

## **UAA Makes New Inroads Across Peninsula Florida**

**by Miles Toder, January 27, 2023**

Florida is home to well over 135 USAID retired development professionals who served in the capacity of civil servants, foreign service officers, personal service contractors, and foreign service nationals. And these are just those who joined UAA, the Foreign Service Retirement Association (FSRA) and/or maintained membership in AFSA after they left government service. There are many more who participate in USGLC, World Affairs Council, and other programs featuring foreign affairs discussions organized by state universities and technical colleges and are not members of our federal level foreign affairs agency's retirement associations.

In speaking to my colleagues across the state, many of us settled here after retirement to enjoy the sub-tropical climate, pursue outdoor activities, and live in a state where costs of living, government and public services were attractive to people at our stage of life. A lot has changed in Florida as its population growth accelerated with the flight of the baby boom generation south. This of course has happened in the context of dramatic difficulties and shifts across the country and around the globe for that matter.

Sensing that the time is right to reach out, connect and find ways to share concerns and ideas together, UAA provided encouragement and resources to see if Florida might become a test bed for its first regional chapter. On the margins of FSRAs Annual General Meeting on January 27<sup>th</sup> in Sarasota Florida, UAA organized a meeting with our Florida based development professional friends and colleagues of which 30 registered and a strong turnout of a dozen participated in person and another 15 or so joined virtually.

UAA has discussed for several years the large and growing number of USAID alumni residing beyond the Washington Beltway in America's all-important heartland. The feeling has been that the future of the organization achieving its goals concerning global development with continued US leadership and support from the American people requires a critical mass of proactively engaged retirees distributed across the country, familiar with local conditions, in some way connected with our foreign affairs agencies and working in partnership with likeminded organizations, educational institutions, state and local government and private sector leaders.

Following a year or so of planning and two years of a course-altering pandemic, UAAs Outreach Committee with support from Membership and Social Committee co-chairs, the UAA Board and help from our invaluable senior advisors, concluded this past Friday the first of what we hope will be further constructive discussions to organize USAID alumni in the country's third largest state by population.

They are spread out across a peninsula that takes over ten hours to drive from north to south, represent multiple generations of USAID employees from recently to long ago retired, and vary in terms of expertise and interest. But today's economic, environmental, social, political and governance challenges across the state of Florida are familiar to those of us who worked to overcome development problems abroad. Tapping the vast experience, expertise and enthusiasm that our fellow, mostly retired development professionals have shown is among the important challenges and opportunities for UAA in the years ahead.

What we learned from our meeting this week is that many of our Florida based colleagues have not set aside their development interests nor allowed their unique skills, knowledge, and experience to atrophy and many still desire to be engaged. Some of our retirees are in contact with elected and appointed officials at the state, county, and local levels. Others meet with Congressional or state legislative staff, engage with schools and universities, work with media and journalists, speak with civic organizations and actively participate in many other aspects of local self-governance, including our Homeowners Associations.

So, can we support and help organize the 135 Florida based members of UAA and its affinity organizations to network, enjoy each other's company and play a role when it comes to familiarizing fellow Floridians with how foreign affairs and development impact our lives here? Can we successfully make the case and connect in people's minds how US leadership through its domestic and foreign policies, trade, immigration, foreign aid, and international partnerships can make us safer, more prosperous, and advance the values that make us "exceptional" with the help of our Florida based colleagues adequately supported by UAA? What sort of support is needed and can our newly constituted UAA committees and Board together with our ongoing relationship with Agency leadership deliver? And can we grow our membership numbers here and in regional chapters across the country so that our scale matches the size of the challenge to reach more Americans so that they understand the stakes and feel as if they can do something about it? We are formulating next steps and would appreciate hearing from our members both in Florida and the rest of the country your suggestions and what you are willing and able to do to support this effort.