

# NAFSA—SEVP Liaison Call to Discuss the New Field Representatives Unit

February 8, 2012

*These notes were taken by NAFSA staff and members during the liaison call. They reflect information provided by government officials in an informal setting. They are best used as general information concerning current agency processes and policies, and it is important to recognize that agency processes and policies are subject to change. NAFSA notes and liaison summaries do not constitute legal advice.*

**Participants:** Steve Acton, Chief of the SEVP Field Representatives Unit, NAFSA staff, members of the International Student and Scholar Regulatory Practice Committee (ISS-RP), and members of ISS-RP's Student Subcommittee.

## **Questions Submitted in Advance**

### **1. Please provide an overview of the Field Representatives Unit (FRU)**

See specific areas of discussion below (overview information is attached to each related question).

### **2. Can you describe the structure/organization of the FRU and its place within SEVP?**

SEVP is undergoing some internal realignment, just as is the Homeland Security Directorate. FRU will be one of six units within SEVP. The six units will look somewhat similar to the current branches, which are based on SEVP's key functions.

FRU will have three regions (east, central, and west), and each region will have a regional manager and 20 Field Representatives (FRs). The distribution of the FRs throughout the country is based on a careful analysis of a number of factors, such as the distribution of certified schools and their student populations. FRs will be located throughout the three regions, will telecommute to SEVP headquarters regularly, and spend extensive time visiting schools and DSOs in their geographic areas of responsibility. Some FRs, such as those in California, might have a relatively small geographic area to cover (due to the concentration of institutions and students), while others in less concentrated areas might cover a whole state or more than one state.

The FRU will also include a knowledge analyst who will help ensure that FRs are well-informed and up-to-date. The knowledge analyst will be FRU's internal point of contact with the rest of SEVP, to ensure that the knowledge analyst and the FRs keep abreast of news and initiatives. DSOs will have an opportunity to provide feedback (via a feedback form) to SEVP after each meeting with a FR. FRU will also employ a fleet manager to manage the vehicle fleet.

Director Steve Acton brings to FRU industry experience in creating and managing training programs for organizations with a national presence and regional representatives. He worked for SEVP as a contractor for more than four years before becoming Director of FRU.

### **3. Can you provide an update on hiring?**

#### **--Have the three regional managers been hired yet?**

These positions were announced in January 2012, and the hiring process is underway.

#### **--Have you begun hiring the initial group of representatives?**

Hiring should begin in April 2012 and probably take several months. The plan is to hire 15 FRs per calendar quarter, for four quarters, so that all 60 FRs will have been hired in a year and deployed by some time around mid-2013. From each cadre of 15 FRs, five FRs will be assigned to each of the three regions.

#### **--Where/how will you advertise the openings? (We'd like to help publicize)**

The plan is to issue a broadcast message to inform DSOs of the openings. The openings will be advertised at [www.usajobs.com](http://www.usajobs.com).

### **4. Can you provide more details about the functions of the Field Representatives mentioned in the recent SEVP Spotlight:**

FRs will serve, in a sense, as an extension of SEVP headquarters. The vision is that they are "there to help," providing "on the ground assistance" to DSOs. Their goal is customer service. Short of finding criminal activity, fraud, or severe negligence, which an FR would report to SEVP, enforcement activity will not be the FRs' role. Enforcement functions will be carried out by other SEVP and DHS units.

#### **• Conduct training for DSOs (and aid in the implementation of SEVIS II by ensuring training of P/DSOs prior to the SEVIS II transition period)**

FRs will provide training for DSOs as requested/as needed. They will also provide SEVIS training to officials from other agencies who use SEVIS (such as USCIS or CBP). FRs will not communicate with students, and will refer student's questions to the DSO or to the SEVP Response Center, as appropriate.

#### **--Do you envision SEVIS training, legal/regulatory training, SEVP policy training, etc.?**

Yes. All of these. The training will be ongoing but, of course, we expect an increase in demand/need for training prior to the deployment of SEVIS II. FRs will likely offer some group training sessions on SEVIS II before it is deployed.

#### **--What materials (including policy guidance) would the Field representatives use to conduct the training?**

FRU intends to create a robust "knowledge base" for use by the FRs. It will grow continually with questions asked and answers provided. The plan is for FRs to have a laptop and other mobile device for accessing the knowledge base. Use of technology

will be important for the FRU, and every attempt made for the FRs to have “paperless offices.”

- **Review nonimmigrant student files**

SEVP sees this as a means to identify problems and potential problems and address them before they become serious. Again, short of a finding of criminal or fraudulent activity or negligence, enforcement actions are not intended to result from the file reviews. They are simply a means for SEVP to identify training needed and help DSOs avoid problems. If corrective actions are necessary, FRs will work with DSOs to fix them. Remember, the key focus of FRU is customer service.

