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Chapter 25

UNACCOMPANIED ASSIGNMENTS

“Absence diminishes commonplace passions and increases great ones, as the wind extinguishes candles and kindles fire.”

~ François de La Rochefoucauld

“Absence is one of the most useful ingredients of family life, and to do it rightly is an art like any other.”

~ Freya Stark

Today’s Foreign Service employees face a high probability of serving at an unaccompanied post at some point during their careers. Foreign Service families may also choose a separated tour in order to accommodate educational needs, employment concerns, or the care of elderly relatives. Advance preparation can help couples and families weather separations more successfully. Single employees should interpret the following suggestions to apply to their situations, whether leaving behind significant others, parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, or adult children.

CHOOSING A HOME LOCATION

Families of employees traveling to an unaccompanied assignment after a Washington, DC, posting may find it easiest to “stay put,” remaining in the area where they have lived for the past two to six years. Other families may enter a separated period following—or even during—an overseas posting. In some instances, families are permitted to stay at post during the employee’s temporary assignment elsewhere. Families with a foreign-born spouse, in particular, may choose to reside in a third country to enjoy extended family support. More often, separated families travel to a U.S. location of their choice for the duration of the assignment.

Factors to consider when choosing the location could include the following:

- existence of a support network of family and friends
- employment opportunities
- cost of housing
- quality of schools



- allowances that will apply
- visitation-related factors, such as number and length of R&Rs and time, ease, and cost of travel from the assignment location
- shipping and duty expenses
- availability of transportation
- ability to be in frequent communication with the post and Washington, DC-based offices (high-speed Internet and phone service options)
- recreational opportunities
- personal preferences (weather, mountains, beach, and so on)

Access to embassy services will be extremely limited if choosing a foreign location unless the employee is going on extended temporary duty to a Provincial Reconstruction Team.

PREPARING FOR SEPARATION

Getting ready for an unaccompanied assignment involves preparation on many different fronts: organizing paperwork, getting finances in order, arranging for allowances, communicating with family members, and considering the psychological aspects of the impending separation.

Organizing Paperwork and Finances

The Family Liaison Office recommends the following actions before the employee leaves for post:

- Review life insurance coverage. Federal Employees Group Life Insurance (FEGLI) and American Foreign Service Protective Association (AFSPA) life insurance plans offer coverage for deaths in terrorist or “perils of war” incidents, whereas many other plans do not.
- Update beneficiaries on unpaid salary and unused annual leave, refund of retirement contributions, Federal Employees Group Life Insurance benefits, Thrift Savings Plan, insurance policies, and investments.
- Discuss with your family what to do in case of an emergency. Execute a durable power of attorney for medical decisions and/or a living will. The Department of State provides one free copy of “Five Wishes” for each employee for this purpose (see “Resources,” below).
- Write and have notarized a letter from the absent parent authorizing the other parent to travel internationally with the children, if anticipated.
- Create a power of attorney for transportation or medical treatment of children, if they are being left with a guardian.
- Make a list of emergency notification numbers for contacting the employee.
- Set up a current power of attorney so that you can transact business on employee’s behalf. Have several originals and copies made. Check with your financial institution (bank, credit union) to ensure they will accept the power of attorney. Some, such as the State Department Federal Credit Union, have proprietary forms.
- Establish at least one joint checking account. Make sure that each person can access funds if anything should happen to the other. Discuss the easiest way to make deposits and fund transfers. Make sure both spouses know how to access the account and check the balance electronically.
- Establish credit that will be adequate for emergencies. Obtain credit cards for both employee and spouse. *It is essential for the spouse to establish credit in his or her own name.*
- Make or update wills. Each of you should have a copy; give the original to the person named as executor or leave it with your attorney—do NOT put it in a safe deposit box.
- Place important papers such as the following in your safe deposit box: original deed to property/house, title to car(s), insurance policies, certificates of marriage, divorce, birth, citizenship naturalization, and so on.
- Draw up a “calendar of events” listing annual inspections (e.g., auto safety), renewal dates (e.g., auto registration), memberships and subscriptions, check-ups, and pet vaccinations.

- ❑ Get an automatic teller machine (ATM) card for your bank account that can be used throughout the U.S. and internationally. Make sure both spouses know the personal identification number (PIN).
- ❑ Review income tax requirements if one spouse has not been involved in preparations.
- ❑ Fill out the Family Liaison Office's contact information form for families on unaccompanied tours. This allows FLO to provide updated information and services during the separation (<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c14521.htm>).

