

March 14, 2014

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We first want to recognize and thank you for the work you have already done to advance work-life balance issues in the Department. Your participation in the October 30 event in honor of National Work and Family Month, and the powerful message you delivered to Department leadership at all levels, has set the stage for real progress on work-life issues. In addition, the launch of new programs and policies under your leadership, such as a pilot program for backup care and centralization of funding for part-time positions, has given managers new tools to improve employee productivity, morale, and retention. We also appreciate your desire to hear directly from employees at all levels to get a better sense of the "pulse" of the Department as you develop strategic management priorities.

To that end, we wanted to follow up on a question regarding Department policies for parental leave and pregnancy that was raised in your January 29 meeting with employee representatives. Despite the progress the Department has made in some areas related to work-life (such as teleworking), many of our policies regarding parental leave and pregnancy are, as President Obama recently noted, caught woefully in a "Mad Men" era. As the only industrialized country with no paid leave for new parents, the United States would greatly benefit from the creation of a separate category of leave related to the birth or adoption of a child. Although this much-needed change would require Congressional legislation, there are actions within the Department's purview which would bring our parental leave and pregnancy policies into the 21st century and improve employee retention. Your leadership on this issue could serve as a cornerstone of your legacy at State, positioning the Department to lead positive change within the federal government, promoting a culture that supports a modern and inclusive definition of family, and bringing our domestic policies in line with our global efforts to promote maternal and infant health.

We would welcome the opportunity to sit down with you, or your designate, and relevant policy offices, to further discuss these issues. The attached document outlines eight specific suggestions which in our view would offer benefits to all State employees, regardless of Service, gender, or sexual orientation. State employees' response to this letter has been enthusiastic and overwhelming, confirming once again that this is an issue that resonates with many of our colleagues. Thank you for considering our suggestions, and we look forward to working with you to advance your vision of the Department as a leading 21st century workplace.

Sincerely,



   

Anne Coleman-Honn Matthew K. Asada Robyn McCutcheon Julianne Paunescu
Balancing Act Co-Chair AFSA Vice President President, GLIFAA President, Executive Women @ State

Specific Suggestions

- 1) **Support efforts to pass the Federal Employees Paid Parental Leave Act (H.R. 517.)** This Act would provide for four additional weeks of paid administrative leave following the birth of a child and allow employees to substitute paid leave for leave without pay for up to twelve weeks following the birth or adoption of a child.
- 2) **Clarify that medical needs, not an arbitrary cap, determine sick leave use for recovery from childbirth (and other conditions).** Some supervisors mistakenly interpret OPM guidelines to mean that employees are limited to six weeks of sick leave for recovery from childbirth.
- 3) **Incorporate pregnancy and parental status discrimination into Equal Employment Opportunity training.** Many employees and managers are not aware that pregnancy and parental status are a protected class. Additionally, many employees and managers are unaware of employee's rights under the Family and Medical Leave Act.
- 4) **Exercise existing authority to create a voluntary leave bank, to provide paid leave for employees who have exhausted their own.** Several agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency and Department of Justice have created effective voluntary leave banks.
- 5) **Modernize and expand State's policy for travel and leave for medical evacuations to include travel and per diem for spouses.** The spouse often serves as an important healthcare advocate and provides support in the weeks leading up to and following the birth.
- 6) **Provide greater support for children gained through surrogacy or adoption.** The Department should consider how best to address the special challenges (legal, financial and administrative) facing families pursuing adoption or surrogacy, including reimbursement of related travel expenses for employees posted overseas. State should also provide greater flexibility in the use of sick leave in the weeks immediately following adoption or birth via surrogacy.
- 7) **Work with the insurance companies to offer optional Short Term disability for childbirth.** Such a program is already available to Department of Defense employees.
- 8) **Formalize short-term assignments to lessen burden of medical evacuation and staffing gaps.**
 - a) Formalize "TDY assignments" for employees on medevac to allow the employee to continue working.
 - b) Create a "Work-Life Rover" program to cover gaps in domestic and overseas assignments.