

**Testimony of Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams
Before the House Appropriations Committee,
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
Thursday, March 18, 2010**

Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Granger, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Committee today in support of the President's Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 budget request for the Peace Corps.

It has been just over six months since I was sworn in as Director of the Peace Corps. It is an honor for me as a returned Peace Corps Volunteer to be Director. The past six months have been challenging, but also incredibly satisfying. It is my distinct privilege to have been asked to lead Peace Corps on the eve of our 50th anniversary and at a time of strategic and quality growth. It is our great responsibility to recruit, train and support the next generation of Volunteers.

Before I discuss the FY 2011 budget request, I would like to thank this Committee for its tremendous support of the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps' FY 2010 appropriation of \$400 million is an unprecedented expression of support and confidence by Congress. I recognize that this is a time of great economic uncertainty for many Americans. These are difficult times in many ways, yet they are also times that present new opportunities to serve our country. I believe the Peace Corps represents one of the best value propositions for the U.S. government overseas.

Peace Corps Volunteers represent the best America has to offer. They live and work in host communities thousands of miles away from family and friends, and they are driven by their common desire to make a sustainable difference. Our Volunteers are grassroots ambassadors for the United States; they represent America's values, generosity and hope.

Today, there are over 7,600 Peace Corps Volunteers serving in 76 host countries. We are charged by the Peace Corps Act to have, at a minimum, 10,000 Volunteers in the field each year. The last time Peace Corps had more than 10,000 Volunteers in the field was 1969.

The Peace Corps budget request for FY 2011 is \$446.15 million, an increase of \$46.15 million over the FY 2010 appropriation. The FY 2011 request will enable the Peace Corps to provide support to 8,500 Volunteers serving in approximately 79 countries worldwide in FY 2011. The Peace Corps' FY 2011 budget request represents the second year of the President's initiative to significantly increase the number of Americans serving as Peace Corps Volunteers to 9,400 by the end of FY 2012 and 11,000 by the end of FY 2016.

The comprehensive agency wide assessment mandated by Congress in our FY 2010 appropriation is currently underway. I expect this assessment to provide critical information and guidance to position the agency for strategic growth. The Peace Corps plans to submit the findings of this comprehensive assessment to Congress in June 2010. The results of this assessment will serve as a guide for agency programming and infrastructure investment in FY 2011 and future fiscal years.

INVEST IN QUALITY GROWTH

Peace Corps intends to spend approximately 80 percent of the proposed FY 2011 budget on Direct Volunteer Operations. This is a \$35 million increase, or an 11 percent increase, over 2010 plans. Our growth model has four key strategies:

- First, expand the number of Volunteers serving in existing host countries. This component of the plan will lead to the largest amount of growth. Our FY 2011 budget request will allow us to respond more robustly to the development needs of our existing host countries by pursuing programmatic growth in priority sectors that reflect current global realities.
- Second, encourage third-year extensions of Volunteers who have demonstrated extraordinary skills and a desire to continue in a leadership role. Third-year Volunteers provide our posts with additional leadership experience and a third year of service allows Volunteers to utilize their expertise and knowledge in a manner that benefits the next class of Volunteers. We are looking at different incentives to encourage third-year extensions.
- Third, increase the number of Peace Corps Response Volunteers. We aim to double the size of our Response program in FY 2011 to 400. Peace Corps Response has been utilized successfully as a strategy for new country entries and allows the agency to nimbly respond to relief efforts around the world with trained Volunteers. Peace Corps Response will play a prominent role in the agency's pending re-entry into Haiti and can play a crucial role in quick start-up efforts in new country entries.
- Fourth, pursue entry into new host countries. So far in FY 2010 we have re-entered two countries, Sierra Leone and Indonesia. We are currently exploring possible agreements with a number of countries that have requested Volunteers. With our FY 2011 budget request, we will be able to pursue roughly three new country entries.

To oversee this approach to growth, I established the Office of Global Operations to provide overarching strategic support and management of our three geographic regions. The Office of Global Operations also includes the Office of Overseas Program and Training Support, the Office of AIDS Relief, and Peace Corps Response.

In addition to adding funds to the field, I am also using resources to strengthen two of our key offices in Washington that support the health and safety of our Volunteers. Keeping Peace Corps Volunteers healthy and safe in the challenging circumstances under which they serve is the Peace Corps' top objective. We are currently reviewing the way in which we provide health care to our Volunteers and working to determine whether there are better ways for Peace Corps to evaluate, manage and support the quality of Volunteer medical care in the field. We will soon do the same with our safety and security operations. With growth, we will need more resources to conduct safety and medical assessments in new and current host countries.