Arranging for Allowances

Review the provisions of Separate Maintenance Allowances. SMA is categorized into three categories: involuntary, voluntary and transitional. All require that the applicant complete the SF-1190 (*Foreign Allowance Application, Grant and Report*) and submit it with the required documentation for approval to the regional or functional bureau to which the employee is assigned for this post.

An agency may authorize **involuntary SMA** when adverse, dangerous, or notably unhealthy conditions warrant the exclusion of family members from the area, or when the agency determines a need to exclude family members from accompanying an employee to post. If the employee initiates a request for involuntary SMA based on medical reasons, supporting data must include a statement from the attending physician and a ruling by the ranking medical officer attached to the agency or by such other person or group as the head of agency may designate.

In other cases, individuals may elect **voluntary SMA**. While this decision is a private one, the employee is required to state on the SF-1190 application the reason for the separation and provide supporting data as cited in DSSR 264.2. SMA typically is granted for career, health, education, or family considerations of the spouse, children, or other family member. SMA may be requested on behalf of one or all of the employee's family members up to the age of 18. The Family Liaison Office's resource paper, *Separate Maintenance Allowance*, outlines the details of the allowance, as well as non-eligibility instances.

When voluntary SMA is elected, all other benefits normally received by eligible family members at post are waived for the period of separation, including medical travel, home leave travel, educational travel, travel of children of separated families, and R & R travel. The employee will subsequently be treated as a single employee at post and receive housing and other allowances commensurate with his/her unaccompanied status if all family members are on SMA. Effective July 2007, the additional category of Transitional SMA was added especially for family members of employees transferring to or from unaccompanied posts. Please refer to the Separate Maintenance Allowance section in chapter three for more information.

The Employee Services Center (formerly Foreign Service Lounge) requests that employees and family members provide them with contact information so that they can inform you of friends and family members who are interested in locating you. (See "Resources," below.) If other means of communications have failed when family members have attempted to contact members of the Foreign Service assigned abroad about an emergency, such as a serious illness or injury or the death of a member of their immediate family, these family members may call the Office of Casualty Assistance (202) 736-4302 from 8:15 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (EST) Monday-Friday and the Operations Center (202) 647-1512 after business hours, Saturday, Sundays and holidays.

Making Personal Preparations

If you are in the Washington, DC, area, take the Transition Center's course "Maintaining Long Distance Relationships." This seminar examines roles and expectations, identifies potential pitfalls, discusses the phases of separation, and promotes behaviors that strengthen often-apart or long-distance relationships. Check the Transition Center website for updated offerings, as new training is under development.

No matter where you are, review the resources available at the Family Liaison Office's website on unaccompanied tours (<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c14521.htm>).

Take time to talk about the upcoming separation and how you plan to deal with it. Be honest about your

fears and concerns. Share your expectations so that misunderstandings will be minimized. Decide on a plan for communicating and visiting.

Discuss responsibilities: who will handle which matters while you are separated? Heighten awareness about income tax requirements, including the collection of certain receipts, invoices, and other financial considerations. Decide which chores, such as mowing the lawn, can be contracted out or perhaps delegated to a child.

Share your skills with your spouse by teaching them what you know! Both should be able to operate cameras, fix loose wires, change fuses, sew on buttons, maintain financial records, and prepare food. Make copies of favorite recipes.

Decide which items will travel with the employee and make duplicates of favorite photos or music. Encourage children to provide a small keepsake or favorite photo to “remember me by.”

Talk about discipline and decision making regarding the children. (No “second-guessing” the person left in charge!) Hold a family meeting to discuss why it is important that the parent is going away and how the family will function during the separation. Take time to acknowledge that the children are making a sacrifice, too, and listen to and address their concerns.

Prepare “bonding” activities in advance:

- Record favorite bedtime stories for young children.
- For an older child, consider getting two copies of a book that is of interest but a bit challenging. After the two of you read each chapter, discuss it on the phone.
- Share “ownership” of a fantasy sports team, arrange to play long distance chess or pursue some other joint activity.
- Purchase gifts and cards to be left for special occasions. Consider setting up a “treasure hunt” (leaving small treats or notes hidden around the house, with clues to be provided over the weeks or months to come).

- Give family members journals or scrapbooks to record their daily lives so that you will be able to catch up when you return.
- Provide a special photo of yourself: it could be ironed onto a t-shirt or pillowcase, placed in a special frame, laminated for portability, or whatever will make you seem close by.
- Purchase a webcam or other computer equipment needed to set up video calls, if these will be possible from the country of assignment. Practice using the new system before you go!

Speak clearly with children about the upcoming changes. Make sure that they do not somehow think that the separation is their fault. Be prepared for clinginess (from the younger ones) or aloofness (from the teenage crowd)—or any other kind of altered behavior. Explain the situation to teachers and encourage their understanding and assistance.

