

Report of the AFSM Twenty-Seventh General Meeting

Washington, DC, 8 December 2016

The twenty-seventh General Meeting of the Association was held at PAHO Headquarters on Thursday, 8 December 2016. The event once again brought together colleagues and friends to enjoy a few hours in the landmark building on 23rd Street, common ground shared for many years.

The annual encounter was attended by 50 former staff and invited guests from the Administration, the PAHO Staff Association, the Credit Union and Global Health International Advisors. The keynote speaker, Dr. Isabella Danel, Deputy Director, represented the Director, Carissa Etienne, who was out of the country.

The agenda, as in previous years, provided updates on health insurance and pension, programs that directly affect all members and that are undergoing significant changes as they implement new information and management systems. AFSM, as reported below, has also undergone visible changes as the Association adapts to the digital world.

Opening of the meeting

Welcome by the President: Germán Perdomo welcomed the participants to the General Meeting which, as required by the Bylaws, is held annually in the District of Columbia. He recognized the presence of the Deputy Director and expressed his appreciation to the Administration for providing the venue for the annual meeting.

Designation of Chairperson: Antonio Hernandez was once more designated as Chairperson, a responsibility he has ably carried out on three previous occasions.

Presentation by Dr. Isabella Danel, Deputy Director: Dr. Danel began her presentation by expressing her appreciation for the Association's work done on behalf of former staff. She recognized their valuable contribution to the Organization as it continues to build on the work done by previous staff. The year 2016 was a challenging time, as she highlighted events that were also extensively covered in the general media: the Zika epidemic which required strong coordinated regional action that involved the whole house and multiple country missions; the response to Hurricane Mathew in the Caribbean and the subsequent cholera epidemic; and the strong earthquake in Ecuador. There were also major achievements: The Certification of the elimination of measles in the Americas, which joins polio and trachoma as scourges of the past; the ongoing health reform process in the Americas toward the goal of Universal Health Coverage; the 50th Anniversary of PALTEX and a new plan of action for malaria elimination.

Business Meeting

The Chairperson requested a moment of silence in memory of colleagues who passed away during the year. He commented that the number of 21 is fewer than that of last year, but the pain remains for loved ones and friends. The silence allowed colleagues to remember happier moments and to reflect on the unstoppable passage of time.

Adoption of Agenda: Germán informed the participants that the signing of an AFSM/GHIA Memorandum of Understanding was added to the agenda. The agenda was approved as modified.

Approval of Minutes of the 26th General Meeting (2015): The minutes, which had previously been e-mailed to the membership, were approved as presented.

Report of the President: Germán focused on five topics:

Newsletter – Now in electronic format and with a new design, it is produced with zero cost (except for the hours of the tech-savvy president and dedicated Board members). The length of articles has been decreased to allow for more articles and more editions. The content is expanded to include contributions from members on various topics, pictures, etc.

Communications - AFSM has a corporate e-mail address, a Facebook page and a website. The website has not been maintained, is obsolete in content and has few visitors. Facebook, which allows for sharing information, pictures, etc., has been more successful growing from 18 to 112 members. Documents and news are being sent via Germán's personal e-mail since AFSM's e-mail address (afsmpaho@gmail.com) is bereft of active management. The number of bounced e-mails have decreased from 25% to under 2% thanks to a concerted effort to update the information available in our database. Germán called for volunteers to maintain the webpage and to manage the corporate e-mail.

Voting procedures – A revised manual, approved by the Board, has been sent to all members and the procedures will become effective in January 2017. They will allow for greater participation of members and different options for voting. The Board will search for the best secure and reliable software for these purposes.

Membership- There are close to 630 members, a 5% increase in the last year. There are about 1,000 former staff who are not members. Germán urged participants to become AFSM ambassadors and encourage friends and acquaintances to join the Association.

Participation – Germán noted that AFSM/Geneva as well as other sister organizations are suffering from lack of candidates. He urged those present to become active and contribute to AFSM as "We all are the Association."