In FY 2011, the Peace Corps will continue to seek to increase strategic partnerships with international and local nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and community-based organizations (CBO). The agency will ensure that such partnerships, remain consistent with the Peace Corps'

grassroots community-based approach to development and its statutory authority as an independent U.S. government agency. Through these efforts to explore innovative, strategic partnerships, the agency will expand its geographic reach and enhance the development impact of Peace Corps Volunteers.

INVEST IN RECRUITING THE NEXT GENERATION OF VOLUNTEERS

Peace Corps continues to capture the imagination of Americans interested in public service abroad. In FY 2009, over 15,000 Americans applied for roughly 4,000 Volunteer positions. The agency anticipates a steady increase in the level of interest in Peace Corps. To reach targeted growth numbers and to ensure that the agency continues to identify the best possible candidates to represent the United States abroad, the Peace Corps is engaging in an intensified strategic recruitment campaign. The recruitment approach will continue to rely heavily on the person-to-person efforts of field-based recruiters in nine regional offices in order to build a Volunteer corps that reflects the diversity of America.

I believe we can do a better job of recruiting Volunteers by demonstrating that Peace Corps service is a life changing leadership experience. I know this firsthand, based on my experience in the Dominican Republic. Volunteers return to the United States as global citizens with leadership, language, teaching and development skills that position them well for educational and professional opportunities. Many Volunteers choose to pursue careers in public service. Returned Peace Corps Volunteers are instilled with the training, knowledge and experience those two years of community development fosters.

Another way to increase the impact of our recruitment efforts is by investing in our Third Goal initiatives. I plan to utilize funds from the proposed FY 2011 budget to bolster the operations of the Office of Public Engagement, which manages our Third Goal efforts. The agency's Third Goal, as defined by the Peace Corps Act, is to "help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans." The funds will be used, among other purposes, to promote educational opportunities that place returned Peace Corps Volunteers with schools to share their overseas experiences and to develop educational curriculum materials for American classrooms.

We can do a better job of supporting our Volunteers by beginning the process of scaling the benefits of service to more accurately reflect increases in the cost of living. The Peace Corps readjustment allowance has remained the same for the last 11 years. Effective April 1, 2010, the readjustment allowance will increase to \$275 per month, an increase of \$50 per month. This increase means that Volunteers completing a full 27-month tour will receive \$7,425 to help in the readjustment period. The Peace Corps will continue to review the readjustment allowance and will consider future increases as funds allow.

INVEST IN INNOVATION

An investment in innovation and infrastructure is an investment in sustainable impact. I know, through careful planning and investment, we can have an even greater impact by creating a culture that values efficiency, transparency, and the sharing of best practices. The agency's new Office of Innovation will manage a bottom-up process, across all offices, and challenge staff to work on the

issues that will promote change and support growth. I am also encouraging the agency to share ideas and best practices from the field that might be “low-tech” but high-impact and “green.”

Poverty, disease, hunger, and illiteracy are issues that continue to challenge developing countries and, in some cases, are exacerbated by problems like climate change, government instability, and natural disasters. However, the tools that Volunteers utilize have changed. Today, nearly 90 percent of Volunteers in the field have personal cell phones. Volunteers are harnessing mobile phone technology to provide health information through text messaging and to assist farmers to identify the best market prices in their area. In FY 2011, the agency will seek to create new ways to utilize the innovative spirit and creativity of our Volunteers to increase their collective impact and improve project sustainability.

We are emphasizing innovation and transparency through the utilization of new technology. In 2011, we aim to have an up-to-date information technology (IT) system that covers the life span of the Volunteer experience from application through close of service. This will not only streamline the process of recruiting and placing Volunteers, but it will also incorporate a system that logs electronic medical records. This system will enable us to provide better and more coordinated medical care for our Volunteers while also reducing the time and cost involved in processing medical clearances for Peace Corps applicants. These investments in technology solutions will make agency processes more effective and efficient, but most importantly, I believe they will improve the quality of the Volunteer experience.

CONCLUSION

Throughout our history, the Peace Corps has adapted and responded to the issues of the times. Peace Corps priorities should reflect current global realities and the development priorities of our host countries. In FY 2011, Peace Corps growth will continue to focus on sectors such as education, food security, health and HIV/AIDS, environment, and renewable energy.

While times have changed since the Peace Corps’ founding in 1961, the agency’s mission—to promote world peace and friendship—has not. Over the last 49 years, nearly 200,000 Americans have served with the Peace Corps. Each of those Americans touched the lives of countless individuals by encouraging them through the selfless act of volunteering. This is the legacy of President Kennedy’s brave idea.

I envision a Peace Corps that remains vibrant for another 50 years; one that grows, adapts and continues to carry the torch of President Kennedy’s dream and responds to President Obama’s call to service.

I would like to thank the Committee again for allowing me to testify in support of President Obama’s budget request for the Peace Corps. I appreciate the support that the Members of this Committee have offered to our Volunteers over the years, and will be pleased to answer your questions.

Thank you.

###