

170th SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Washington, D.C., USA (hybrid session), 20-24 June 2022

Provisional Agenda Item 6.3

CE170/28
25 May 2022
Original: English

STATEMENT BY THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE PAHO/WHO STAFF ASSOCIATION

1. The PAHO/WHO Staff Association would like to thank the Members of the Executive Committee for their interest in matters related to current staff working conditions in accordance with the provisions of the international civil service. On behalf of the staff, we reiterate our commitment to the mandates of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau (PASB). The working relations between the Association and the Executive Management are characterized by cooperation and mutual respect.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic is not fully under control yet and most of the countries in the Region of the Americas are working to restore the health of their populations, provide vaccines, manage their financial recovery, and address challenges to reduce the historical inequality gaps that characterize our Region, making a positive difference in people's lives. The staff and personnel of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) have been working shoulder to shoulder with national health authorities, under different contractual arrangements and for prolonged hours, in support of the response to the public health emergency. Increased stress levels have been reported by some personnel in all duty stations.
3. As the pandemic is still ongoing and countries are still facing challenges and threats at the global, regional, and national levels, staff members of PASB and, in particular, of the Staff Association wish to convey our commitment and solidarity to Member States and, especially, to the health workers and population of this hemisphere.

Staff Health and Well-Being

4. All personnel and staff have demonstrated their commitment to the mandates and objectives of PAHO and have adapted to new work arrangements. We welcome the efforts to prioritize and give visibility to mental health as an integral part of the staff's well-being. We are committed to supporting structural efforts related to preventative measures and to strengthening access to services promoting mental, psychological, and emotional well-being, especially in duty stations where those services are not readily available. There is no health without mental health, and we must walk the talk.
 5. It is important to mention the "Lessons Learned from the PASB's Teleworking Experience" (OIA report no. 03/21). We believe that this report provides evidence in support of both positive and negative aspects of this modality of work. The report indicates
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that telework resulted in cost savings (reducing travel expenditure, for instance), did not adversely affect productivity, and did not hinder remote supervision of personnel. In addition to these findings, we recognize that telework provided flexibility with regards to working hours and administrative matters. At the same time, the report notes that: *a)* personnel sometimes felt compelled to work or respond to messages outside regular work hours (including during lunch break), which blurred the distinction between work and private life and induced experiences of “burnout”; *b)* the scheduling of back-to-back meetings was sometimes excessively burdensome; and *c)* PASB might have provided a greater degree of support to those afflicted by isolation and anxiety.

6. The evidence also shows that there has been no “back to normal,” considering as normal what was the case before the pandemic. It is clear that the workforce is facing dramatic changes, such as: *a)* the change in dynamics in families; *b)* the advantages of virtualization for certain processes, such as consultation, training, learning, systematization, and enabling functions in general; and *c)* new trends in the use of resources for face-to-face meetings, missions, and travel in general, which must consider public health measures and often require extra funding in cases where participants or staff become sick with COVID-19. Constant monitoring is required.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

7. The PAHO/WHO Staff Association welcome the recent commitment by the World Health Organization (WHO) to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), with the launch of the one-year project “Listen, Learn & Act Together,” in June 2021, as well as the Human Resources Agenda and Action Plan for DEI for the WHO Workforce, published in May 2022. We support this initiative and have our own representative collaborating with it. We encourage everyone, especially those in leadership positions, to actively work on and give visibility to the initiative on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

8. The Ethics Office (ETH) of PAHO, appointed by the Director’s Office as focal point for this important WHO initiative, must make more systematic efforts to develop DEI activities that are meaningful, bold, practical, and sustainable across PAHO. These efforts should include adapting parts of the initiative into training and awareness campaigns. WHO has assigned resources for this initiative, and we would like to see concrete products and services in this area.

Zero-Tolerance Culture on Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment

9. The Staff Association strongly condemns all forms of harassment, sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (SEAH), and gender-based violence, and we stress that, when experienced in the workplace, they constitute a human rights violation and a serious attack against the person.

10. We welcome the strong commitment and all efforts by the Director of PASB to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse and to investigate allegations of harassment and sexual harassment. WHO has assigned resources to activities involving the prevention of SEAH, which will fund at least two professional positions in the Region of the Americas.

The Staff Association should participate in the selection process. ETH was appointed by the Director of PASB as focal point for this important initiative.

11. We welcome the PAHO Policy on Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. However, we stress that more awareness and dialogue are needed, especially considering the diverse cultural and sociodemographic factors that characterize our work environment. Further safe spaces can be attained by creating additional informal structures to help break the silence when addressing issues related to sexual harassment, as victims may not always feel comfortable using existing, formal channels. In this respect, we would welcome an active bystander campaign.

Internal Justice System

12. We are involved in the discussions related to the PAHO internal justice system, in the framework of the Integrity and Conflict Management System (ICMS). An internal justice system can only work efficiently if it is trusted by staff. A robust internal justice system is one that is transparent, brings swift resolutions to allegations, and offers protection for victims.

13. The ICMS continues the review and update of the Investigation Protocol to guarantee due process and timely management of cases under investigation and response to reports or complaints received by the Investigation Officer.

14. The PAHO Ethics and Climate Survey was launched in September 2021 using an independent online service (NAVEX Global). A total of 1,163 individuals responded to the survey. The results were recently presented to the Executive Management and will be shared and discussed with all staff in a town hall meeting, soon.

15. We are pleased with the decision to revisit the post description and scope of activities for the Ombudsman position. The position is part of the informal process for conflict resolution, and we will collaborate in the analysis, revision, recruitment, and selection for this position.

16. With regards to the PAHO Board of Appeal (BOA), it is important to mention that the assignment of the BOA Secretariat role is still pending. The role is usually assumed by a General Service staff member on a voluntary basis. Given the difficulty in finding volunteers, the Staff Association is proposing alternatives.

17. The Staff Association is committed to continuing the constructive dialogue with management to uphold the rights of staff members and to achieve the Organization's mission successfully. We are grateful for its support and encouragement.

Action by the Executive Committee

18. The Staff Association submits this report to the Executive Committee for its comments and requests that it promote these proposals and recommendations.

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