

## Mission Bahamas Housing Office Frequently Asked Questions

Introduction: Here are some housing related Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) prepared for employees being posted to the Bahamas. Note that these FAQs are not all inclusive. They are tailored to address some of the areas of housing that come up frequently or for which there may be confusion. We encourage employees to refer to the Mission Bahamas Housing Handbook – October 2007. Your agency’s housing representative can assist you with obtaining a copy. It can also be viewed on Embassy Nassau’s intranet site, <http://nassau.state.gov/> under GSO-Housing.

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### **1. Question. What is the general characterization of housing in Nassau and Freeport?**

Answer: All pooled housing is leased. As of this writing, there are 102 units in the Nassau pool. The pool falls into two major sub-categories: residences inside of gated developments and those in traditional suburban neighborhoods:

Suburban neighborhood setting:

Detached homes – 34

Attached homes (town homes & duplexes) – 12

Total: 46

Gated condominium developments:

Attached homes – 48

Detached homes - 8

Total: 56

Grand total: 102

General characteristics of the areas in Nassau where we lease housing. All residences leased by the embassy tend to be concentrated in neighborhoods 1 mile or less from the northern edge of the island along the main perimeter road stretching east and west of the city. This road is known as either East Road, East Bay Street or West Bay Street. Most residences are fairly close to the coast and many are within walking distance of beaches, marinas or other ocean access points. However, none are on the beach per se.

The Bay street thoroughfare is the main connecting artery for the residential and resort districts east and west of the city. It is two lanes in some areas and four lanes in others. It is generally busy but the side roads connecting to it are usually fairly quiet. It is down these many side roads where we find various neighborhoods and enclaves that provide us our housing stock. All of these areas have a suburban look and feel similar to what one might see in the US.

The easternmost residence in our pool is five miles from the embassy. The westernmost residence is 14 miles from the embassy. The leased residence closest to the embassy is four miles. The airport, where approximately 1/3 of employees work, located west of the embassy is ten miles away.

Characteristics of the gated community setting. Amenities within these developments are extensive, including swimming pools, tennis courts, and in some cases, beach or waterway access. Usually there are restaurants and shopping in the communities or close by. The common areas are nicely landscaped and maintained by community association property management. On average, residences in these communities are newer construction than those we find in the open suburban neighborhoods. Most residences in these developments do not have private yards. Some have patios, decks or balconies. These residences are frequently under homeowner or condominium association guidelines.

Characteristics of the suburban neighborhood setting. These residences are in the traditional open access suburbs stretching out due west and east of the city. These residences are mostly but not exclusively detached homes. They are generally older and as a result are not as up to date as the more modern units found in the gated communities. On average, they are slightly more spacious than residences in the gated communities. All of the detached homes have private yards. Some of the residences in the suburban neighborhoods are attached town homes. Some of these have small, fenced-in yards, some do not. The look of these suburbs is very similar to the ranch house/bungalow suburbs popular in the 1970's, frequently seen in Southern Florida

Swimming pools. Twelve detached homes have private swimming pools. Three pairs of detached homes share a swimming pool in a two residence enclave. Residences in gated developments have access to one or more community swimming pools.

Freeport housing breakdown. Currently there are 17 leased residences categorized as follows:

Detached home in suburban setting – 4  
Attached home in gated community – 11  
Detached home in gated community – 2  
Total - 17

## **2. Question. What is the basic housing assignment policy at post?**

Answer: Landlord-furnished, leased housing is provided to all official U.S. employees except for a small number from one of our agencies who are receiving a living quarters allowance. Pooled housing is assigned by the Inter-agency Housing Board (IAHB) prior to your arrival at post. Assignments are made based on:

- a) Grade of the employee's position as it relates to residence size guidelines
- b) Number of dependents identified on the travel authorization (orders) who will live at post at least 50% of the year and
- c) Availability of housing within the housing pool at the time of projected arrival.

Housing is leased in accordance with the Department's guidelines concerning size and cost. These guidelines come from the 15 Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) which is the section covering the department's Office of Overseas Building Operations (OBO).