Carol Collado, AFSM Vice President, called the attention of the participants to the intensive and productive work of Germán, who has moved AFSM forward into the new century. In turn, she was recognized for her dedication in explaining and defending the changing health insurance and

pension benefits. Well-earned rounds of grateful applause resounded in the room for both leaders.

Report of the Treasurer and Auditor's Report: Sylvia Schultz presented the *Income and Expenditure Report* and the *Balance Sheet* as of 30 September 2016, copies of which were made available at the meeting. The reports documented a positive balance of \$47,467; major expenditures were the 2015 General Meeting, the Summer Luncheon and the printing of the *Newsletter*. The *Independent Auditors Report* was also distributed at the meeting. Germán has discussed with the Director the continuation of support from PAHO as provided by previous Administrations. Such funding would be recognition of the special relationship and common goals of both organizations.

Election of Board Members: The President noted that the board has nine members elected to three-year terms. Three current members (Enrique Fefer, Hernan Rosenberg and Sylvia Schultz) are completing their terms of office and have agreed to be available for re-election. There were no other candidates and the three were re-elected by acclamation (see above *Participation*).

Signing Memorandum of Understanding (MOU): The MOU between AFSM and Global Health International Advisors (GHIA) was signed by the presidents, Germán Perdomo and Habib Latiri, respectively. The signing was followed by Habib Latiri explaining the origins and purpose of GHIA which was established four years ago by a group of former PAHO professionals and now counts over 90 members in the USA and in country chapters. GHIA's mission is to improve public health through advocacy, technical advice and mobilization of resources. The Chairperson requested Habib Latiri to contribute an article to the *Newsletter* to explain GHIA's mission and activities to a broader audience of AFSM members. GHIA and AFSM representatives will meet to identify and develop joint activities.

Report on Staff Health Insurance: Chris Saenz, Staff Benefits Officer, reported that in January 2016, after three years of design and implementation, the IT management system became operational, allowing staff to have more time to address requests for information and other assistance. WHO has a new Web portal intended to facilitate the submission and processing of claims. It will be rolled-out on a regional basis, with PAHO/AMRO last in line.

The WHO Global Oversight Committee (GOC) met in November to review and make recommendations regarding insurance rules, management and finances. PAHO has a liability of \$280 million to comply with the International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS), which requires full funding of future retirees. PAHO has pooled its money (\$460 million) with the WHO fund, which will allow for greater investment flexibility (up to 25% in stocks). WHO expects to be fully funded by 2041.

As is required every five years, the Organization is preparing a Request for Proposals (RFP) to select a company to manage the insurance program, which may result in change of the present provider. The decision is expected by mid-2017.

As reported previously, PAHO is the only region to retain a Surveillance Committee (now known as a sub-committee of the Global Surveillance Committee), a recognition of its capability in managing claims.

Ms. Pilar Vidal, president of the PAHO Staff Association, provided additional information on GOC–related matters. She highlighted progress in various areas, such as recognition of SHI in health facilities in all duty stations and locations where retirees reside; 24/7 multilingual support; claim processing in under 15 days; electronic submission of claims; and regular information and updates. However, she also expressed concern regarding proposed cost savings measures in the USA. These would limit reimbursement of expenses to 70% when using out of network services and would exclude out-of-pocket expenses in the calculation of catastrophic coverage. The Staff Association considers these measures to be punitive and discriminatory for USA staff.

Though documented by the Staff Association (as well as by AFSM) to be an effective cost-containment measure, the GOC did not endorse making Medicare Part B enrollment mandatory, reimbursing the cost. Instead, it recommended encouraging voluntary enrollment with no reimbursement, a disappointing position.

Ms. Vidal ended her intervention by urging AFSM to keep working together with the Staff Association, particularly in matters relating to health insurance.

