

# **CHARLESTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM: STRESS, RETENTION AND REFORM IN THE FOREIGN SERVICE**

by

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White Paper on Proposed Reform in the Foreign Service

August 2022

*This White Paper is based on surveys, interviews, and research conducted while the author was on the Una Chapman Cox Fellowship. This is independent research and does not represent the views of the USG.*



### **Acknowledgements**

Words cannot express my gratitude to the Una Chapman Cox Foundation. This endeavor would not have been possible without the foundation's generous support of my research through the Sabbatical Fellowship program.

I am incredibly grateful to the community of Foreign Service Officers and study participants whose candor, feedback, and encouragement impacted and inspired this work. Belinda Jackson Farrier, Oni Blair, Alissa Redmond, and all the stellar women whose departure from the Foreign Service served as impetus for this endeavor: Thank you for your service. We miss you.

I could not have undertaken this journey without the support of Mi Phan and Mason Theriault, my tireless research assistants. Your interviewing, data-gathering, and editing skills are surpassed only by your energy and commitment.

My deepest thanks to Dr. John Ehrenberg, Professor Aurora Griffin, Gillian Apfel, Julie Eisenberg, Vedyamrita Bethel, Aiyana Athenian, Krishna Peter Perry, Sada Sat Kaur, Lighthouse Yoga, Santosha on the Kennebec, friends and colleagues from both the public and private sector, who shared their feedback, expertise, and guidance.

Lastly, I would be remiss in not mentioning my family, especially spouse, child and dogs who put up with early morning and late-night zoom meetings. I would like to thank my beloved friends Ben, Heidi, Debi, and Siddharth for all the entertainment and emotional support. Your belief in me has kept my spirits and motivation high during this process.

### **Abstract**

This white paper shares the chronic stressors impacting mid-level female Foreign Service Officers at the Department of State, using data gathered from officers with an average of 12 to 15 years in the Foreign Service and a strong track record of serving in hardship/high-danger pos<sup>1</sup>ts. This paper offers solutions and practices to address concerns from a key demographic that the Department of State has successfully attracted thanks to robust recruitment efforts, but regularly fails to retain and promote in parity with males.

To understand the distinctive stressors experienced by Foreign Service personnel, we designed a base-line survey to gather data on the stressors which most impact the perception of work/life quality at the Department of State. We assigned numerical valence to most questions to compare quantitative data. To avoid confirmation bias, we allowed respondents to rank recurring stressors. Over 800 respondents took the online survey. Across the board, 84.7% of mid-level female respondents described their work as meaningful and demonstrated devotion to duty and nation. However, these factors are eroded by a workplace culture perceived as unsupportive, anachronistic, and detrimental to the retention and promotion of women.

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## Introduction

When I began the Una Chapman Cox Sabbatical Fellowship<sup>2</sup>, my intention was straight forward – I would pulse the Foreign Service rank and file to get a sense of their stressors and traumas via anonymous survey, then quantify and rank the survey results. Once I understood the medical and holistic interventions Foreign Service personnel were relying on to alleviate stress, I would research interventions other governmental and private sector entities found most effective with their personnel. Then, I would compile a curated selection of body-based approaches suited to mitigating chronic stressors within the Foreign Service life.

The global pandemic in 2020 created a unique opportunity. Since the medical paradigm outside of the Department had shifted to allow for telehealth, and I hoped to create simple mind-body integration tools for our globally scattered personnel to employ in private to better manage stress. The Department of State was starting to mimic the language of talent management and beginning to preach the gospel of resilience; I intended to research and package medically validated breath and meditation practices that could be employed by our people across the planet.

And then came the data.

Confidential surveys and in-depth interviews shed light on the general mood within the Foreign Service, especially amongst mid-level female Foreign Service generalists<sup>3</sup>. Across the board, nearly 85% of the over 800 respondents, regardless of gender and other demographic demarcations, described their work within the Foreign Service as meaningful. Survey respondents respected their colleagues and were deeply committed to advancing foreign policy.

The high proportion of mid-level female generalist respondents allowed us a deeper dive into the challenges and concerns shared by this particular demographic. This is a demographic that the Department of State has successfully attracted thanks to robust recruitment efforts, but regularly fails to retain and promote in parity with males<sup>4</sup>. Across the board, over 80% of mid-level female respondents described their work as meaningful, reported high levels of admiration for their colleagues, and demonstrated

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<sup>2</sup> The Una Chapman Cox Sabbatical Fellowship was created as “a way of enabling particularly promising Foreign Service Officers to reacquaint themselves with the United States and in the process to recharge their batteries and reaffirm their personal commitment to the Foreign Service” (The Una Chapman Cox Foundation, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> According to the survey that was sent out, 78.6% of respondents were female, 73.6% were mid-level, and 80.3% were Foreign Service generalists. A Foreign Service generalist is also known as a Foreign Service Officer.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the survey responses and confidential interviews, many respondents perceive the Foreign Service as promoting more men into high level positions than women or BIPOC (black, indigenous, people of color). This perception is supported by various studies and documentaries about diversity in the Foreign Service, including the 2014 PBS episode of *To The Contrary*. (Stein, 2014)

devotion to duty and nation. However, the survey also indicated these factors were being steadily eroded by a workplace culture perceived as unsupportive, anachronistic, and detrimental to the retention and promotion of women. After the survey data was analyzed, the focus of the research shifted away from self-led wellness practices towards the larger systemic issues with which this demographic grapple<sup>5</sup>.

