

**Statement of Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams
Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Hearing on “Peace Corps at 50”
May 11, 2011**

As prepared for delivery

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Berman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about the steps the Peace Corps has taken to improve the safety, security, support, and care of our Volunteers.

I am the Director of the Peace Corps, but I am also a returned Volunteer. So I am part of the Peace Corps family, and it is an honor to lead this agency that has meant so much to me throughout my life. The health, safety, and support of every member of our Peace Corps family is my number one priority. Peace Corps Volunteers represent the best America has to offer and we owe them nothing less than our best in return.

Peace Corps’ Commitment to Volunteers and their Families

We make a commitment to every Volunteer that we will support them during and after their service, in the same way that every Volunteer makes a 27-month commitment to serve our country overseas. Unfortunately, the Peace Corps has not always lived up to its commitment. The powerful testimony of the witnesses shows us that the trauma and pain they experience can be acute and lasting. We sincerely regret that we did not fully appreciate this in the past. It is not our intent to victimize our Volunteers a second time. We want to do everything we can to help them heal.

The brave women who have come forward have shown us that the Peace Corps has not always been sufficiently responsive, compassionate or sensitive to victims of crime and their families. It is heartbreaking to learn that, and I apologize for any additional pain the agency inflicted on our Volunteers. The victims of sexual assault deserve nothing but compassion and support. Each Volunteer is a valued and treasured member of the Peace Corps family. A crime against one is a crime against all of us.

Since the Peace Corps was founded 50 years ago, more than 200,000 Americans have served as Volunteers in 139 countries. We are all enormously proud of their remarkable service both to the United States and to the host nations. Today 8,600 Volunteers serve in 77 countries. We can all take pride in their dedication to addressing the challenges facing developing countries.

Volunteers embody compassion, generosity, and an unbridled belief that together we can achieve more than we ever could by working alone. It is these qualities that deepen our pain when there is a loss. We care profoundly about the welfare of our Volunteers. Every life lost and every act of violence against a Volunteer is a tragedy.

I have met personally with the parents of Kate Puzey, the outstanding Volunteer who was murdered in Benin in March of 2009. I assured Mr. & Mrs. Puzey, and their son David, that the Peace Corps and the United States Government are united with them in seeking justice for Kate. Lois, Harry, and David have shown incredible strength, and I am deeply grateful to them for helping us to improve the way we handle sensitive information and support the families of fallen Volunteers. I regret that the Peace Corps did not do a better job supporting and communicating with them early on.

My staff and I have also met with a number of returned Volunteers who have shared personal experiences of rape and sexual assault. I would like to thank them for their courage in speaking out, and for helping us to make needed reforms. They have enlightened us and they have helped us to understand the lasting damage suffered by victims of crime. I am very sorry for what they went through and I am committed to ensuring that their experiences are not repeated.

The Peace Corps of today takes the issue of sexual assault prevention and response seriously and we are dedicated to providing compassionate victim-centered care.

Since I became Director 20 months ago, the Peace Corps has put in place new policies to reduce the risks faced by Volunteers and to ensure they receive our full support when a tragedy occurs:

- We issued *Peace Corps' Commitment to Sexual Assault Victims*, a set of core principles to ensure we provide timely, effective, and compassionate support to victims of sexual assault.
- We implemented and trained staff on our new *Guidelines for Responding to Rape and Sexual Assault*. The guidelines emphasize a victim-centered approach with specific procedures posts must follow to respond promptly to an incident and provide the best possible support to a victim.
- The agency's Sexual Assault Working Group is developing a comprehensive sexual assault prevention and response program. The working group includes returned Volunteers and survivors of rape and sexual assault, as well as staff with expertise in trauma response. Since last year, we have been developing comprehensive new training for Volunteers before and during their service on sexual assault prevention and response. We will begin rolling that training out this summer.

- At the suggestion of First Response Action, I hired a nationally recognized leader in victim's rights to be the agency's first victims advocate. [She is here with me today.] She will make sure victims of crime get the emotional, medical, legal, and other support they need.
- At the suggestion of Congressman Poe, I created the Peace Corps Volunteer Sexual Assault Panel, made up of outside experts and returned Volunteers who were victims of sexual assault, to help us design and implement our sexual assault risk reduction and response strategies.
- We are committed to a reform agenda. We have improved the agency's global safety and security program by working to implement the recommendations submitted by our Inspector General in 2010. I believe these reforms will better protect our Volunteers serving around the world.

These and the other reforms we have put in place are just the beginning. More needs to be done, and I look forward to working with you and others to ensure the continued success of our Volunteers. Their willingness to serve our country is an inspiration, and I am committed to doing all I can as Director of the Peace Corps to protect and support them.

Thank you and I look forward to any questions you might have.

#