- Can you explain when this might occur and how?**

This is still being discussed and determined at SEVP, but it's likely that every FR visit to a DSO will involve file review. As far as reporting fraud, negligence, etc., goes, an SEVP business process has not yet been fully developed, but the report would probably go through the section chief (Steve Acton) and then to the appropriate unit within SEVP.

- **Answer questions**

- What materials (including policy guidance) would the Field representatives use to answer DSO questions?**

The obvious ones, like laws and regulations, but also the “knowledge base,” which will continue to expand and add new information. It is expected that FRs should be able to answer about 90% of DSO questions in “real time,” and they will know who to contact for answers to the other questions.

- Would you envision them answering questions about legal and regulatory issues in addition to SEVIS-related questions?**

Yes. Not just technical questions, but also regulatory and policy questions. The goal is to have FRs available to answer DSOs' questions as they arise and schedule meetings with DSOs as requested. The FRs' schedules will be known to FRU, but they will be flexible enough to allow this kind of interaction with DSOs.

- **Conduct site visits**

- Does “site visits” refer to those mentioned in the regulations, such as in the certification process, or other?**

Yes. Some of the site visits currently conducted by SEVP contractors will, in the future, be conducted by FRs. But regular visits to review files, offer training and information, and answer DSO questions will be provided, too. The plan is for FRs to meet with PDSO/DSO from each certified institution once each year if the institution has no active

students, and twice a year if the institution has active students. The goal is to have regular meetings. FRs will meet with DSOs, not students.

--If not the kind specified in the regulations, what would be the purpose, would they be announced in advance?

The goal is to provide customer service, assistance, and information. These visits or meetings are not intended to be surprise visits and will be arranged in advance.

- **Attend conferences/meetings**

**--Do you envision the Field Representatives serving as presenters for SEVP at NAFSA regional conferences and the annual conference?**

This has not been settled, but it is more likely that SEVP section chiefs/unit directors will continue to present at NAFSA conferences, as they do now. The goal is not for FRs to replace headquarters teams in this endeavor. Rather, the FRs should be in attendance at conferences, and should be networking and answering questions.

**5. The SEVP Spotlight also mentions that “after completing an intensive training program, these field representatives will deploy in 2012 and 2013.” Are you in a position now to provide additional information about the training that the Field representatives will undertake?**

The FRs will complete an eight-week training program including, among other things, extensive training in the laws and regulations, briefings from other agencies (USCIS, CBP, FBI, TSA, DMVs, etc.), training on how to conduct a meeting, shadowing SEVP headquarters staff to gain a thorough understanding of SEVP operations. The FRs will return to SEVP headquarters twice a year for additional training, with perhaps additional training at the regional level.

### **Questions Raised During the Call**

**6. If FRs are easy to contact, I can imagine that some DSOs might ask them for help navigating SEVP or asking questions that are answered elsewhere.**

The FRs' job is to answer questions and train. They can refer DSOs to the SEVP Response Center for answers to some questions.

**7. There's a fine line between compliance and customer service. What is the difference between identifying help/training needed and a compliance issue?**

Granted, this is the hardest question to answer. As I mentioned earlier, the FRs are not enforcement agents. Their mission is much more customer-service-oriented, training-oriented, and information-oriented. We realize that, if the program is to be effective, DSOs must trust FRs. Over the next few

months we'll be working to delineate this "fine line" and ensure that serious compliance problems encountered by FRs can be addressed while reinforcing their customer-service mission.

**8. Are you planning to hire DSOs? What kinds of qualifications will you seek in applicants for FR positions?**

It wouldn't be surprising if some current SEVP staff applied, and certainly SEVP will seek to hire experienced DSOs. These seem the two most likely pools of applicants, and it wouldn't be surprising if maybe 15% or so could come from within SEVP, and the remaining 85% from the DSO population. That's just rough speculation about who might apply and have the qualifications. It is very unlikely that "someone off the street" would have the necessary background. We will not be hiring "warm bodies." We are looking for specific kinds of expertise.

**9. Will the public access to the "knowledge base"? If so, both during development and after?**

Yes. The public will have access. I would envision a link on SEVP site and Study in the States site, for example.

**10. So, we would have opportunities for dialog about the "knowledge base" (i.e. guidance about "instructional sites")?**

Yes

**11. Level of expertise? Will FRs know M, F-3, J issues? Other agencies? What cross-communication?**

Yes. They should be experts when they are deployed. And information about these will be in the "knowledge base." Definitely part of training. FRs will probably not address J issues since DOS governs them.