While I still produced a series of [podcast episodes](#) based on my research for use by Foreign Service personnel and the general public<sup>6</sup>, I would be failing as a colleague if I didn't share the concerns and proposed solutions colleagues across the planet contributed to this white paper.

Across all demographics, the survey revealed an intense level of love for the work<sup>7</sup>. This underlying sentiment gave us tremendous hope. The Foreign Service is made up of people who want to do the right thing. In the words of a single parent Foreign Service Officer, "The Foreign Service is like an abusive boyfriend. You love it, you want to believe it will get better, so you keep giving yourself reasons to stay."<sup>8</sup>

## Data and Methodology

My Una Chapman Cox sabbatical year began with an in-depth literature review<sup>9</sup>. I steeped myself in research connecting body-based trauma and stress alleviation. Guided by the pioneering work of Dr. Van Der Kolk, I engaged in the study of various modalities of breath-work/pranayama<sup>10</sup>, meditation, and yoga practices bolstered by

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the struggles that were highlighted by the survey were the bidding process, moving, and work-life balance.

<sup>6</sup> The "Shady Kriya" Podcast is a series of curated breath, meditation, and yoga nidra vignettes which can be accessed worldwide. The episodes feature mind-body integrating practices of varying length, designed to fit into the busy lives of Foreign Service personnel. It can be found on Apple, Spotify, and Anchor podcast platforms.

<sup>7</sup> In the survey, respondents repeatedly shared the importance of friends and the camaraderie in the Foreign Service. As one respondent stated, "I've made some good friends and met some good colleagues, both in and out of the service."

<sup>8</sup> Private Interview, 2022

<sup>9</sup> Literature works such as *The Body Keeps The Score* by Bessel van der Kolk and *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art* by James Nestor were used for research to get an understanding of how people affected by stress or trauma are starting to connect their mind and body to relieve them from mental pressure. The techniques to deal with trauma described in both these books are focused around coming to terms with stress and trauma rather than trying to eradicate or suppress those feelings completely. Literature shares that suppressing or ignoring these feelings, including with neuro-pharmacological interventions may cause long-term physical and psychological symptoms.

<sup>10</sup> Pranayama is breathing exercise associated with yoga.

research on body-mind integration methods focused on addressing trauma, and reducing stress. Once the research team was assembled, we reviewed literature from various corporate and governmental entities. We focused on cultural reform and staff wellness efforts, and the reported results of these efforts<sup>11</sup>. The research team focused on companies and organizations which had seen a significant amount of tumult in their organizational structure and studied their efforts to rebound and retain workforce.

To understand the distinctive stresses experienced by Foreign Service personnel, we designed a base-line survey to gather data on the stressors which most impact the perception of work/life quality at the Department of State. We assigned numerical valence to most questions, so we could compare quantitative data. To avoid confirmation bias<sup>12</sup>, we allowed respondents to rank recurring stressors according to their perceptions.

Additionally, we gathered data from respondents about their general awareness of Department of State sponsored and independent interventions<sup>13</sup> to alleviate stress. We also asked survey participants about the frequency of engagement in their chosen body-based therapeutic interventions.

Our data was not bound by the usual strictures of collecting demographic data within the Foreign Service; respondents were free to share their rank, cone, gender, marital status, kids etc. We intended to aggregate all demographic data so that it would be anonymized, de-linking responses from individual respondents.

Striving for confidentiality and data aggregation, we eschewed the Department of State's email and communication systems and avoided affiliation with any of the Department's official entities to encourage free expression. After several test-iterations, the final version of the survey was published on February 14, 2022 via informal social media groups<sup>14</sup> and communities within, and adjacent to, the Foreign Service. The [baseline stress survey](#) was designed to give us quantitative data, while allowing respondents to freely express themselves in free-form questions. We also gave respondents the opportunity to volunteer for in-depth interviews if they wished to share their insights in greater depth.

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<sup>11</sup> This information was based on the anonymous surveys and confidential interviews that were conducted.

<sup>12</sup> In efforts to minimize bias, respondents were asked to rank certain stressors (i.e. bidding process, moving, employment opportunities for spouse/partner/EFM, etc.) according to their own perceptions from 1 to 5 with 5 being the most stressful.

<sup>13</sup> Independent interventions include: yoga, meditation, or other forms of exercise.

<sup>14</sup> The survey was posted on several Facebook groups specifically for Foreign Service Officers and those affiliated with Foreign Service Officers (i.e. spouses of Foreign Service Officers.)

Our respondent pool skewed toward mid-level Foreign Service generalist women<sup>15</sup>. Although more women answer surveys<sup>16</sup> than men, this level of candor and detail from a demographic the Department of State can recruit, but not retain and promote<sup>17</sup> in meaningful ways is extremely valuable data.

Behind closed doors, complaints from Foreign Service Officers of systemic discrimination, chronic stress, and overwork have sometimes been dismissed by managers as generational ('woke,' 'soft,' 'snowflake' millennials or women 'on the mommy track' complaining to a generation of seasoned 'suck it up buttercup' veterans) or cultural (new hires not understanding how to navigate the system/bureaucracy). This data from mid-level female officers, with an average of 12 to 15 years in the Foreign Service and a strong track record of serving in hardship/high-danger posts, points to deeper issues.

This paper attempts to slot the most named key stressors<sup>18</sup> across the demographic for mid-level women into three broad categories. It also shares recommended solutions from the field and external management data and practices to address concerns.

