understand that it may not be in your job description, but let's find somebody who can help us and to just not give up.

It is so very important to all of our families, and ultimately to the department as a community. People have heard this message from me; I'm no more bashful here than I was in San Salvador at saying to people, hey, this is in fact a quality of life issue for our families. It's really important and we need to take it seriously. I'm not going to pretend to you that I think it's fixed, because I don't think it's fixed, but we're making progress.

So with that, I will stop talking and listen to you. I'm certainly happy to answer questions if I can or hear your feedback about what you thought was good today or you'd like to see us do differently.

(Audio break.)

AMB. LIKENS: Well, first of all, supervisors today ought to know better, right? I mean, the Family Medical Leave Act gives you pretty broad authority to do what you need to do. And I

would just push back very hard and I would go to HR. Frankly, they can't take punitive action against you for doing something that the law says you're allowed to do.

It's hard not to get emotional about it, and my experience in dealing with those kinds of workplace situations is, the more emotion you bring into it, the harder it is to get everybody to be dispassionate. And so to the extent that you can keep it on a strictly professional factual basis, that Family Medical Leave Act entitles me to do this. And I will try to work with you to make sure that it has minimum impact on the important things in the office, but this isn't optional for me. This is a need that a family member has that I have to deal with. But I certainly wouldn't allow anybody to do anything punitive for doing what you have to do as a parent.

Q: And you have to apply for the Family Medical Leave Act. You have to apply for it, but it's easy to do.

AMB. LIKENS: Yeah. Yes.

Q: One of the things we talked about today was how to – using the resources that were presented – how can we get a preview of posts that we can and should bid on so that the bid list we submit and the political capital we expend competing for those jobs isn't wasted. And systemically, I think the State Department has a similar problem across several areas. When we look at security clearances, we look at medical clearances and a lot of things, you don't find out whether you can go to a place for those purposes until after the bids are submitted, sometimes until after the bidding deadline and handshakes are already being handed out.

And so we have it backwards, that you're not really, really able to throw all of your lobbying weight to one or two posts that you know you can actually go to, because you could have the rug yanked out from under you later if DS, or MED, or somebody comes and says, oh, no, you can't go there. So how do we get to a situation where we know – before we place the bid list, before the bids are due, where we can and where we can't go, so that we can effectively lobby for jobs?

AMB. LIKENS: Well, I would say there are two ways to combat this. One is in your own research of the posts, right? And to find out from the post that you're interested in bidding in, before you put in your bid list, to understand what are the capabilities at that post. You know your own, your child, or your family member, whatever the circumstance is, you know the parameters of the support they need, and so you should be doing your research on the posts to see that they have those things, because when MED looks at those issues for clearance, they know each and every post, and they certainly don't know your child as well as you do.

And so if you can go them with a factual presentation about, here are the support things that my child needs, and here is my understanding based on this conversation with the management counselor, the CLO, the doctor, whoever it is at that post, at what this post has available, so that you can go ahead in good faith, go after a particular job because you've done your homework, that you know the things that your particular situation requires are in fact present at the post you're most interested in.

And so I would do that research. The tools for doing that research are better; they're still not perfect. My own personal recommendation to everybody is, if you're relying on an accommodation at a school, for example, you'd better call that school personally. I wouldn't – no matter how up-to-date a Web site is or isn't, very often your ability to get that clearance depends on that capability being in existence at that school. I would call that school and I would have that conversation personally with whoever the person in the school who's responsible for that program, so that you have a very authoritative understanding and an up-to-date understanding of what that school really has, not what the Web site says they have, or what MED has 3 years ago. A lot of cases, it's better news. Sometimes it's less good news, that the great person they had went on to another international school and is no longer there, and that can be bad news. But better you know that early in the process rather than late.

In terms of working with MED in terms of when they actually issue the clearance, obviously the sooner you do that, the better. And my experience with MED has been an active dialogue with them. Both of my children had Class 2 medical clearances, and Class 2 is obviously easier than some of the others, but in both cases I had to get the particular MED clearance, and I did go in pretty early to them to say, I'm thinking of going here. What do you think? Are there any concerns about this post that I don't know about that would lead you to ultimately say that I can't go there?

And in one case, we had to do some more research, and their initial concerns were resolved. So early is my advice; that you do your research early and you do your outreach to MED, and I know they were here today, so you heard directly from them about what goes into their calculation. Early is my answer. Yes.

Q: Since you yourself addressed the fact that it's still not a perfect system – in fact, it's far from it, as far all the different places we need to gather information, all the different consultations we need to make around the department. And it sounds like – you didn't say explicitly, but implicitly you've probably been tilting against that windmill for much of your career.

What do you suggest that we can do, either individually or collectively, to help in that process? I mean, there are so many different parts of the EM (ph) family that have a piece of this process that I assume that it all rolls up somehow into the office of the undersecretary is the actual solution. Do you suggest that we –

Q: How do we fix it – (laughter).