News about UNJSPF: Germán reminded the participants that all beneficiaries have been given a new Unique Identification (UID) number for the new Integrated Pension Administration System (IPAS). He stressed the importance of knowing the UID and the need to register in the Fund's webpage. The Fund's new Member's Self-Service (MSS) provides access to pension account information, including receipt of the Certificate of Entitlement (CE), which may soon be available only digitally. He recommended that members visit the site regularly for news and updates. Germán urged all retirees to ensure that one or more family members be familiar with procedures to claim survivor benefits. Carol cautioned that some changes in beneficiary status must be processed through forms with signatures rather than on-line. Neglecting proper procedures as detailed in the website will result in delays and complications.

Report on International Reunion in Dominican Republic (18-20 October): Juan Manuel Sotelo, Secretary for the meeting, provided a comprehensive review of the event which brought together 49 participants (39 AFSM members). The PWR, Dr. Alma Fabiola Morales, and, via video, Dr. Carissa Ettiene addressed the group. Updates were provided on health insurance, pensions as well as new Credit Union services. The follow-up discussions emphasized the importance of being knowledgeable of the rules and procedures in order to avoid interruptions and complications in receiving acquired benefits, subjects particularly relevant for surviving spouses. The Colombian and Bolivian chapters presented their reports, Juan Manuel Sotelo remarking on the well-developed organization and activities of the Colombian affiliate. Germán led a wide-ranging conversation ranging from membership recruitment, to promotion of country chapters, communication channels, and AFSM's financial status. The latter subject led to a spontaneous

round of voluntary contributions to the Association. This gesture reflected the atmosphere of the Reunion: one of friendship, communication and common goals.

Florida and Costa Rica were suggested as potential venues for the 2018 International Reunion, a selection that remains open to further input.

An excellent article by Juan Manuel Sotelo on the Punta Cana Reunion appeared in the November edition of the *Newsletter*.

Credit Union (CU) Presentation: Miguel Boluda, CEO, mentioned the CU's strong relationship with the Association, as exemplified by their presence in and contribution to the International Reunion in Punta Cana and the use of their new meeting room as the venue for the AFSM Board's monthly meetings. The CU has also provided bridge loans to new retirees facing delayed pension payments. The CU is in a solid financial condition with over \$212 million in assets. The considerable 14% increase in loans was due in great part to a greater number of mortgage loans, a result of the CU decision in mid-2015 to become a loan originator, rather than using a third party for this purpose. Eighty per cent of mortgage loans are to non-US citizens, a distribution that is considered a higher risk than US-based loans. This has required a larger set-aside of funds (18%, three times the normal amount). Bottom-line, the CU is well prepared for any unexpected financial crisis. Miguel promoted the new no-fee credit card which provides rewards as points that may be used for hotels, flights, etc. In response to questions regarding fees for use of the credit cards outside the USA, Miguel said that there is a 1% charge. Debit cards have no fees; the cost absorbed by the CU at an annual cost of \$130,000. He urged all CU members to designate a beneficiary; otherwise funds unclaimed for three years would go to the local government.

Habib Latiri recalled that 40 years ago the Credit Union was a small operation in a non-descript space in the building and congratulated the management on its growth over the decades. However, Miguel Boluda noted that continued growth cannot be taken for granted given the challenges facing credit unions: 30 years ago, there were 15 thousand, only 6 thousand remain today. He asked that those present encourage family members and former staff to open accounts in the CU to ensure its future growth. On a more cheerful note, he announced that a year-end bonus will be credited to member accounts. Miguel then called upon Patricia Ilijic, Executive Vice President, to hand out the generous door prizes gifted by the CU. The Chairperson closed the session by gratefully recognizing the many ways the CU supports the Association, a sentiment fully endorsed by the ten lucky winners of the raffle.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 12:30. The President thanked all for their presence and invited them to enjoy a light lunch and a glass of wine in the Delegates Lounge. It was a fine way to end an informative morning and another opportunity to chat with colleagues and friends before each went their own way with warm thoughts of the "good old days" as they faced the approaching winter weather.