### **“Promotion by Essay Contest”<sup>19</sup>**

#### Promotion and Assignment Process

Overwhelming numbers of respondents, across demographic categories, expressed high levels of stress and dissatisfaction with the promotions and assignments process<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> According to the survey that was sent out, 78.6% of respondents were female, 73.6% were mid-level, and 80.3% were Foreign Service generalists.

<sup>16</sup> In a blogpost by Kristine Royall (2021), “women tend to be more likely to self-select to participate in online surveys.”

<sup>17</sup> During an interview conducted with a female Foreign Service officer, she said that it is harder for women in the Foreign Service. Many find it difficult to find work-life balance. In addition, a quote from the survey stated: “It’s incredibly toxic - misogynistic, microaggressions at every turn for women.”

<sup>18</sup> Stresses are classified as Systemic Discrimination, MED Bureau Processes, Promotion and Assignments Processes, and a Lack of Bureaucratic Standards.

<sup>19</sup> All quoted material is directly from written survey responses, or private in-depth interviews conducted with Foreign Service Personnel between February and July 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Based on responses from the survey and interviews, many promotion and assignment processes are a chronic cause of overworking and stress.

Ranking this as one of the highest stressors consistently, they described EER<sup>21</sup> writing and bidding for assignments as the most stressful and non-rewarding aspect of their job. While this may not be news to anyone familiar with the Foreign Service's 'up-or-out' system, respondents shared innovative suggestions to reform the promotion process and redefine success within the Foreign Service.

The most colorful written-in responses to the survey focused on the "annual creative writing process known as EER season." In addition to what one respondent with prior private sector experience termed as the "absurdity" of "promotion by essay contest," several respondents noted that the demographic make-up at the upper ranks of the Foreign Service repeatedly demonstrate that "women and BIPOC are not promoted at the same rate" as white males. Many respondents shared that seeing "toxic bosses and bad performers get awards and promotions is more demoralizing than seeing good people get promoted." Other respondents pointed to the inconsistency across promotion boards<sup>22</sup> as a key flaw in the system. Respondents often conflated dissatisfaction with the Foreign Service promotion process with the assignments process, seeing the two as inextricably linked. Mid-level female officers especially viewed the assignments process as opaque, nepotistic, and unfair.

While many respondents took umbrage with the up-or-out system and recommend eliminating the annual EER<sup>23</sup> process entirely, many recommended smaller reforms which would go a long way towards eliminating the stress and unnecessary morale-killing aspects of the promotion and assignments process.

#### Recommendations from the Field:

- Once or twice at any given grade, allow people to withdraw from the promotion process if they have not been low-ranked in the last five years and are not within two years of ticking out.

Respondents speculated that since GTM/PE<sup>24</sup> calculates a fixed number of promotable slots every year, allowing folks to periodically remove themselves

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<sup>21</sup> Form DS-5055 and Form DS-7768, U.S. Foreign Service Employee Evaluation Report (EER) are official reports upon which personnel actions (assignments, within-class salary increases, tenure, promotion, recertification, and award of performance pay) may be based.

<sup>22</sup> In 2020, a whistleblower brought attention to the issue of nepotism and cronyism within the promotion process in the State Department. This raised questions about the "inconsistencies in how people were chosen, and weak oversight of rules and contracts involved" (Toosi, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> There are many calls to "scrap the EER system" and/or "eliminate EERs."

<sup>24</sup> Bureau of Global Talent Management (Formerly Human Resources), Office of Performance and Evaluation

from EER review would reduce the burden on review panels, and give officers some modicum of autonomy on their career progression.

*“People know their own competence, and the realities of their lives. Trust your people, let them sit out the promotion circus.”<sup>25</sup>*

*“Giving people autonomy to manage when they want to get promoted and take on greater duties is a free-market choice.”*

*“You relish the work you do, you do it well, and don’t want to advance to the next level for whatever reason, why does the Foreign Service push you to fail?”*

*“It makes no economic sense to spend tax dollars and time recruiting and training someone new, because you failed to retain someone who was good at their jobs.”*

*“Why create this ‘pig-in-the-python’ madness and risk clogs?”*

- De-couple management skills and cone-specific skills; allow promotion in both tracks<sup>26</sup>.

Promotion in the Foreign Service invariably means greater management responsibilities. There is a presumption that if someone is a strong officer within her or his cone, they will make great managers. This is an erroneous assumption, especially at the Department of State where officers develop cone specific skills but are not trained to manage the complicated bureaucratic realities of myriad personnel types within our organization. Management literature advises<sup>27</sup> that leadership should pay attention to first-time managers who “do not enjoy or are bad at” managing. Promoting high performers to managers even if

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<sup>25</sup> All italicized quotes are culled directly from written response within the survey, or from in-depth interviews with participants.

<sup>26</sup> “If your leaders feel that you won’t give them the keys, that you are backseat driving or monitoring their every move, you will not establish trust or allow them to move your company forward. Creating this type of toxic, micromanagement culture of leadership can contribute to CEO/founder burnout as you try to manage ‘all the things’” (Austin, 2019). Based on responses in surveys and interviews, there is poor management at high levels and mid-levels. Allowing positive growth within the Department from high level positions, mid-levels, and so on, will help work culture going forward.

<sup>27</sup> “If you have inexperienced managers, review candidate resumes together with them and establish selection guidelines for what qualifies a candidate for a round of interviews” (Austin, 2019). For first-time managers, it is important for leadership to set guidelines and incorporate good people-management to establish a good work culture going forward.

they are better suited to be individual contributors creates morale corroding structures. Consider a process at the Department of State which allows upward mobility in both Cone and Leadership tracks and allows officers bidding mobility between each type of job. If a Political Officer thrives at policy work or a Consular Officer excels at American Citizen Services, but fails at management and leadership, allow trying new things to be ‘a positive experience versus an ego hit or failure’. Retain in-cone<sup>28</sup> expertise with opportunities for growth which do not always entail greater personnel management.