Q: Do we address something specifically? One of the professional side colleagues here confided that there are so many different parts of the process, and each can get bottled up, that it would really be – even from the management side – a better idea to have one office that comprehensively handles the clearance for the special needs child, not just ECS handles the educational side and MED can handle the medical issues side, there can be psychological issues. And then obviously, overseas schools contributes to that equation.

AMB. LIKENS: There's also allowances –

Q: Right, no, absolutely. Then there's actually landing the assignment and being channeled to the assignment, no, absolutely. I'm trying to fix this for people in the future and then I'm also thinking of the people who are ultimately viewing this overseas. We find this hard enough to do from bidding, from the D.C. side, and we've all been in the case of trying to bid from overseas for – heaven forbid – another region. What can we do? There's got to be a better solution for both the parent side as well as for the management side. It just doesn't seem –

AMB. LIKENS: And I told you, I was coming at this from a management perspective. Is it really the best use of everybody's time, for everybody to keep reinventing this cycle, and quite honestly, having different experiences? Diana and I had the experience in Salvador of somebody who I found to be absolutely unhelpful, said, no, to me every time I approached them for assistance, Diana found to be a piece of cake. She said, oh, yeah, they gave me everything I wanted. I said, how did you do that, because –

Q: (Inaudible.)

AMB. LIKENS: Yeah, the exact same person in the same office, dealing on pretty similar issues, and we got two different answers.

Q: Hold your hands up like this. We'll show you –

AMB. LIKENS: I do think the answer is somebody or some office that has broader responsibility for this issue. The problem is – and I'll be very realistic here – all foreign policy professionals sitting in this room. The hot issues on the secretary's plate, and the president's plate, and Undersecretary Kennedy's plate are, how do we staff Afghanistan, how do we staff Iraq, how do we accommodate the hiring surge? We're finally getting the hiring that we need to be able to staff all of our missions, but taking on that surge in a concentrated period of '09 and '10 is going to be a huge thing for this institution to digest, so to say, hey, we think that the most important thing you have to do is create a cross-cutting office for this issue, I will tell you, will not be the most compelling thing that hits their desk.

I recommend that we ask – we've asked before. We have a new DG coming in the course of the summer, and maybe a letter from interested employees to the DG saying, look, here are the dilemmas that we face, here's why you, the director-general and the administration should care about this, and here's why we think there needs to be – at a minimum – an office in HR that pulls together all of these pieces, if not somebody in the broader M area that can resolve the problems when there are competing interests among various issues.

In an ideal world, when I dream – and this is me, just me, Rose speaking personally – I dream of an ombudsperson in the EM world, given the authority to cut through some of the red tape that sends people off all these different processes when we could do it so much better.

Part of it is just better information sharing and better information collection, and then we all have to, as a group of parents, think about how much of that information do we want to share, because it's our information and our children's information. And one of the answers ought to be

an information platform that shares the information transparently from MED to HR to allowances, so that everybody gets the same data.

And to some extent that conflicts with your potential interest in having all of that kept privately, because everybody approaches the issue of how much information you're willing to put out there about your child or your family differently. But part of it has to be better information sharing around all of the interactions that every one of us has. How many of you had the experience where every single office, you have to start again, explain who you are, who your child is, what your child's problems are, what the medical recommendations are?

Wouldn't it be so refreshing if there was a little file that everybody had access to so that when you call, they could pull up and see everything the department knows about your child, and issues and all the past actions? What was done at your last post, whatever allowances or things you were able to do at your last post ought to be – at least – a given for your next post, right? You shouldn't have to renegotiate that for your next post, so wouldn't it be great if you could have a place where that was all recorded? There are a variety of improvements that could be made.

Q: I would think that the compelling argument to make to management is that, you know, we've learned today we've got over a thousand special-needs kids in the Foreign Service, so take that out of the number of officers – and the fundamental management interest is to get people to go overseas and serve in those assignments overseas. And so, if a child has a Class 5 or a Class 2 and the system just doesn't find a way to make it work to get that child and that family overseas, then you just hamper the Foreign Service's ability to staff all those positions.

AMB. LIKENS: Right, and I think that's the case for HR and for the new BG. Yes?

Q: I would also hope that folks remember that it's not just the Foreign Service that's affected by this. Civil service is also affected by this. We're kind of looking at possibilities somewhere down the road of going overseas for at least an excursion tour, and, you know, today's certainly been educational, I'll say that. Whether this actually makes things easier, I really don't know yet, frankly. I hope in the process of looking at better ways of doing this that you include the entire community.

AMB. LIKENS: Sure, absolutely. I mean, I think, frankly, this would be one of those circumstances where, you know, collaboration between civil service employees assigned domestically and Foreign Service families has a – we have a natural ability to help each other.

Why? Because what happens – Foreign Service families come back and come to the Washington metropolitan area where we're going to put our kids in schools in Fairfax, Arlington, Montgomery, right, and who do we know that might already have experience with PG County and Montgomery County and Arlington and Fairfax, but our civil service colleagues who have children in those school systems.