The spouse staying home should plan for back-up childcare, both short-term and longer term in case of emergency. Having this plan written down and known by relatives or neighbors could help in case of unforeseen circumstances.

Take a break from all of the preparations to spend time doing fun things together. (Put this “action item” on your list multiple times and enjoy checking it off!) You will treasure the memories.

Plan ways to say goodbye. It might seem easier to live in denial, ignoring the upcoming separation and glossing over it (“it’s just a year”). However, time passes more slowly for children, and the rituals of farewells can form part of the process of adapting.

Finally, recognize that the complex emotions involved may emerge in many ways. As the departure date approaches, you may find yourself picking fights, acting angrily, distancing yourself, or building emotional walls. These are completely normal defense mechanisms—but you might not want them to fill your final days. Self-awareness may help you modify your actions.

LIVING APART

The Family Liaison Office suggests the following:

- Cultivate a mentality of “the less hassle the better.” Find help for lawn care, bill paying, house cleaning, or even shopping. Find a reliable plumber, electrician, carpenter, and auto mechanic to call in emergencies. The State Department’s free referral service, IQ:Information Quest can help you, or contact the Overseas Briefing Center for listings.
- Work on creative ways to communicate: telephone, e-mail, tapes, letters, faxes, or newspaper and magazine clippings. If your child cannot read, take crayons with you so you can send drawings to illustrate your letters. An older sibling, the other parent, or a guardian can read your letters out loud.
- Photograph or video your post, quarters, surrounding area, embassy office, friends, and so on so that family in the U.S. can see what it’s like at post.
- Plan to see and call each other as often as finances allow.
- Write a journal, especially at the beginning. It can be a matter of self-preservation.
- Talk about ground rules for what sort of information and emotions, especially emotions, can be shared and in what manner.
- Remember that this experience is time-limited. Put on paper the reasons for accepting this separated assignment and refer to them periodically, as a reminder.

As the distant employee, create shared experiences with your family, even while far away. Send back a recipe to enjoy “together” or enclose small local items in your letters—and, yes, send letters even if you e-mail four times a day! Consider choosing a specific time to think about each other or create some other connecting ritual, such as sending a wish to the other person on the first star of the night. Work towards maintaining an emotional connection throughout the assignment.

For those at home, create a way to mark the time apart if this seems helpful: a calendar with days that you can cross out or a jar containing the same number of marbles as you will have days apart, to be removed one per day. Show young children pictures of the absent parent and make sure that they know this is “Daddy” or “Mommy.”

Enlist support. This is no time to be a heroic martyr. Others who have “been there” report feeling as though admitting negative emotions would be a betrayal of the employee. Join the Family Liaison’s e-mail group HomefrontUS or seek community in other ways. Having a safe outlet for your concerns can help you realize that what you are going through is “normal,” albeit difficult. Ask for help when you need it (and offer help when you can).

Treat yourselves to rewarding activities and special experiences: take a class, plan a special trip, or enjoy watching all your favorite old movies. As one family member recommends, “Stay as busy as possible.” If your self-therapy includes redecorating part of the house or if you face a move during this period, be sure to send pictures to the distant spouse and keep a few familiar objects or arrangements intact. Homecoming will be emotionally awkward anyway; try to minimize the additional sense of being in a strange physical environment.

Expect emotional and behavioral changes, both from adults and children. The stages of coping with separation may include denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. None of these are pleasant to encounter, but they are normal steps in the adjustment process. Listen carefully, without becoming defensive, and don’t try to tell others what they should feel.

Find reasons to give thanks. Small joys can ease larger sorrows.

MAKING VISITS

Plan visits carefully. Discuss expectations in advance: what are you imagining? If one partner is dreaming of a second honeymoon and the other just wants help mowing the lawn, conflict is inevitable.

Seriously consider meeting at a vacation spot or alternative location rather than home. Social events,

chores, and every day life can make a home visit more exhausting than relaxing. With the family routine in full swing, the visiting employee may feel like a “fifth wheel,” while the home-based spouse may feel frustrated and irritated that the visitor does not offer more help, damaging the fragile equilibrium of life apart.

The employee should remember that seeing everything function means that the family has found ways to get by—a good thing! (Ratchet the guilt-meter down one notch.) Although it may appear at first glance that the family “doesn’t need me any more” understand that they have worked hard to manage without you but desire a return to “normalcy,” just as you do. However, you are all going to have to redefine what “normalcy” means.

The home-based spouse should bear in mind that the “major traumas” of every-day life may come across as trivial to someone who has been witnessing daily mortar attacks. Try to be understanding of each other.