*“We reward ‘great’ officers by promoting them, they flame-out and create toxic workplaces because they were promoted into management, hate it, haven’t been properly trained, don’t have a clue, etc. etc. Admitting that you are not ready or trained for management is frowned upon. Meanwhile, if you are a self-aware human being who wants to take control of your career, and not charge up the FS ladder, we won’t have that.”*

- Make promotion lists private.

A recurring theme was the high level of stress and demoralization respondents reported when they perceived the Department as rewarding toxic performers. Management research has repeatedly shown that rewarding “toxic rockstars”<sup>29</sup> has a far greater negative impact on good performers and women of color, negating the positive impact of rewarding women of color (Purushothaman & Stromberg, 2022). Since the Department defines success as awards and promotions, and the current EER system is often perceived<sup>30</sup> as rewarding individuals who are good at working the system, making the process more private may go a long way towards boosting employee morale.

*“Send private letters to people so that it doesn't become this massive pageantry of who got promoted and who didn't.”*

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<sup>28</sup> Foreign Service Generalists are broadly divided into Consular, Economic, Management, Political, and Public Diplomacy cones. Although generalists are hired to be able to perform any of these roles, promotions and assignments are largely based on specializing and building expertise in the Foreign Service Officer’s chosen cone.

<sup>29</sup> In the article, “Leaders, Stop Rewarding Toxic Rock Stars” by Purushothaman and Stromberg (2022), the term “toxic rockstar,” is used to describe a “high performer who is a bully at work or a leader who delivers results but creates a toxic environment.”

<sup>30</sup> According to interviews conducted by the research team, Foreign Service officers believe that officers do not get rewarded solely based on performance. Word-of-mouth and friendship are the two biggest deciding factors of who gets promotions, therefore a person who is more friendly with their superior may be picked for a promotion over someone who deserves it based on their performance.

*“Seeing toxic bosses bag promotions is more demoralizing than seeing good people get promoted, even if you have been passed over (for promotion).”*

*“I got promoted, and then I looked at the rest of the list. Seeing the usual kiss-up kick-down (sic) get promoted, good people passed over, it just ruined it for me. Why does it matter? Because it means I am stuck here longer, working with more opportunist, unscrupulous ‘high-flyers.’”*

- Redefine success within the Foreign Service.

The Foreign Service’s up and out system necessitates movement. This means people will either self-select or be pushed out. Given that this is a reality, defining and celebrating solely one type of success in the Foreign Service (e.g. promotion to the Senior Foreign Service, Ambassadorial titles) is counterproductive. Creating alumni networks and leveraging former officers as advocates outside the Department, as resources for our exchanges and programs, as mentors for FSOs wishing to transition to other careers is a win-win. Rather than celebrating the success of the Pickering and Rangel fellows solely if they remain in Department and cross the SFS threshold, the Department could recognize and promote the Foreign Service as excellent training for future private sector and public sector jobs. Cultivate these bright lights as advocates for the Department of State. Actively fighting the pernicious perspective that those who leave ‘could not hack it’ or ‘lack the right stuff’ is a wiser use of our existing system.

*“The Foreign Service assumes everyone wants to make Ambassador. Some of us love serving our country. We don’t care about titles.”*

*“I left after a decade; it was the right thing for my family. In any other place I would have been celebrated, sent off with a party or something. After ten years, I was expected to disappear. Not even an exit interview, no stay in touch, nothing. Like I was being fired or something!”<sup>31</sup>*

- Reconsider how Washington DC jobs are marketed.

Given the uneven split between DC and field jobs, Washington jobs are more abundant, while positions abroad are fewer and therefore far more competitive. This is especially true for tandems<sup>32</sup> who need two in-cone, at-grade positions to

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<sup>31</sup> GTM has begun a pilot program of offering exit interviews to FSOs resigning from the Department. This process has been largely welcomed by rank-and-file female FSOs, who hope their feedback will be used to address systemic issues.

<sup>32</sup> Tandem officers are defined by GTM as married FSOs, regardless of gender or cone.

help with career advancement. To families with childcare costs, jobs in DC can often be financially detrimental, and are widely perceived as unpromotable. While the Department has made progress with pay parity issues, it would be useful to dispel myths about DC jobs being non-career advancing.

*“The conventional wisdom is that Washington jobs are good for getting an onward, but bad for your promotion chances. Is this really true? Would be good to address these perceptions if you want people to stay in DC.”*

*“DC jobs not promotable, jobs abroad are scarce. Re-evaluate the split if you want people to be in DC”*

- Create permanent independent promotion boards.

Promotion boards made up of ad-hoc volunteers feed the perspective that there is no consistency in decision making. In addition to inconsistency and opacity, promotion boards have also been plagued by allegations of mismanagement<sup>33</sup>. Creating permanent boards held accountable for their actions, separate from the rank-and-file of the organization, reporting to an oversight committee would promote consistency. Permanent independent boards can be responsive to the needs of the organization, aligning promotions with service needs<sup>34</sup>. A promotion oversight committee would monitor permanent promotion board compliance with organizational values and heighten commitment to promoting an ethical environment. This would also make promotion a year-round process, conducted in private rather than a seasonal load-heavy, volunteer-driven process.