And you know, just when you said that, I was just like, wow, that's just so obvious – and never made that connection. But I think it would be a wonderful thing to be able to find civil

service colleagues who have experience with learning needs in the domestic environment to help give us tips. I mean, certainly, we all share that information. It was always terrifying.

You know, I will be very honest and say my kids got much better support overseas than generally they have had in the domestic area. You know, my oldest son didn't come back to Arlington County public schools. We put him in a Catholic school for his last 2 years before he graduated from high school because I just didn't have the energy to fight with Arlington County one more time, and he had 2 years left in school. I said, he's only got 2 years; I can't spend those 2 years fighting with Arlington County; I just can't. And so he went to a Catholic school in Fairfax to finish his last 2 years just because I couldn't find a way to make Arlington work.

You know, my second son is graduating from an Arlington County public school in three weeks, and it has been a much better experience. But we weren't willing to take the chance – (chuckles) – right when we came back. But having that kind of network of civil service colleagues would, again, be a huge improvement. So thank you for suggesting that because I had never really made the connection.

Q: One of the things we talked about earlier that was interesting was where – (inaudible, background noise) – in transitions found it hard, and almost everybody's comments had to do with moving back here. And one thing – I think Joan was sitting next to me and we mentioned it might be good to get a yahoo! group that's Washington-based that would cut across civil service, Foreign Service, anybody, to help with the transition here.

And that would be a pretty easy thing to do because there are a lot of civil servants who have said to me, oh, I wish I could go to that workshop. There are a lot of civil servants here who have children with special needs, and obviously I'm one of them. You know, that's – (inaudible, off mike).

AMB. LIKENS: That's a great idea. I mean, wouldn't you love to be able to talk to somebody who's been through the battles and who can say to you, well, here's how to make it work in Fairfax, or, here's the key person in Montgomery to talk to? That would be huge. Anybody else? Yes?

Q: (Inaudible, off mike) – Fairfax do you know a school, we do that. There's a group existing already about this question –

Q: It's like a blog or a –

Q: Not only –

(Cross talk.)

Q: Not only France to get there but it's a Department of State official we monitor – (unintelligible) – and it gives tips to people. And then this is a reference you have to use to make your point, you know? And I think this group is very useful, you know, for people to find

information instead of banging the door, as we know, and France has a lot of experience and that they'd like to share it.

AMB. LIKENS: Good idea. Anybody else? Yes?

Q: Yes, this was brought up this morning, too. I have a question about funding. You know, there are posts that discriminate against FIDS (ph) with children or FIDS with special-needs children because it's such a drain on post budget.

AMB. LIKENS: Really?

Q: The more kids you get – sure – because it's near the funds where the education allowance comes out of your post budget.

(Cross talk.)

Q: – special education, but there are – and when making – especially now, as tight as post budgets are and –

AMB. LIKENS: I have not – actually, I have not heard that. You're the first person to say that to me.

Q: Well, I'm actually the second because someone else brought it up this morning. And to take that into consideration.

AMB. LIKENS: Wow. Well, that's actually pretty dumb. Seriously! Because while, yes, the post has to take it out of their budget, ultimately, they get made whole. I mean, bureaus get made whole for the number of people with families. I mean, you just go back into RM and say, you know, we have families – we have a family with five children, and last year in that job we had somebody with no children, and so we need, you know, five allowances. And that money moves pretty fluidly among the bureaus.

I mean, in the immediate instance, you know, you may not have it between – the person arrives in July and the tuition has to be paid immediately, but bureaus get made whole by RM for that. I mean, that is all built into the department because, you know, that money was with you at your last post and so it's RM and the regional bureaus that have to make that work. But that shouldn't be allowed.

And, frankly, if you feel like that has happened to you, I would, you know, take that through a variety of mechanisms to senior levels in the regional bureaus, certainly. But, managers who do that are opening the department to all sorts of legal and other kinds of problems that they don't need. You just can't discriminate against people based on something like that.

And so as a manager, if I found out that somebody in my chain-of-command did that, I'd be pretty mad because they've opened us to all sorts of wasted time fighting something we're going to lose. (Chuckles.) It's just bad management to do something like that.

So as I say, I don't want to ask for the particulars in a broad group but that shouldn't be happening and I don't think managements would condone that. And so, you know, executive directors and HR and other folks need to know that that's happening because it clearly shouldn't.

And I know when ICAST (ph) was created, this was a hot topic of debate, you know, that were the ICAST-serviced agencies going to try and dictate that in ICAST positions, they could dictate which employees?

And the department fought back very hard on that very topic and said, no, we're going to have to have the freedom to assign the people to the jobs. And we're not going to let you, the ICAST service council tell us that the employees with children, and therefore, educational allowances, can't go to that post because you're not willing to pay that expense. That's just off the table. We will not allow that to be a factor subject to discussion in ICAST. So this is not an unknown issue.

MS. : Any other burning questions or should we close it down? I want to thank Ambassador Likens for coming – (applause).

(END)