

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 16, 2018

The Honorable Michael Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

We are disappointed to see yet another media report chronicling the Department of State's anemic response to the concerns of thousands of Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) who have children with disabilities. Since we first learned about these concerns from media reports nearly a year ago, the State Department has repeatedly failed to provide satisfactory answers to our requests for information.

The allegations laid out in reports over the past year are stunning.

Last October, we learned that the State Department's Medical Bureau (MED) had suddenly begun barring some children of FSOs from going abroad, even when they had previously been allowed to, and that the Department had withdrawn funding for services overseas that children with disabilities are entitled to in the United States. These changes reportedly cost one foreign service family more than \$60,000 because they had to leave their 13-year-old child at a therapeutic boarding school in the United States when the diplomat went abroad to fulfil their assignment and serve their country.¹

This April, we learned that MED revoked the medical clearance of one FSO's daughter – despite the recommendations of her doctors – after she was medically evacuated to the United States, then denied multiple appeal requests and refused to meet with the daughter throughout the entire ordeal, stranding her and her mother 6,000 miles from their family. We understand one MED employee was reportedly reprimanded for being “divisive” after he sent an email to his colleagues that stated federal disability law, and that several FSOs were considering leaving the Department because of their frustrations with MED.²

¹ Jackie Spinner, “State Department Support for Diplomats with Children with Disabilities is Contracting,” *The Washington Post*, October 29, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/state-department-support-for-diplomats-with-children-with-disabilities-is-contracting/2017/10/29/86e2fff6-b4d4-11e7-be94-fabb0f1e9ffb_story.html (accessed August 15, 2018).

² Robbie Gramer, “U.S. Diplomats Stuck in Medical Limbo,” *Foreign Policy*, April 02, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/02/state-department-children-special-needs-mental-health-issues-bureaucratic-battle-diplomacy/> (accessed August 15, 2018).

As the MED Bureau falls under the Undersecretary of State for Management, Senator Menendez raised this issue last month with the nominee for the position, Brian Bulatao, your West Point classmate and CIA Chief Operating Officer. His response, in which he said he was committed to “examining how the Special Needs Education Allowance is applied” and “implementing our programs consistent with applicable law,” was underwhelming.³

And now this week, we read that MED is forcing FSOs to cut short their tours by revoking medical clearances for their children. Other FSOs are reportedly being forced to take out loans to repay benefits MED granted their children with disabilities, but has now rescinded and demanded back payment. These actions effectively discriminate against families who have children with disabilities. The most disturbing part of this report, however, is that “U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has been ignoring their pleas for help.”⁴

We know that not all of these problems have occurred during your tenure, and, in some cases, predate this administration.

But you are responsible now.


However, we understand that no one in the Department has even acknowledged receipt of the letter that FSO families sent you three months ago. We request that you respond as soon as possible.

In addition, we request your commitment to provide us, within the next 30 days, a detailed explanation of how the Department plans to address the concerns of these FSOs and their families. These men and women have dedicated their careers in service to our country, and they face great challenges and undertake enormous sacrifices doing so. By effectively separating families who have children with disabilities, or placing undue financial strain on those families, the Department is only adding to the burden of these brave public servants. That is not acceptable, and it must not continue.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and we look forward to hearing how the Department plans to address this disservice to our FSOs and their children.

Sincerely,


Robert Menendez
United States Senator


Patty Murray
United States Senator

³ Questions for the Record Submitted to Brian Bulatao, Nominee to be Under Secretary of State for Management by Senator Robert Menendez #36. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, July 18, 2018.

⁴ Robbie Gramer, “Pompeo Ignores Plea from Diplomat with Children with Special Needs,” *Foreign Policy*, August 14, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/14/exclusive-pompeo-ignores-plea-from-diplomats-with-children-with-special-needs-disabilities-mental-health-issues-diplomacy-state-department-medical-bureau/> (accessed August 15, 2018).