*“One panel thinks that one thing is important and the next year the panel thinks something else is important.”*

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<sup>33</sup> “Many of the problems centered on the Bureau of Global Talent Management’s Office of Performance Evaluation, often referred to as GTM/PE. This office is in charge of filling and overseeing the promotion boards” (Toosi, 2022). Although those who are on the promotion boards have to go through a tedious process of paperwork and review process, there were several accounted issues of nepotism in promotion processes.

<sup>34</sup> “Create an oversight committee: The new board committee would potentially monitor senior managers’ compliance with new company values and their commitment to promoting an ethical environment” (Cakebread, 2017).

*“I see that in the cables and talks GTM<sup>35</sup> arranges. I focus my EER<sup>36</sup> on feedback from the panel, and next year, the panel has conflicting feedback. There is no consistency.”*

*“You see the names of ex-bosses, co-workers, personal friends listed on panels all the time. How can this be objective? I hear panelists can recuse themselves, but given how small and gossipy our community can be, how often does that happen?”*

### **“My mental and physical health is so much better after quitting”**

#### Health and Wellness at State

A majority of the respondents at the Department of State understood the need to seek both traditional (i.e. CBT Therapy<sup>37</sup>, virtual or in-person counseling, consultation with a life or career coach) and non-traditional (i.e. apps, yoga, meditation, health retreats, acupressure, acupuncture) emotional health interventions to mitigate the recurring stresses of the Foreign Service lifestyle. Their greatest challenge to get themselves both traditional and non-traditional help was the overwork, and the “very invasive” bureaucratic process required to get such care.

#### Recommendations from the Field:

- Reform MED’s <sup>38</sup> clearance process.

The perception that MED is inconsistent and intrusive lead to a high level of frustration, especially amongst FS personnel with children. Respondents found MED’s changing guidelines, opaque bureaucracy, and lack of coordination between the field and DC added a great amount of stress.

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<sup>35</sup> Global Talent Management

<sup>36</sup> Employee Evaluation Report

<sup>37</sup> Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

<sup>38</sup> Bureau of Medical Services

*“Reform State/MED so that we can get our children the care they need from pediatric experts without fear that their clearance will be downgraded because of an uninformed opinion of someone in State/MED not involved in their care.”*

*“That pre-clearance MED bidding tool is laughable and inaccurate. One RMO<sup>39</sup> on the ground can tell you your condition is manageable at post, corresponding to what your physician tells you. Then, that RMO transfers out, and new person says no to the same condition. You must get everything in writing and spend months working on bidding, long before bidding season starts. I am obviously not trying to go to a place where my family is unsafe. This process is so time consuming.”*

*“At first, MED turned me down for a post where I have already served in my career. No change in my condition, medical care at this post (in North America) is better than anything I get in back home. That didn’t change the amount of back and forth after I got my handshake. I got to post two months late. I had to apologize to my entire section about putting them out, had to disclose my medical condition to everyone.”*

- Abolish invasive medical updates for routine psychotherapy and counseling, especially if no medications are prescribed.

Individual case workers at the MED bureau require a substantial amount of forms from counselors and mental health providers. Despite the Director General's guidance<sup>40</sup> that officers were no longer required to submit forms reporting routine psychological counseling to Diplomatic Security, MED still requires copious forms. The cognitive dissonance within the bureaucracy creates hardships. Those who did manage to seek regular therapy reported that the medical clearance process requires already burdened medical health providers to answer archaic forms which must be shared with MED. Respondents reported paying medical offices out-of-pocket for forms required by MED or struggling to find medical providers who would fill out MED's forms.

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<sup>39</sup> Regional Medical Officer

<sup>40</sup> “The Department fully supports employees who would like to reach out for professional assistance for mental health care and wants to remind employees that no negative inference concerning an employee’s access to classified information will be raised solely on the basis of mental health counseling.” (Department Notice # 76099)

*“When I forwarded the DN<sup>41</sup> to MED, they told me that the DG’s <sup>42</sup> guidance applied to DS<sup>43</sup>, not them. I had stopped going to therapy, but because I reported therapy during my last update, they insisted I owed them updated forms”*

*“My therapist said she couldn’t answer how I would fare in a “hardship” post, because she has no idea what that this – a non-State person has no context, how can we ask them these questions.”*

*“My doctor’s office told me there was no way that [filling out forms] was happening, she was too busy. I called every day for six months, still no forms. I had to bid domestic.”*

*“The Department doesn’t have the right system in place to be asking these types of personal questions.”*

*“If you have ever worked in HR (now GTM) or DS, you figure out that these forms mean nothing. Twenty plus years working with DS, I have never seen MED restrict someone going to Baghdad or wherever because of these red flags. So why ask for these forms?”*

- Augment ECS<sup>44</sup> staffing, and extend ECS hours

Respondents disclose Regional Medical Officers are “too swamped with bureaucratic duties” to provide regular therapeutic interventions for disruptive or traumatic life events abroad. Interviewed respondents shared past experiences of MED personnel actively discouraging officers from seeking local counseling services abroad for grief or couple’s counseling citing vague ‘security concerns.’

Since getting external psychological counseling creates an undue burden, making sure that ECS can respond to personnel needs, and communicate with their MED colleagues would reduce the hurdles to creating a healthy workforce.

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<sup>41</sup> Department Notice # 76099

<sup>42</sup> Office of the Director General

<sup>43</sup> Bureau of Diplomatic Security

<sup>44</sup> Bureau of Medical Service, Office of Employee Consultation Services

The expansion of telehealth during the pandemic has broadened the availability of U.S certified mental health professionals to Foreign Service personnel abroad. However, the accompanying blurring of on-duty and off-duty hours has meant that time to seek those interventions regularly is a luxury.

