

Techno Tips

AFSM – Thirty Years of Communicating with Its Members

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In 1990, a group of visionaries considered it necessary to create an organization that would help retirees maintain a link with PAHO/WHO and above all establish ties of companionship, fraternity, support, and camaraderie among fellow retirees.

Some of the challenges, at that time, were to motivate retirees to join this organization, keep a registry of its members and establish a mechanism to keep everyone informed of activities and fundamental issues such as health insurance, taxes, pension and well-being of all retirees and their families, regardless of their geographical location.

With the support of Carlyle Guerra de Macedo, Director of PAHO/WHO, the first meeting of the Association was held on 15 June 1990 and 50 people attended. To inform others about this event and the Association's future plans, in September 1990 the Pilot Edition of the "Newsletter of the Association of Former PAHO/WHO Staff Members" was published. From then on, it became the official means of communication for the nascent Association, which was officially established in a General Assembly, on 8 November 1990.

To maintain the registry of members and spouses, their geographic location and contact information, Hans Bruch, making use of technological advances in the field of computing and information, prioritized the development of a database and a computer program to collect and update member information. Anecdotally this first program was written in German by Hans's brothers. In 1991, and until today, Hortensia Saginor was in charge of updating and maintaining the information of the members and their spouses or representatives, and she established a system to update the information in accordance with the changes caused by deaths, mobility and the joining of new members.

To this day, the information on deaths and new members of the Association is made continuously through the "AFSM Newsletter". It was also necessary to facilitate communication among the members and for this purpose a directory with the members' physical and e-mail addresses began to be published in printed form. Directory distribution was by somewhat limited and done by mail. As of the year 2000, improvements were made and more information was included in the directory, which continued to be published in print until 2015. The challenge that AFSM continues to have to date is to monitor changes in the contact information of the members, such as their physical locations, postal addresses, email addresses, faxes and telephone numbers. Although the effort is great, the results are not as expected. As of the date of this article, there are more than 1,000 retirees, of which 661 are members of the Association, including spouses and relatives. Of these, 589 have registered an electronic address and of them, only 536 are in active communication with the Association. For AFSM it continues to be a challenge to maintain communication with members who only have a geographic address, since most do not respond to communications by

postal mail, and in several cases the correspondence is returned because it does not coincide with the residence of the recipient.

Starting in 2013, in order to streamline and expand communication with members and provide immediate information, AFSM began a transition from communication in print and by mail to an electronic communication environment. Under the leadership of Cristina Torres Parodi, the Association's website <https://www.afsmpaho.com/> and the email AFSMPAHO@Gmail.com were established. The Association's website or web page, designed in a friendly way to facilitate access to information, is bilingual and the vast majority is published simultaneously in English and Spanish, following the tradition of the Association's newsletter. Part of the information that was accessible on the website was the directory of the members of the Association, but for technical reasons, security, privacy and protection of the members' information in open virtual environments, the directory was withdrawn. At the time of this publication, mechanisms are still being studied as to how to best make this information accessible exclusively to members,.

Because information such as changes to health insurance and the pension system is of great importance to members, efforts continue to keep the information on our website up-to-date, but use by members has been very low. No more than 400 visits per year to the portal were registered, and inquiries to the AFSM email address were almost non-existent. Instead, specific inquiries were made by telephone.

Aware of the difficulties in the process of transitioning from printed to electronic communication in virtual environments, along with the limitations of some members adapting to the use of new technologies as well as the digital division between generations, the AFSM Board of Directors gave priority to closing the technological gap. To this end, starting in 2015, the Communications Committee, coordinated by the author of this article, took charge of designing and establishing a communication and information strategy to facilitate access and information flow among, from, and to members, making use of available resources. The information on the website was updated and improved, permanently incorporating updates on the topics of health insurance, pension, and other topics of interest. Through mass email messages (Blast messages), all members are informed of the availability of this information and are invited to visit the website directly. This strategy has made it possible to increase visits to the portal to a number close to 4,000 visits per year. This has been especially important during this year of COVID-19, which has increased the use of virtual communications. Starting in November, our colleague Stanislaw "Stan" Orzeszyna has volunteered to be the webmaster of the Association's website, thus strengthening the Communications Committee.

The mass e-mailing system has improved the flow of communication with members and with the Board of Directors, because relevant information is sent in real time to members and queries are responded to immediately. However, we are aware that there is a lot of work ahead, especially to locate members who are outside the circle of electronic communication or who have limitations and difficulties in the use of technology. In this regard, we have written and published articles in AFSM newsletters to help members improve their communication mechanisms and we are currently concentrating on moving the entire AFSM communication and activity system to a

virtual PAHO platform (Share Point) that will help to improve communication safely, while integrating the different programs that make up the AFSM communication system.