

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)
Services for Employees Exposed to High-Threat and High-Stress Environments
Report to Congress

USAID submits this report pursuant to section 7019(e) of Division K of the FY 2023 Omnibus Appropriations for State and Foreign Operations, which incorporates the Joint Explanatory Statement requirement that not later than 120 days after the date of enactment of the Act, the USAID Administrator shall update the report required under this heading in the explanatory statement accompanying division K of Public Law 117-103.

Introduction

USAID's Staff Care program continues to support a workplace where all employees feel valued; where their physical and mental well-being are bolstered; and where they can achieve a healthy balance between their work and life responsibilities. Given the intense nature of USAID's humanitarian and development assistance work around the world and the associated stressors of living and working in high-threat environments (HTEs), USAID has invested in Employee Assistance, Work-Life, Wellness, and Organizational Resilience programs under the umbrella of the Staff Care Center (SCC) in USAID's Office of Human Capital and Talent Management (HCTM).

USAID established the SCC in 2012 to provide a full array of support services to the entire USAID workforce, including contractors, and their eligible family members. Executive Orders, supportive legislation, and federal regulations that mandate and/or authorize the program's services led to the establishment of the SCC and its programs.

USAID's Staff Care Program

When it was established, SCC largely focused on employees and contractors who were deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, other Critical Priority Posts (CPCs), and HTEs. Today, SCC continues to provide a menu of services to these posts and others around the world. SCC's flagship Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is the backbone of its psychosocial support services. The EAP offers free and confidential clinical assessments, short-term counseling, consultations, and referral services for a wide range of work-life challenges, such as stress management, family issues, and more. All staff, regardless of staffing mechanism or place of assignment, and their family members are eligible for EAP services at no cost. When staff and/or dependents contact the EAP, they are assigned to a licensed mental health professional or counselor for in-person, telephonic, or virtual services. EAP counselors are located around the world and counseling services are available in more than 70 languages.

The EAP, however, is not designed to provide treatment for people who have been diagnosed with mental health or substance use disorders. Employees with a diagnosis of any mental health disorder, or employees exhibiting clinically significant signs of any mental health disorder are assisted by the EAP provider to obtain care utilizing their insurance or through other community

mental health services. At that time, the EAP provider can assist in a supportive role to ensure that a transition to appropriate mental health care has occurred. The EAP provider can continue to provide support related to the employees work role or other benefits provided by the Staff Care Center, including mindfulness practices or leadership consultations, for example. In addition to the EAP counselors who are provided through a specialized institutional contractor, SCC also offers EAP services through its U.S. direct hire (USDH) licensed clinical social workers. These social workers are assigned to Washington, D.C., and provide the full spectrum of EAP services, including case management for those in need of specialized or higher levels of services. This support is designed to ensure the highest level of readiness and function by helping Foreign Service (FS) employees navigate challenging assignments, personal problems, Exceptions Committee requests, medical clearances, and performance and conduct processes.

When the COVID pandemic forced most USAID staff to work remotely, SCC moved most of its group activities, as well as individual counseling and organizational resilience interventions, online. Counseling continued to be offered both in-person or virtually, based on the employee's preference. In FY 2022, however, as USAID began to once again support domestic and international temporary duty travel (TDY), SCC resumed deploying its teams around the world to deliver a full range of services.

In FY 2022, SCC completed 39 in-person and virtual Organizational Resilience engagements, reaching 2,539 participants. Organizational Resilience engagements help employees cope with professional and personal stressors and prepare for and adapt to change. Most engagements typically include team assessments, facilitated office and team retreats or virtual sessions, leadership consultations, and follow-up support over six to twelve months. These interventions focus on building individual resilience and creating stronger teams by providing coaching for leaders and supervisors to foster good communication and positive work interactions. Results from post-intervention surveys have shown improved team cohesion and effectiveness. During FY 2022, SCC clinicians conducted over 3,250 counseling sessions and SCC offered 106 workshops that were attended by over 6,000 participants, including workshops for over 1,200 employees in 32 USAID Missions. These workshops complement the EAP and help employees build knowledge, skills, and healthy habits for managing stress and improve their well-being. SCC also conducts wellness challenges to promote mental and physical well-being. In FY 2022, over 1,800 employees participated in individual and team-based wellness challenges.

Of note, all USAID staff members and dependents may request specialized screenings and evaluations. These services are not a mandatory part of USAID's standard processing between assignments.

Push for More Holistic, Institutionalized Resilience Programs

Resilience is the capacity to adapt successfully to risk and adversity, and the ability to bounce back and move forward from setbacks, high stress, crisis, and trauma. SCC continually works to create and roll out more comprehensive resilience support programs to the USAID workforce. Through the leadership of its director, Tarshia Freeman, SCC is leading an interagency working group with representatives from the Department of State and USAID that is reviewing how both

organizations can proactively prepare employees for living and working in high stress environments.

Known as the SCC's Strategic Resilience Working Group, the members continuously assess and support USAID and State Department staff operating in high stress environments, such as those currently based in Ukraine. The Working Group is reviewing best practices and is designing a full array of integrated resources to cultivate resilience, with a special focus on identifying training opportunities and other interventions that can be used in each stage of USAID's deployment cycle. The Working Group is also collaborating with HCTM's Center for Professional Development to identify all USAID resilience training content, standardize the language in these trainings, and create uniform goals to ensure that USAID is providing cohesive support to its staff, all of which will inform outreach strategies and future programming. Examples of current programming include psychological first aid and stress management techniques.

USAID and State Department Collaboration to Protect the Mental Health of All Staff

As described in previous reports, all USAID staff assigned to overseas posts have access to U.S. Embassy Health Units. In the case of mental health or substance abuse services, most Health Units are limited to providing general assessments, referrals, and basic medication management. A few Health Units in HTE posts have a State Department clinical social worker and/or psychiatrist that augments the Health Unit's services. When USAID staff need outpatient psychotherapy or psychiatric services for mental health or substance use disorders, the Health Unit identifies a health care provider in the country and facilitates service delivery. If necessary, the Health Unit can coordinate medical evacuation services for levels of care beyond outpatient services.

USAID and State Department staff working on staff care issues meet regularly to share training plans, calendars, and curricula to collaborate on client cases, particularly those that emerge from HTEs and other complex environments. In addition to the State Department's Employee Consultation Services (ECS) and Bureau for Medical Services (M/MED), SCC also coordinates closely with the Center of Excellence in Foreign Affairs Resilience (CEFAR), based at the Foreign Service Institute. CEFAR provides resilience training, education, and support for U.S. Government Foreign Affairs agencies. Currently, USAID U.S. direct hire employees who have served for more than 90 days in specific high-stress or HTE posts are required to participate in the *High Stress Assignment Outbrief* course provided by CEFAR. USAID personnel serving in other high-stress posts are also encouraged to take the course. This course gives employees the opportunity to understand the challenges of returning, reintegrating with family and friends, and moving on to other assignments. It also provides resources and available support to address a wide spectrum of needs, including mental health services, following a challenging assignment.