*“Most therapists have a 48-hour or 24-hour cancellation process. No matter how many times I blocked off 50-minutes on my calendar for a telehealth appointment, that was not respected by my office. After paying out-of-pocket too many times, I gave up trying.”*

*“(I experienced) Death in the family in addition to the pandemic and handling home-schooling, my local RMO-P<sup>45</sup> told me I couldn’t get therapy locally. I said ok, can I get help (from the US) online? RMO-P says yes, if you come into the Embassy and use one of our lines to be HIPPA compliant. This is during the pandemic when every American is doing tele-health. In the end, I had to curtail because my marriage was on the line. Just so I could be in DC to get therapy. Which we ended up getting online.”*

- Keep managers out of medical interventions, educate them on privacy concerns and basic labor laws.

Respondents reported that the only way they could get regular counseling is by sharing deeply personal and private life events with their direct-line supervisors. Managers seem to be unaware of basic labor practice and privacy compliance, and there is no evidence that managers get any practical human resource management training. Most managers are unaware about the various employment categories amongst DoS<sup>46</sup> personnel and unsure how various union and FAM rules apply to each.

*“A lot of people don’t see that seeking counseling is actually confidential.”*

*“It is not my manager’s job to tell me what my special needs child needs during the pandemic. It is ridiculous that I even had to share why, exactly, I needed to take the 10 hours of admin time the DG allocated. The solution given to every*

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<sup>45</sup> Regional Medical Officer/ Psychiatrist

<sup>46</sup> Department of State

*managerial issue is call S/OCR<sup>47</sup>. I don't want to sue the Department; I want my managers to understand boundaries."*

*"During my routine counseling session - which I had to beg for because it was listed in EER guidelines, btw- my reviewer asked me why we didn't hire 'better child care' because I drove my kids to school every morning. The idea being childcare was cheap at post. Mind you, I was easily working over 40 hours every week, eating lunch at my desk, getting kudos from the FO<sup>48</sup>. When I asked how this was affecting my performance, she changed the subject. A few days (sic) my rater asked to meet with me and counseled me on my 'tone' with my reviewer. Alarmed, I asked what I had done wrong, so then (sic) lectured on how I should be grateful that someone was mentoring me on 'FS culture'."*

*"I wanted to be upfront with my boss about maternity leave and shared I was pregnant. Then I miscarried. My manager asked invasive questions, it was just horrible. Traumatic."*

*"I left because scaling change was exhausting, not appreciated, and daunting. I was a labor attorney before I came to the Department. I spent all my time in GTM jobs at State teaching managers to not ask problematic questions like 'when are you planning to have children?' or saying things like 'oh all this diversity stuff is in fashion now'. Stuff of nightmares for anyone familiar with labor law. This made me the bad guy, not a team player, I was told I didn't get 'our culture'."*

- Standardize DRAD<sup>49</sup> services, respecting that depression and anxiety are recognized by the Americans with Disability Act<sup>50</sup>.

Embassies and consulates de-facto rules differ from one place to another. While that makes logical sense given that we need to respond to local conditions, it does not make sense to have different legal and labor standards for disabilities.

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<sup>47</sup> Office of Civil Rights

<sup>48</sup> Front Office, the Office of the Chief of Mission at an Embassy or Regional Bureau.

<sup>49</sup> Disability/Reasonable Accommodation Division

<sup>50</sup> The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was introduced in 1990 and protects individuals affected with disabilities from being discriminated against in their public life.

*“My DRAD counselor (in DC) fought to get me the special-needs accommodations I needed. I was so grateful, I thrived, great EER. Then I went to another post. The same accommodations became so difficult to get, I was seen as the problem child long before I came to post. I know my health condition was discussed with my co-workers. It was the worst.”*

*“The Service is profoundly anti-disability and hostile to special needs.”*

*“I had severe anxiety. I reached out to DRAD in DC, they give me their recommendations, I shared with HRO<sup>51</sup> at post, who pared down the list for what would work in the local context. I took that list to my manager, who refused to honor any of the recommendations. Not one. In the end my HRO advised me to curtail and take all the HL I needed. So that is what I did.”*

## Creating Cultural Change

### Weaponizing Resilience to Avoid Meaningful Change

When asked to reflect on the Department’s pandemic-era focus on resilience and wellness, many respondents perceived this as the Department of State weaponizing resilience<sup>52</sup>. In interviews with the research team, respondents perceived the Department of State’s diversity and resilience initiatives as weak substitutes to avoid addressing key systemic problems. At the Department resilience is often seen as “a doubling down of old bootstrap logic, where your success or your failure comes down to your character.”<sup>53</sup>

*“The Department weaponizes resilience by telling officers that their problem is that they just aren't resilient enough rather than actually giving us adequate resources for the jobs that they expect is to accomplish.”*

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<sup>51</sup> Human Resource Officer

<sup>52</sup> Survey results concluded that the Department of State did not provide adequate resources to allow officers to do their job correctly. Officers struggling with workload were being told they were not resilient enough to overcome obstacles.

<sup>53</sup> *New York Times* writer, Parul Sehgal (2022), explains that cultures built around resilience also need to provide necessary support to their employees instead of making them feel they are being crushed by workload.

Many survey respondents stated that the Department seems to adhere to an anachronistic reality where families conform to the traditional model of one working parent with another partner at home to manage everything else. Survey respondents who fit the traditional model expressed frustration with how a lack of standard practices and loose adherence to the law makes life on officers and their families unnecessarily stressful.

