

Culture of Inclusion: Best Practices for the Inclusion of Singles in the Foreign Affairs Community

Excerpts from 21 STATE 95338, released on September 15, 2021

Key Points:

- This cable offers best practices for post and bureau leadership to ensure single colleagues are fully included and their needs are considered equally during transfer season and year-round, both at home and overseas.
- While some of these practices are only applicable overseas, other practices, such as the equitable allocation of leave and after-hours responsibilities, are relevant to the treatment of both Civil and Foreign Service singles domestically.
- Discrimination based on marital status is prohibited by law, violates Merit System Principles, and runs counter to developing a culture of inclusion. The best practices highlighted here promote equal treatment, not special treatment.
- This is a continuation of our efforts to better support single employees (Ref A) and promote employee and community resilience. We encourage implementation of the lessons learned and actions taken as a result of feedback collected during the February “Living Single in the Foreign Affairs Community” webinar series.
- Additional resources for singles in the foreign affairs community can be found in The final paragraph.

Keeping the Momentum Going:

To better foster a culture of inclusion, the Department sought feedback from groups that may have felt excluded by specific post or office practices. The “Living Single in the Foreign Affairs Community” webinar series provided invaluable insight to help Department leaders learn more about the experience of singles from a variety of communities and backgrounds across the Department and attempt to address areas of concern. Following the series, the TalentCare Council established a temporary working group to focus on singles-related issues, which has already resulted in several concrete actions, including revising Community Liaison Office (CLO) guidance and training materials, modifying Post Info to Go, and hosting a Foreign Service Institute-wide train-the-trainer session. The feedback from these webinars, as well as other surveys and focus groups, also led to changing the name of the Family Liaison Office to the Global Community Liaison Office (GTM/GCLO). While some posts and supervisors have already begun making positive changes, this cable aims to keep the momentum going and build upon best practices as guidance for post and bureau leadership and to remind all employees how we can all contribute to a more inclusive culture.

Suggested Best Practices:

Ensure equitable management practices:

- Managers should **allow the use of workplace flexibilities** such as situational telework for eligible employees, in accordance with Department guidelines, when employees need to be at home waiting for a repair, to receive shipments, or for the installation of

permanent internet, etc.

- **Do not ask questions about family and marital status during an interview.** Discrimination based on marital status is prohibited by law and constitutes a Prohibited Personnel Practice and violates Merit System Principles (5 U.S.C. Â§ 2302(b)(1)). It also is counter to developing a culture of inclusion and negatively impacts morale.
- **Treat time outside of work hours equitably.** Managers should make every effort to equitably distribute workload and leave. Posts and offices cannot exclusively “reserve” times such as spring break, summer, or a holiday season for employees with partners and/or children to take leave. Single employees should not be assigned additional duties on the assumption that they are more available to perform extra duties or work extra hours. Single employees also have personal obligations and responsibilities; their time outside of work hours merits equal respect.

Take steps to avoid colleagues feeling isolated upon arrival at post:

- Ensure **housing board representation** by having a single member of the community on the housing board, when possible. Review housing board guidance at post to ensure members are trained to treat all equally. As a reminder, there is no such thing as “singles housing” in USG policy and such terminology should not be used. As a common safety and security practice, posts should avoid housing employees (including singles) in buildings without other USG units/residents or in isolated residential areas. In addition, posts should look at creating Residential Warden Groups for accountability purposes.
- **Encourage employees to take annual leave upon their arrival at post** to help settle in and to also **fully utilize the 16 work hours for packing and 8 hours for unpacking** permitted in 3 FAH-1 H-3465.
- When possible, **set up phone and internet service in advance** of an employee’s arrival (even if through a hot spot or temporary service) so, upon arrival, they are able to connect with loved ones back home, build new connections in country, and avoid isolation.
- **Check in** on your colleagues. Reach out and invite new arrivals out to meet members of the community. Check in on your colleagues to make sure they are settling in and finding their way around the new city. Moreover, don’t hesitate to check in on your colleagues during times of increased isolation, transition, or if you notice behavior change.
- Consider creating a **contact list** of phone numbers of USG employees living nearby to provide to new arrivals. This helps to mitigate isolation and can be essential during a crisis.
- **Ensure all welcome kits include at least four place settings** so that all newly arrived employees can entertain guests at home while they wait for their shipments to arrive.
- Assume that employees need more than one set of bedding and towels on arrival.
- Respond quickly when an employee asks for additional items.

Schedule social activities with all colleagues in mind:

- CLOs should consider offering events such as city orientation tours **outside of work hours** so that employees, including single employees, can also attend.
- **Continue to offer adult-focused programming** in addition to events geared toward

families with children.

Resources:

Employees are encouraged to explore and utilize the following resources:

- GTM/GCLO created a new [Singles in the Foreign Service webpage](#) with resources aimed at singles, but useful for all employees.
- FSI's Overseas Briefing Center recently updated Post Info to Go to include questions for community members to comment on safety and security concerns, the importance of learning the local language, the ability to make friends outside the mission, and other factors relevant to quality of life, all issues identified during the singles' listening sessions as important factors when bidding.
- Interested employees are encouraged to join the Bureau of Medical Services Office of Employee Consultation Services (MED/ECS) virtual singles support group, which meets on the second Tuesday of each month. For additional information, please contact MED/ECS at medecs@state.gov or 202-634-4874.
- TalentCare serves as a single touchpoint for employees to access information on programs and policies that promote well-being, community, safety, and workplace flexibilities.