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PREPARING THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMUNITY FOR AN *OVERSEAS MOVE*

An inside look at the resources
and training used by the
U.S. State Department

By Sarah S. Genton

When my husband and I learned of his first posting as a U.S. diplomat to Harare, Zimbabwe, excitement combined with a feeling of apprehension overtook our lives. How we prepared for the journey ahead was the culmination of training, mentoring from those more experienced than us, and assistance from the Department of State's many offices that support the U.S. foreign affairs community. Now, 26 years and 10 moves later, I help others navigate the expatriate lifestyle through my work at the Department of State's Transition Center, located at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in Arlington, VA.

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“Packing up and moving from your home country to a foreign land is serious business. The fact that many in the foreign affairs community do it frequently does not mean that the process is always familiar or even easy. It is important to remember that ... you will need a structure supporting you.”

—From the *Transition Center Training Toolkit for foreign affairs agency employees and their eligible family members*

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With each move, we are reminded that personal preparedness for an international assignment takes months. There are the myriad details of the move itself, and just the basics of what to bring and what to leave behind can boggle the mind. There is the emotion of closing out one’s life in one location and embracing the unknown of what’s to come. And when family members are part of the mix, a complicated set of circumstances emerges that can involve future employment for the spouse/partner, overseas schooling and child care, security, housing, and family adjustment, to name just a few.

At the Transition Center, the key to realizing success in the international assignments process is empowering all U.S. government employees assigned to a mission overseas with the tools to make educated decisions about the choices ahead and to manage expectations through training in the realities of living abroad, including security awareness.

The proven best practices below help to bolster knowledge, understanding, and self-confidence when employees take on a new international assignment. As a result, foreign affairs agencies as a whole benefit from a well-trained and prepared workforce, with family members ready to take on the challenge of supporting the government’s mission.

THE OVERSEAS BRIEFING CENTER

The Overseas Briefing Center (OBC), housed within the Transition Center, is the Department of State’s

main hub for post-specific (i.e., destination-specific) resources to prepare the U.S. foreign affairs community for life in a new country. Through in-center and online materials, clients research lifestyle and family issues, allowances and regulations, cost-of-living considerations, import regulations for vehicles and family pets, schooling and child care, family member employment, mail options, and more.

“I was completely unaware that there are differences for how quickly we can get a new versus used car licensed in Poland,” says Karyn DeParis, who is planning her move to Warsaw. “This was not an issue at other posts we have been to. The waiting period is shorter for a used vehicle, which means we can be self-reliant sooner.” OBC visitors such as DeParis have access to more than 270 briefing boxes, one for each U.S. embassy and consulate worldwide. To complement that information, fact sheets that guide clients through the logistics of a move line the walls of the center. While the center is full of resources from a variety of offices and organizations, here are a few of OBC’s most popular products, available to U.S. government employees and their families.

Peer-to-Peer Feedback Program

Before accepting an international assignment, future transferees can ask for an “on the ground” perspective from work colleagues and family members who are currently assigned to and living in the foreign city to which they are headed. The OBC collects anonymous comments regarding schooling, neighborhoods and housing, expenses, available activities, what life is like for singles, same-sex partners, items to bring, security concerns, spouse/partner employment challenges, and other important factors that impact whether a proposed assignment is a good match.

Readers of peer perspectives should remember that an assignment that works for one employee/family might not be successful for another. Therefore, clients are encouraged to read a number of perspectives and use them only as one point of reference. For the wider expat community, a similar resource called *Real Post Reports* is available online from an independent website known as *Tales From a Small Planet* (www.talesmag.com).

Audiovisuals and Post Videos

The Internet is filled with colorful multimedia productions highlighting cities around the world, mostly from a tourism perspective. For U.S. government families who live overseas, that perspective is appealing and extremely helpful for planning family trips or enticing relatives and friends to visit. However, the day-to-day realities of actually living in a foreign city can be very different.

“People want to see what type of housing will be available and learn typical commuting times, where to shop, and what items are locally available,” says Maureen Johnston, a resource specialist at the center. “Parents are interested in seeing the local school facilities, and everyone is interested in recreational and cultural activities to enrich their nonworking/ nonschool hours.” The OBC post video program addresses the old adage “Seeing is believing” with videos produced specifically to show the lifestyle issues of a tour in Hyderabad, India; La Paz, Bolivia; or Port-au-Prince, Haiti, for example. To garner the experience of a younger age group, OBC also hosts a yearly “KidVid” contest, with a panel of judges awarding prizes to the best videos submitted from filmmakers ages 10–18.

Technology Surveys

Connectivity around the world has improved greatly in the last 10 years, with many countries offering state-of-the-art communications systems to support Internet and cell phone usage. However, capacity to meet the demand, the amount of available bandwidth, and the cost of services differ across borders.

The No. 1 priority for most families upon arrival in a new country is Internet and cell phone connectivity to communicate with loved ones back home. And for children, maintaining relationships with friends from afar can help ease the transition to a new location. To this end, OBC collects information about telecommunications companies operating in a given country, current rate structures, bandwidth capacity, cell phone availability, and time frames for setting up in-home service. This information helps families determine, before arrival, any communication challenges they may face.

Taking the Family Pet

Moving a pet from point A to point B has become a costly affair. In addition, airline policies and the assigned routes for U.S. government employees traveling on official orders can make the process even more complicated. The OBC maintains a database of country-specific pet import and quarantine restrictions and additional information for understanding the process.