*“So much of our work is governed by unspoken traditions and/or the assumption that everyone still has a traditional, one working spouse, one stay at home spouse, life.”*

*“The core expectation is that the Department will be the priority over personal (life) and health.”*

Respondents noted how much of the Foreign Service was governed by unspoken tradition, which often contradict FAM<sup>54</sup> regulations and labor laws. Respondents pointed to specific instances of post management refusing to honor the ten hours of administrative leave allocated by the Director General during the pandemic, refusing compensatory time off for staff routinely working over 40-hour weeks, or paying non-tenured officers’ overtime.

*“I am amazed at how often people blow off legality (like paying FAST<sup>55</sup> officers OT or adhering to FAM provisions) if it doesn’t agree with what they want to do.”*

Survey Respondents viewed a systemic resistance to change within the Foreign Service as a prominent and recurring stressor. Respondents believe that the up or out system is sometimes used to justify problematic foundational issues. A large proportion of survey respondents noted the discrepancy between our hiring efforts (focused on diversity) and our retention efforts (hemorrhaging diverse demographics).

*“The service is still very ‘pale, male, Yale’ especially at the upper ranks. This is very clear in the promotion process where women and BIPOC<sup>56</sup> are not promoted while mediocre white men are promoted.”*

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<sup>54</sup> Foreign Affairs Manual

<sup>55</sup> First or Second Tour Officers

<sup>56</sup> Black, indigenous, and people of color

## Recommendations from the Field:

- Standardize bureaucratic processes for logistic support; Bolster support staff numbers to cover the workload.

Respondents repeatedly expressed frustration with the various online processes surrounding moves and routine life-changes. Respondents are frustrated that these services remain scattered across various offices at the Department, with opaque or non-existing rules. In addition, the Department's increased reliance on faulty automated processes combined with an alarming dearth of actual human personnel who assist with logistic and administrative support has added layers of frustration to FSO experiences.

*“Everything from medical clearances to travel orders to passport/visa to arranging for shippers to pick up your car is convoluted, managed by a different office (or multiple offices) in the Department.”*

*“Why can't the Department figure out that half the workforce moves every year? Why does it always seem like I am the first employee to ever move, get married, have a kid, etc.?”*

*“The longer I am in, the harder the moves get. You would think that the logistics get easier with practice, but the corroded support services over the span of my career has meant that each move is worse.”*

- Create non-punitive systems of accountability and work-conflict mediation which are independent and have staff and budget authority.

Corporate literature advises<sup>57</sup> that the Department can change ground realities with better oversight of its management team. Creating a board-like structure composed of experienced human resource managers and senior personnel from within and outside government with no prior ties to the Department would demonstrate the Department's commitment to overhauling its culture.

Standardizing the Foreign Service Grievance Board, making sure it is composed of paid professionals who administer and uphold consistent decisions would help exponentially to create an atmosphere of transparency.

A new independent oversight board reporting directly to the Hill should monitor M family entities and enforce compliance with Department commitment to an ethical

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<sup>57</sup> A management team of professionals from outside the department should be assembled to ensure accountability and responsibility are being shown in each employee at the Department.

environment. This board should also create permanent non-volunteer Foreign Service grievance boards (FSGB) and hold them accountable for uniformity and consistency in their decisions.

*“The ombudsman’s office does some sort of mediation, but they have no authority to even enforce labor laws.”*

*“The Director General and GTM discipline DAS<sup>58</sup> are not independent. These offices are judging colleagues, they are part of this system, how can you expect them to be objective?”*

- Link tax dollars to performance.

The Department spends valuable time and money on litigation. Managers whose illegal behavior has cost the Department money should be tracked, re-trained, or disciplined according to severity of their actions and the consequences to the institution. Instead of empty narratives in SFS EERs to garner performance pay, it would be more efficient for G to share data with GTM/PE, or issue letters to the performance file of individual employees which can be viewed by promotion boards.

*“There must be something besides suing the department when you encounter racism, sexism, homophobia, harassment. People are not looking for a fat settlement, they are looking for a fair workplace.”*

*“All our processes are directed at lawsuits and money, not at creating change. I don’t want an adversarial relationship with my boss, I want someone to explain legal requirements, and teach managers to manage legally, respectfully.”*

*“HROs who do the right thing are punished. They can’t be part of the same bidding and EER process, subject to COM authority, and then be expected to stand up to the entire structure.”*

*“The Director General and GTM discipline DAS are not independent. These offices are judging colleagues, they are part of this system, how can you expect them to be objective?”*

- Release annual reports to the rank-and-file sharing progress on improving working conditions and retention numbers.

Respondents expressed frustration with a lack of honest communication from upper management. Sharing clear guidance with managers on following labor laws; discipline, and organizational consequences when managers and posts

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<sup>58</sup> Deputy Assistant Secretary

break laws; updates from the OIG<sup>59</sup> about tangible improvements at posts after inspections, would go a long way to restoring faith in the Department's commitment to improving working conditions. Respondents applauded GTM/RET recent efforts to conduct exit interviews with FSOs who choose to resign. Sharing anonymized quantitative data about retention every year would help alter the perception that the Department does not care to retain women and BIPOC.