Regardless of the location, schedule “down time” for recovery before launching into more energetic pursuits. Take charge of the calendar and protect family time together and free time for resting. It may not be possible to see everyone and do everything; you can make up for it after the tour ends. Consider planning one event to include friends, neighbors, and distant relatives, leaving more time for resting and reconnecting.

Particularly if visiting the Washington, DC, area, the employee should practice “office control” and refuse to let work impinge on family time together. Extra days can be scheduled to accommodate work requirements; rest and recuperation should be exactly that.

Consider scheduling a few days of “couple time” without children. This can be difficult to arrange, since the employee may arrive exhausted (making a romantic getaway impractical at the beginning of the leave) and children may understandably react badly to having both mom and dad depart at the end of the time together. One possible solution is for the employee to stop en route for a day dedicated to sleeping, then both meeting somewhere before starting “family time.”

Help children manage their expectations. Mom or Dad is not coming back for good, just for a visit. Again, this is one more reason that an alternative location may prove advantageous. Some families have each person make a list of things he or she wants to do during the R&R and make sure everyone gets at least one “wish.” Consider adding a new “bonding” item or activity (see above).

Remember that, just as when leaving the first time, complex emotions will cause you to react in unexpected ways. If conflict threatens your time together, bear in mind that a difference of opinion gives you options: it offers the gift of a new perspective. Focus on the fact that the other person is not ultimately the problem. The problem is the enforced separation.

RETURNING HOME

As the end of the separation nears, the home-based spouse may take on a taxing schedule of trying to get everything in perfect order. The returning spouse may undergo an exhausting journey followed by a serious case of jetlag. If coming from a high-risk post where tensions are uniformly high, the employee may react to the sudden cessation of threats by “collapsing” like a puppet whose strings have been cut. Plan to rest for the first few days, taking time off as necessary. Allow time to get reacquainted, for the kids to go through their scrapbooks or journals, for lazy days to enjoy each other’s company. Once again, discuss expectations ahead of time to help reduce disappointments.

Remember that the employee may seem like a stranger to very young children. Older kids of all ages may test the limits or find it difficult to control their emotions. Be patient and flexible. This is just another stage in the adaptation process.

Encourage the employee to talk about his or her time away, but don’t insist if he or she does not wish to dwell on the experiences. It may take time to process everything that happened. Brace yourself for the realization that you will never truly know “what it was like over there” and that colleagues who did share the experiences are going to have a kind of intimacy with your spouse unavailable to you. The same dynamic happens among fire fighters, law officers, and certainly the military. This does NOT replace your pri-

mary role as spouse. Scheduling time to go through journals together or setting up some other systematic way of reconnecting may enhance understanding of the experiences the other person lived. Consider family counseling even if everything seems to be fine; this "preventative maintenance" can help rebuild an even closer relationship.

If returning from a high-stress assignment, make it a high priority to attend the outbrief program, offered by the Office of Medical Services and the Foreign Service Institute's Transition Center. Past participants have described how much better they feel knowing that they are not the only one reacting to helicopters or slamming car doors, feeling that life at home focuses on trivial matters, or having difficulty resuming everyday routines.

No matter what your assignment, don't try to jump right back in to how things were before the separation. You have all changed, and you may wish to re-allocate roles and responsibilities. Take your time, and avoid criticizing decisions made while you were away.

Find ways to thank each other. The home-based spouse does not receive glowing performance reports or "Meritorious Honor Awards." Often the only appreciation he or she receives for supporting your Foreign Service work comes from you; family and friends may even have expressed criticism or disapproval. Balance the scales with heartfelt and generous thanks, conveyed in multiple and creative ways.

RESOURCES

Department of State Offices and Programs

Office of Allowances (A/OPR/ALS)

Room L314, SA-1
Columbia Plaza
2401 E Street, NW
Bureau of Administration
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC 20522-0103
Phone: (202) 261-8700
FAX: (202) 261-8707; (202) 261-8708
Standardized Regulations, Interpretation
AllowancesO@state.gov
Internet: <http://aoprals.state.gov>

Family Liaison Office (M/DGHR/FLO)

Program Specialist for Unaccompanied Tours
Room 1239, Harry S Truman Building
2201 C Street, NW
Department of State
Washington, DC 20520-7512
Tel: (202) 647-1076 or (800) 440-0397
Fax: (202) 647-1670
Internet: <http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/>
Intranet: <http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/flo/index.html>
E-mail: flo@state.gov

Separate Maintenance Allowance paper
<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/rsrscs/pubs/2049.htm>

Long Distance Relationships and Separated Tours: When Couples Live Apart
<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/rsrscs/pubs/12511.htm>

Website on Unaccompanied Tours
<http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c14521.htm>

FLO offers **HomeFrontUS**, an online listserv designed to support family members of U.S. Government employees serving overseas at unaccompanied posts. This free easy-to-use e-mail group provides an arena for members to share their experiences. Spouses, children, parents and siblings of employees posted to unaccompanied embassies and consulates are invited to join. Contact the Family Liaison Office for instructions on how to subscribe.