Professional pet shippers can save the day, if handling the paperwork, airport logistics, layovers, and changing from one airline to another become too daunting to facilitate without assistance. We often see families shocked by the cost of bringing one, and sometimes two or three, pets to their post of assignment. Many pet-lovers, however, come to the conclusion that the benefits of bringing their pet outweigh the cost. Pets help families maintain a routine when moving, teach children kindness and responsibility, and make a new home feel normal.

Preparation Checklists

Nothing works better than a checklist to remind us of what we need to accomplish. Planning for an international move begins months before one actually gets on the plane. The Overseas Briefing Center maintains “Preparing to Go Overseas” checklists, with timelines for tasks related to leaving Washington, D.C., and a listing of items that require attention before arrival in a new country. The U.S. foreign affairs community has the support of several Department of State offices. Programs and services are explained in the online publication *Foreign Service Assignment Notebook: What Do I Do Now?*

TRAINING IN PREPARATION AND THE REALITIES OF OVERSEAS LIVING

My first experience as the spouse of a diplomat before leaving for Africa was participating in a training class that addressed employment options for family members. The possibility of not being gainfully employed with a steady salary caused me great angst, a common concern for adult family members who face an international move. The one-day class gave me the confidence to move in a different direction with my career, focusing more on portable work options and using my strengths as an editor to land work overseas.

All members of a family on international assignment need skills and knowledge to help them be successful. Life skills training at the Transition Center addresses the realities of living in a foreign culture, resilience in both adults and children, cultural sensitivity, adaptation, employment for family members, and effectiveness for organizing the logistics of a move from one country to another.

“The overall goal of our training programs is to build confidence in our clients by empowering them with skills, a positive framework, and knowledge needed to surmount the challenges that Foreign Service life throws at them,” says Dr. Archana Dheer, coordinator for the Transition Center’s Training Division. “At the end of our programs, we like to see that our students have discovered their strengths, identified skills they already have or need to develop, have made connections in this community, and understood that they are not alone—lots of support is available to make this journey a success.”

The most popular classes are Communicating Across Cultures, Explaining America, Protocol and U.S. Representation, Logistics Planning, Traveling With Pets, Youth Programs, and a suite of courses designed for foreign affairs family members who seek meaningful professional opportunities overseas. Many of these classes feature a panel of experts, made up of colleagues from within the foreign affairs community, who bring experience and a current perspective to the topic at hand.

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A new resource, “Realities of Foreign Service Life,” available on the Internet at www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/fslstraining/c47996.htm, addresses the many challenging aspects of a mobile lifestyle, explores the personal side of Foreign Service life through videos of community members telling their stories and sharing experiences, and provides guidance and resources.

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“Overseas Crisis Readiness (OCR),” available on the Internet at www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/ocr, caters to the foreign affairs community and its need for emergency crisis preparation overseas. Family members and employees learn to pack a go-bag, prepare a safe haven at home, participate in a radio check, and review resilience strategies. A customizable Personal Crisis Preparedness Aid is included to help organize personal information and documents.

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SECURITY AWARENESS TRAINING

Risks associated with a crisis overseas are often different from those in the U.S. The steps one must take to assure personal security overseas also differ depending on one’s country of assignment. The U.S. government requires that any employee assigned to a U.S. embassy or consulate overseas take security awareness training.

“Crises overseas are intensified by distance, communication challenges, cultural nuances, and in some cases, a lack of local support services,” says Tony Pontarelli, security trainer and head of the Security Awareness Training programs at the Transition Center. “We highly encourage adult family members to accompany their spouses/partners to security training. An awareness of how to handle tricky situations, like a traffic accident or street robbery, can actually save people from making dangerous, and potentially life-threatening, mistakes.” Security seminars at the Transition Center are also available for private-sector and nongovernmental organizations and for study-abroad administrators.

For young people, the Transition Center offers youth programs that explore safety and security threats that children (grades 2–12) might face in an overseas environment. Through games and

interactive activities, they learn to identify resources to protect themselves.



If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.

—Nelson Mandela



LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF THE DESTINATION COUNTRY

Landing in a foreign country with no working knowledge of the local language creates an automatic barrier to success. Without some level of language proficiency, a trip to the local grocery store can cause anxiety and frustration, not to mention the security risks of exploring a city without being able to read signs or understand directions. Making friends with residents in the host country, being able to communicate with parents at the local school, or conversing with the cashier at the market or the automobile repair technician are culturally important and enriching. The Foreign Service Institute provides language training to foreign affairs personnel, and also to their family members on a space-available basis.

A COMMUNITY OF CARE

Transition Center programs and services, and the various partner offices, form the core of a “community of care” for our foreign affairs colleagues. Over the course of my own personal journey, official Department of State support systems and resources, and a cadre of mentors and friends, have kept me not just surviving, but thriving during our family’s international experience. *M*

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PUBLIC RESOURCES ♦

of State materials for those being posted overseas are available to the public on the Internet. Here’s where to access them:

Foreign Service Institute

www.state.gov/m/lsi

TRANSITION CENTER

www.state.gov/m/lsi/tc

Overseas Briefing Center

www.state.gov/m/lsi/tc/c6954.htm

- Bidding and Assignment Research (brochure)
www.state.gov/documents/organization/205907.pdf
- Country Information
www.state.gov/m/lsi/tc/c10391.htm
- Preparing to Go Overseas Checklists
www.state.gov/m/lsi/tc/c49333.htm
- Foreign Service Assignment Notebook
www.state.gov/m/lsi/tc/c9649.htm

Life Skills Training

- Life Skills Courses
www.state.gov/m/lsi/tc/ls/training

Security Overseas Seminars

- Security Awareness
www.state.gov/m/lsi/tc/securitytraining