- Acknowledge Moral Injury

Respondents shared experiences of intense trauma and guilt resulting from their work on policy issues in Syria, Afghanistan, Central America amongst others, where political decisions from changing administrations radically shifted Foreign Service actions on the ground. Similarly, Foreign Service Officers who were urged to placate their colleagues on internal human resource policy issues while knowing that their leadership did not intend to act on complaints reported high rates of Moral Injury.<sup>60</sup>

The difference between burnout and Moral Injury is important. Moral Injury is described as a category of psychological injury when individuals have repeatedly been forced by their leadership to act in ways contrary to the organizations purported beliefs.<sup>61</sup>

Burnout suggests that the problem resides within the individual, implying that the individual lacks the resources or resilience to withstand the work environment. The Department implies that the solutions to burnout are the individual's responsibility. As former *New York Times Magazine* writer Parul Sehgal notes, resilience is often seen as "a doubling down of old bootstrap logic, where your success or your failure comes down to your character."

Moral Injury solutions do not reside in promoting mindfulness or resilience among individual FSOs, but in creating a management environment that acknowledges the value of the time FSOs and foreign contacts spend together developing trust,

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<sup>59</sup> The Office of the Inspector General has been at the forefront of America's attempt to fight waste, fraud and abuse, and improve efficiency in the Department of State.

<sup>60</sup> Moral Injury was first characterized in healthcare studies when healthcare workers are forced to carry out an act that goes against their personal morals. The moral belief of healthcare workers is to put the needs of patients first, but they are becoming forced to think the demands of shareholders and company finances over the needs of patients.

<sup>61</sup> Moral Injury is a chronic, organizational pressure to perpetrate, bear witness to, or fail to prevent an act that transgresses our deeply held moral beliefs.

understanding, and true working relationships that accompany the true implementation of foreign policy.

While FSOs remain stoic and realistic about the reality of their bi-partisan jobs, they desire acknowledgement and support within the Department when sharp policy pivots make them unreliable to partners on the ground. HROs, FMO<sup>62</sup>s, and management staff are often on the frontlines battling management challenges but are dependent on Front Offices and bureau personnel for EERs and assignments without any direct channel of communication with Grievance or Legal personnel, leaving them especially vulnerable to retaliation.

*“Look, I know this (Afghanistan policy) is above my paygrade. But, like, I was getting texts from my (former) contacts and LE<sup>63</sup> staff begging me to help them get in from (gate at Kabul airport during the August 2021 Taliban takeover). I was a wreck (I mention this in a zoom meeting and my boss says, ‘well you don’t work on Af/Pak anymore’<sup>64</sup>. Yes, I know that obviously, but like can you understand what this feels like? Can you not be a jerk about it?”<sup>65</sup>*

*“My rater looks all stressed, comes into my office, tells me I should delete tweets from my (personal) twitter because they ‘may bother’ political appointees. I am a black PD officer serving in AF, I am super, super careful. I scrutinize my tweets, the only thing I can see is a BLM<sup>66</sup> hashtag accompanying a generic MLK (Martin Luther King, Jr.) day tweet. How is this political? Then, they also want me to talk about superior U.S. ethnic and racial justice to my contacts.”*

*“The number of times my FO told me (HRO at post) to tell employees that they were ‘aware of the problem’ and ‘handling’ (sexual harassment) complaints, when I know they did nothing. I talked to DC (Bureau EX, GTM, S/OCR, and Ombudsman’s Office) for guidance. My DCM<sup>67</sup> told me I was being a troublemaker for talking to DC, started to exclude me from meetings and emails directly related to my portfolio. I curtailed before my EER blew-up.”*

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<sup>62</sup> Financial Management Officers

<sup>63</sup> Locally Engagement Staff

<sup>64</sup> Afghanistan & Pakistan

<sup>65</sup> Bureau of African Affairs

<sup>66</sup> Black Lives Matter

<sup>67</sup> Deputy Chief of Mission

*“My FO told me to tell (an employee) who asked for my guidance that they didn’t have an EEO<sup>68</sup> basis for complaint, and to strongly imply to the employee that filing an EEO complaint would ‘ruin’ her career. The employee absolutely did have a basis. She quit after that tour. I still think about that exchange. I still feel horrible.”*

*“I left because scaling change was exhausting, not appreciated, and daunting. This made me the bad guy, not a team player, I was told I didn’t get ‘our culture’.”*

## **Conclusion & Next Steps**

While the data from the survey and interviews addresses a wider variety of chronic stressors that contribute to corroding morale amongst mid-level female officers than categorized by this white paper, this white paper attempts to slot the concerns into categories. These categories are not mutually exclusive – frustrations with bureaucratic and logistical processes do not preclude concerns about the promotion and assignments process, for example. Respondents also highlighted concerns like the sub-par technological tools and need for greater management training; for the sake of clarity this paper focuses on stressors that came up repeatedly amongst respondents. The respondents to the survey and interviewees routinely ranked the above stresses far higher than security threats and other headline grabbing concerns.

To benefit from the candid feedback from this key demographic within the Foreign Service, it would be advisable to cross reference the concerns and solutions raised by survey respondents and study participants with feasibility studies. Creating an independent research entity charged with exploring the strictures of the Foreign Service Act of 1980<sup>69</sup> as well as budgetary realities would be the practical way to move forward. Once a review of existing research on feasibility is complete, an independent steering committee composed of both current and former Foreign Service personnel (especially those who retired early or resigned) can engage with the Department of State bureaucracy and stakeholders within the foreign affairs community, including Congress to identify nodes of action with the remit to solve specific issues.

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<sup>68</sup> Equal Employment Opportunity is a Federal policy that provides equal treatment and opportunity in employment without regard to race, color, religion, or sex.

<sup>69</sup> H.R.6790 - Foreign Service Act of 1980, Retrieved August 18, 2022 from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/house-bill/6790>



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