Employee Consultation Services

(M/MED/MHS/ECS)
Room H246, SA-1
Department of State
2401 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520
Tel: (202) 663-1815
Fax: (202) 663-1456
E-mail: MEDECS@state.gov

Employee Services Center (A/OPR/GSM/ESC)

Room 1252, Harry S Truman Building
2201 C Street, NW
Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520-1252
Tel: (202) 647-3432
Fax: (202) 647-1429
Intranet: <http://aoprism.a.state.gov/esclounge.htm>
E-mail: EmployeeServicesCenter@state.gov

Office of Casualty Assistance (M/DGHR/OCA)

Room 1241, Harry S Truman Building
2201 C Street, NW
Department of State
Washington, DC 20520
Tel: (202) 736-4302
Fax: (202) 647-5313
Intranet: <http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/oca/index.html>
E-mail: oca@state.gov

Foreign Service Institute Transition Center

(M/FSI/TC)
George P. Shultz National Foreign Affairs Training
Center (SA-42)
Washington, DC 20522-4202
Physical location: 4000 Arlington Blvd., Arlington, VA
(do not send mail to this address)
Internet: www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc
Intranet: <http://fsi.state.gov/fsi/tc>

Directions, maps, parking and other information
<http://www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/c16687.htm>

Overseas Briefing Center (M/FSI/TC/OBC)

Room E2126
Tel: (703) 302-7277
Fax: (703) 302-7452
E-mail: FSIOBCInfoCenter@state.gov

Transition Center Training Division (M/FSI/TC/T)

Foreign Service Life Skills Training
Tel: (703) 302-7268
E-mail: FSITCTraining@state.gov

Related Transition Center Training

Maintaining Long-Distance Relationships
<http://www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/1846.htm>

High Stress Assignment Outbrief Program

(a joint program sponsored by the Office of Medical Services and the Transition Center)
For more information, contact;
(703) 302-7272 or
(202) 663-1903
E-mail: FSITCTraining@state.gov
Intranet: <http://fsi.state.gov/fsi/tc>, click on "Overseas Briefing Center," click on "Destination Iraq" and use the link to the Outbrief Program (direct URL <http://www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/74065.htm>)

IQ: Information Quest

Tel: (800) 222-0364 or (800) 262-7848 (TDD)
Internet: <http://www.worklife4you.com>.
New users enter company code: statedepartment;
User ID is: FirstnameMiddleinitialLastnameMMDD,
(Month and Day—four digits from your birthdate)
e.g., JaneCDoe0927. Other U.S. Government employees should check with their agencies about how to access these services.

"Five Wishes"

To obtain a copy of the "Five Wishes" document, contact Patricia Huff at huffpa@state.gov or (202) 261-8180, Office of Employee Relations Work/Life Programs, or visit the Overseas Briefing Center

Regulations and References

Travel of Children of Separated Families
3 FAM 3750
<http://foia.state.gov/REGS/Search.asp>
Separate Maintenance Allowance Regulations
(DSSR 260)
<http://aoprals.state.gov>
Separate Maintenance Allowances
Questions and Answers
<http://aoprals.state.gov>

Emergency Contact Information

If family members cannot reach you in case of an emergency, they may try the following numbers when other means of communication have failed:

State Department

(weekdays 8:15 am to 5 pm, EST)
Office of Casualty Assistance (202) 736-4302

All agencies

(after business hours, weekends, and holiday)
Operations Center (202) 647-1512

Websites

(External links are for informational purposes only and should not be construed as endorsement of the sites or their privacy policies.)

Dads at a Distance - <http://www.daads.com>
Moms Over Miles - <http://www.momsovermiles.com>
Activities that long-distance dads or moms can do with or for children

Long Distance Couples - <http://www.longdistance-couples.com>
Activities for long-distance couples, including “dates from a distance”

Separation and Reunion Handbook (military) – <http://www.hooah4health.com/deployment/familymatters/separation.htm>

National Guard Youth Online Community
<http://www.guardfamilyyouth.org>
12 deployment guides or story/activity books are available for children ages 2-18 in PDF format (can easily be adapted for Foreign Service kids).