**3. Question. What about personal preferences?** For example, can an employee request a residence close to a certain school, a fenced yard, a detached home, beachside location, nice view, short commute, private swimming pool, certain number of bedrooms, etc?

Answer: All employees can expect to be housed according to the department's OBO standard:

*"The objective of the housing program is to provide safe and secure housing that is adequate to meet the personal and professional requirements of employees at a cost most advantageous to the U.S. Government. For the purposes of this policy, adequate housing is defined as that comparable to what an employee would occupy in the Washington, DC Metropolitan Area, with adjustments for family size and locality abroad."*

The candid answer on personal preferences is that many times requests can not be met. This is not to say the IAHB will not try to address them. However, its over-riding mandate is meeting the OBO standard and matching residential size guidelines with the employee's position grade and number of authorized family members. Meeting these required criteria often eliminates possibilities for meeting other preferences.

Accommodating personal preference is frequently a matter of timing. This timing factor often accounts for the perception of unevenness - why one employee got a certain preference accommodated and another did not.

If an employee feels that they are assigned a residence that is inconsistent with policy or there are personal circumstances of a compelling nature that would justify a reassignment, the IAHB will consider an assignment appeal. The details of the procedure for processing an appeal and meeting the basic requirement of an appeal are found in the housing handbook.

The housing office attempts to electronically send every inbound employee a housing questionnaire. All employees are encouraged to complete and return it. This questionnaire will help the IAHB make the best possible assignment within the constraints it must work.

**4. Question. Are Nassau and Freeport “furnished” or “unfurnished” posts and what else can you say about furnishings, storage and related matters?**

Answer: It is a furnished post in the sense that we lease our residences fully furnished by the landlord which is the prevailing market practice. This is a different set up from what veterans of other Foreign Service posts are accustomed to which is residences furnished with standard furniture purchased from the department’s residential furniture contract. While the condition of landlord provided furnishings is generally good, employees need to be prepared to accept a wide range in tastes and styles.

Employee household effects weight allowances are based on this being a furnished post. For example, State Department employees are limited to 7200 lbs. More important than the allowance is the practical realities of how much and what to ship to post. In many cases, fully utilizing this allowance will create an unpleasant, over-crowded and cluttered home environment. Employees should consider the following points:

- Landlords are not required to remove any of the furnishings they place in the residence. If an employee ships their own furniture items, the displaced landlord provided items can not be removed from the residence.
- Storage capacity, closet space and shelving of most residences is limited as compared to what many are accustomed to in the US.
- Many residences do not have enclosed garages and no residences have basements. Very few have useable attics.
- The embassy warehouse is an off site, leased, lock and leave facility that is very small; therefore storage of displaced furnishing at this facility is not an option.
- Commercial storage space is very expensive in Nassau and Freeport. Obtaining it and paying for it is the employee’s responsibility.

After occupying housing an employee might determine that some additional items can be brought in. Some agencies permit their employees to ship in additional household effects at government expense. The specifics of this vary from agency to agency. Employees should verify this with their administration staff.

**5. Question. What about pets and housing?**

Answer:

Pet importation. The Bahamian government allows importation of dogs and cats without quarantine. The government requires that an import permit be obtained prior to arrival. Also, health

certificates and proof of vaccinations is required. Obtaining the permit and ensuring that all documentation is complete is the responsibility of the employee. The GSO office can provide further details on what must be done; call: 1-242-322-1181, x4276.

Employee housing preferences and pets. All requests relating to pets are considered to be in the “personal preference category”. Personal preferences are discussed in [FAQ #3](#).

The realities of accommodating pets. There is no requirement for the IAHB to base residential assignments on the desire of an employee to bring pets to post. The IAHB does what it can but no guarantees can be made. There is always a possibility an assignment will be made that is not satisfactory to the employee concerning their pet preferences. Employees considering bringing pets to post should be aware of this and should be prepared to make alternate pet arrangements if they are assigned a residence that has restrictions affecting their pet or pets.

A very common mis-perception is that if an employee comes to post with one or more large dogs, they will be guaranteed a detached home with a large yard because their dogs “enjoy being left outside”. As the numbers suggest in [FAQ #1](#), above, detached homes with private, fenced-in yards are in the minority, particularly for employees falling into the Standard housing tier.

