

**Oral Remarks of Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams
Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and Global Narcotics Affairs
Hearing on “Peace Corps, The Next 50 Years”
October 6, 2011**

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Rubio, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. This is an exciting time at the Peace Corps. We marked our 50th anniversary this year, and we have put in place sweeping reforms of policies, procedures, and practices to make certain that this remarkable agency and our outstanding Volunteers thrive for the next 50 years.

The Comprehensive Agency Assessment

The Peace Corps was founded in 1961 to promote progress and build bridges between Americans and peoples overseas. Fifty years later, our mission is not only still relevant, it is more important than ever in an increasingly complex world. From combating HIV/AIDS to serving as America’s most effective grassroots ambassadors, Volunteers are doing essential work for our country.

When I became director, I ordered my team to do a top to bottom review of agency operations. The result is the Comprehensive

Agency Assessment that Peace Corps submitted to Congress last year. This assessment is our blueprint for reform. It lays out a vision for the agency –

“The Peace Corps will be a leader, in partnership with others, in the global effort to further human progress and foster understanding and respect among people.”

In order to achieve this vision, the Assessment put forth a six-part strategy that we are busy implementing.

We have put in place a new, objective, evidence-based approach to deciding where we operate and how we allocate Volunteers. This process, called country portfolio review, represents a significant step forward.

We are strengthening the technical assistance we provide around the world by focusing on and scaling up a limited number of highly effective projects.

We are putting in place a streamlined, state-of-the art process to recruit, select and place Volunteers. And we intend to increase opportunities for Americans who have highly specialized skills and

significant work experience, but who may not be able to make a 2-year commitment.

We are expanding our efforts to advance what we at Peace Corps call the “Third Goal” -- helping to promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. And we are systematically strengthening management and operations through updated technology, innovative approaches, and improved business processes.

Safety, Security, and Support for Volunteers

Our most important reforms lie in the area of Volunteer safety and support. Nothing is more important to me, as Director of the Peace Corps, and as a returned Volunteer, than the health, safety, and security of every member of the extended Peace Corps family. Peace Corps Volunteers represent the best America has to offer, and we owe them our very best in return.

Since I became Director two years ago, it has become apparent to me that the Peace Corps has not always been sufficiently responsive or sensitive to victims of crime and their families. I sincerely regret that. That is not Peace Corps policy. That is not

the Peace Corps way.

Over the past two years, we have put in place new policies to minimize the risks faced by Volunteers and to improve the way we respond to victims of crime. While the Peace Corps cannot eliminate every risk Volunteers may face during their service, I am committed to making sure that we do everything we can to protect Volunteers and provide effective, compassionate support to them and their families when a tragedy does occur.

We hired a nationally recognized leader in victims' rights to serve as the agency's first Victim Advocate. Her name is Kellie Greene and she is here today. She works hard every day to provide emotional, medical, legal, and other support to Volunteers who are victims of crime.

We issued Peace Corps' *Commitment to Sexual Assault Victims*, which makes clear that all Volunteers must be treated with dignity and respect. And we implemented new *Guidelines for Responding to Rape and Sexual Assault* that detail our victim-centered approach to incidents.

We are already rolling out new standardized and comprehensive training for Volunteers on sexual assault risk reduction and response. And we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, to collaborate and share resources on sexual assault prevention and response.

RAINN also serves on our new Peace Corps Volunteer Sexual Assault Panel, made up of outside experts and returned Volunteers who were victims of sexual assault. They are all helping to make sure that our policies are based on best practices.

I welcome efforts in Congress to codify the reforms we have put in place and I would like to thank Sen. Johnny Isakson and Sen. Barbara Boxer for working so hard to ensure that all Volunteers – particularly victims of sexual assault – receive the support and services they need. Your commitment to the agency, and to our Volunteers, is truly inspiring, and your legislation is a fitting tribute to Kate Puzey, an outstanding Volunteer who was killed while serving in 2009.

I am deeply grateful to Peace Corps Volunteers for their dedication and service, and I am committed to doing all I can as Director of

the Peace Corps to protect and support them. I know that the members of the Subcommittee share this goal and I look forward to working with you and others to ensure the continued success of this agency and our Volunteers.

Thank you.