

Nov 04, 2016 by **Michael Edward Walsh**

Time to Rethink the CLO Position ^[1]

For over 30 years, the Community Liaison Office (CLO) Program has provided key family services support to Foreign Service Officers and their families abroad. The program is now present in over 200 embassies and consulates, including unaccompanied hardship posts such as Baghdad, Kabul, and Islamabad.

Within these missions, the CLO Program is overseen by Community Liaison Office Coordinators. The CLO Coordinator is somewhat unique in that the position is designated for “a U.S. citizen spouse ... of a direct-hire employee assigned to post.” This provides a valuable opportunity for spouses to find meaningful employment within the embassy.

The CLO Coordinator serves as a chief advocate for employees and family members within the mission. CLO Coordinators are also tasked with providing the mission with “effective programming, information, resources, and referrals” for on-post and off-post activities and services.

Unfortunately, it is hard to understand how CLO Coordinators can effectively liaise with the local community to provide “programming, information, resources, and referrals” about off-post activities and services required to be fluent in the



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This is a major problem that the State Department needs to address. The organization needs to acknowledge that there are two types of CLO Coordinators currently serving in our diplomatic missions abroad. One set can liaise with the local community because they speak

the local language and the other cannot.

For those that cannot, this obviously impacts the quality of family services provided to employees and their families at their post. But, it also undermines our public diplomacy objectives abroad.

Often times, the American diplomatic community's footprint weighs heavy on local communities precisely because a disproportionate number of our accompanying family members do not speak the local language. Having a CLO Coordinator that doesn't either only exacerbates this problem and makes it more difficult to integrate our missions with the local communities.

To address this problem, the State Department needs to prioritize language fluency for all CLO Coordinators.

One approach would be to recognize: 1) CLO Coordinators are critical to the operations of our diplomatic missions abroad; 2) CLO Coordinators must be fluent in the local language to successfully carry out their duties. This would enable Human Resources to limit their solicitations to those applicants who are already fluent in the host country language(s).

A less radical alternative would be to fill this gap with training. If the recruitment of CLO Coordinators could start long before applicants arrived at post, they could receive the foreign language training required for the job before they ever arrived on post. Assuming that their background investigation and Top Secret Security clearance adjudication was ongoing, it could even continue once the spouse arrived on post until they were able to pass a language fluency test.

If we are serious about fulfilling our diplomatic objectives abroad, we must prioritize minimizing the social impact of our embassies, consulates, and military bases on the local community. Clearly, this means that we need to refrain from activities that reinforce negative stereotypes and neo-colonialist discourses. This does not mean just devoting more resources to public diplomacy. We also need to invest more in the people who serve as one of the primary interfaces between our diplomatic community and their hosts.