Another factor is the high number of residences inside of gated communities. These communities have restrictions, usually weight and breed types.

#### **6. Question. What is the reality concerning detached homes with private yards?**

Answer: This is the “expectation management” question for employees new to the “living abroad” experience.

Only about 30% of the houses in the Nassau pool are traditional suburban homes with fenced-in yards. Since many of these residences are larger, they tend to be assigned to larger families or the higher graded employees coming to post who are authorized more space based on their grade. Given this reality, the Standard grade employee of which there are the most of here at post (GS-12/FS-03/O-4 and below) have a fairly low statistical chance of their being a detached home with private yard available at the time their assignment is made.

Put another way, employees accustomed to living in the typical US suburban environment featuring a detached home with yard should be prepared for the strong likelihood of a different living experience when they come to Nassau.

#### **7. Question. Why don’t we get more detached homes in the pool?**

Answer: The goal of housing operations is to provide adequate housing consistent with department’s mandated size and cost guidelines. There is no allowance within these guidelines for establishing a pool with a preponderance of detached homes.

The reality is that detached homes are in short supply and very hard to come by within the rental caps set for this post by Washington. Also, the detached homes under these caps are frequently

older and come with inherent maintenance and upkeep problems. New or updated detached homes are almost always priced outside of the rental caps we must meet. Because of these factors, the trend will continue to be leasing multi-unit dwellings such as town homes found mostly in gated communities, primarily west of the city.

**8. Question. If I am assigned a residence with a private pool, is maintenance of it my responsibility?**

Answer: Yes. The cost for pool maintenance of a private pool ranges from \$100-\$200 per month. While it can not be required of you, post strongly encourages you to use a pool maintenance service. If you object to being assigned to a home with a pool, please state this to your agency's housing representative.

**9. Question. What about grounds maintenance?**

Answer: Detached homes with yards are the responsibility of the tenant. It's post responsibility to ensure the residence is turned over to you in presentable condition. It's the employee's responsibility to keep it that way. Thus, you will be expected to maintain your yard or hire a gardener to maintain it. If you believe the square footage of your gardens and yard, exceed 8000 square feet, you may be eligible for partial reimbursement of some of your upkeep expenses. Contact GSO – Housing for details.

**10. Question. Am I entitled to a housing assignment based on the distance of my residence to my work location or a school?**

Answer: Generally, no. All residences are considered to be within the acceptable commuting time and distance from all locations where employees work or where their dependents go to school. However, once the basic assignment parameters of matching position grade/family size to the appropriate sized residence is satisfied, the IAHB will attempt to consider home to work/school distances.

**11. Question. What happens if my family size increases after we are at post?**

Answer: This does not provide a basis for re-assignment unless there are exceptional circumstances. However, initial assignments done prior to arriving post can factor in impending family size increases. The IAHB must have documentation of the impending addition and the expected arrival of the additional authorized family member (most frequently birth or adoption) must be reasonably soon after arrival at post.

**12. Question. What are commute times and what is driving like here?**

Answer: From the easternmost and westernmost residences, employees can expect commute times of up to 30 minutes during off peak times. During rush hour it can increase to one hour.

As the Bahamas are a former British colony, driving is on the left. Approximately 95% of vehicles are left hand drive, just like in the US. Road conditions are fair to good. Residents are seen driving

vehicles similar to what you would see in the suburban environment in the US. Some employees prefer small SUV's over sedans but sedans are fine here too.

Driving in the Bahamas does take some degree of patience as the roads can be congested and some of them are a bit run down. Also, local driving practices can sometimes be slightly more erratic than what the US driver may be accustomed to. However, on balance, driver behavior here is more similar than different than what you might experience in the US.

**13. Question. Will I be assigned a residence that includes an enclosed garage?**

Answer: There is no requirement to provide residences with enclosed garages. As of this writing, approximately 1/3 of the residences in the housing pool have enclosed garages.

**14. Question. Are all residences fenced-in?**

Answer: No. All of the residences within the gated communities are not fenced in. Many but not all of the detached homes in the traditional residential neighborhoods do have fences around them. Most of the fences are 4-5 feet high.

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