



# Broadening the Peace Corps' Approach to Sexual Assault Prevention

March 2022

## Introduction

Sexual violence is a pervasive global health issue. Since the 1970s, the size and scope of this problem has become better understood due to the many survivors, including Peace Corps Volunteers, who have courageously shared their deeply personal experiences. The advocacy of survivors and allies has challenged the status quo and changed the narrative around sexual violence, more fully exposing this endemic problem. With new evidence of the prevalence and long-term impacts of sexual violence due to increased rates of reporting over the last decade, more research has been dedicated to this topic and the field of sexual assault risk reduction and response has dramatically and continually evolved.

In 2013, the Peace Corps launched a Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response (SARRR) program aimed at reducing incidences of sexual assault against Peace Corps Volunteers and equipping staff with the tools and training necessary to respond appropriately when sexual violence against Volunteers occurs. Since its inception, the SARRR program has guided many programmatic improvements at the Peace Corps and elevated an approach to sexual assault training and support that is trauma-informed and centered around the needs of Volunteers. Guided by current research, best practices in the field, and the feedback of those who are drawn to the Peace Corps' mission of world peace and friendship, the SARRR program has expanded and improved over time.

In order to direct the Peace Corps' next phase of improvements to the program and to incorporate current best practices in the field, in April 2021, the agency requested that the Sexual Assault Advisory Council (SAAC), an independent advisory council established by Congress, examine the last five years of recommendations and provide updated guidance on how the agency can further strengthen the SARRR program and other agency structures and programs. In November 2021, the Peace Corps published the Council's **2021 SAAC Report**, which detailed 26 recommendations informed by their review. To complement these expert recommendations, the Peace Corps also invited the public to submit suggestions during a two-week period in December 2021 which resulted in 35 submissions, primarily from returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs).

The SARRR program team has worked alongside offices agency-wide to comprehensively review and consider all the recommendations recently offered by the SAAC, RPCVs, staff members, and other Peace Corps stakeholders. Reviewing this feedback was an important way for the agency to reflect on current agency structures and programming, plan and prioritize the next phase of improvements, and more closely align the Peace Corps' work to mitigate risk and support survivors to the agency's values. Additionally, the recommendations afforded the Peace Corps a critical opportunity to more fully map current best practices and the evolution of the field over the last decade.

This brief provides an overview of how the field of sexual assault risk reduction and response has evolved, what changes the Peace Corps has made to bolster its systems and programming since

the global evacuation of Volunteers in March 2020, and the next steps the agency will take to enhance the SARRR program and to broaden its overall approach to sexual violence mitigation and response in a way that supports the dignity and safety of all persons, both within the Peace Corps and in the many communities where our Volunteers are invited to serve.

## The Public Health Approach

Over the last decade, the most notable shift in sexual violence research and best practices has been from a public safety to a public health approach. Traditionally, individuals and organizations engaged in the field of sexual assault, including the Peace Corps, have taken a public safety approach to reducing the risk of sexual violence. This approach has focused on an individual's safety and security and on what behaviors and structures can mitigate this individual's risk of sexual violence. For example, in the context of the Peace Corps, emphasis has been placed on not travelling at night or avoiding certain locations as a way to keep Volunteers safe and reduce victimization. The Peace Corps' SARRR program established a solid foundation for Volunteer safety through risk reduction and mitigation efforts and a standardized response process for when crimes against Volunteers do occur. These safety and security efforts are strongly codified in policy and reinforced through staff and Volunteer training. Volunteer safety has and will always be paramount.

Now, the field of sexual violence research has expanded to include a broad public health lens. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than one in three women and one in four men have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetimes<sup>1</sup>. With sexual violence so pervasive and entrenched worldwide, the CDC and other leading public health organizations now approach this issue with public health theoretical and behavior change models.<sup>2</sup> These models expand beyond the safety and security of individuals and take into account the health, safety, and well-being of entire populations. The public health approach strives to provide the maximum benefit for the largest number of people. Through public health models and practices, large scale societal change can occur. With a public health lens, practitioners consider how context, norms, and social determinants impact behavior, including violent behaviors such as sexual violence.

***In order to prevent sexual violence, we must understand and address risk and protective factors at the individual, relational, community, and societal levels.***

***– Centers for Disease Control and Prevention***

The CDC promotes a public health approach that outlines a key step of identifying risks and protective factors as a way to help understand the complex interplay of individual, relationship, social, political, cultural, and environmental factors that influence sexual violence. While the Peace Corps has emphasized protective factors in the SARRR program since its inception – such as community integration and the promotion of gender equity within host communities – a holistic integration of prevention activities through a broad public health model will strengthen the overall program to better support Volunteers and the communities they serve.

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<sup>1</sup> CDC, "Violence Prevention: Fast Facts," [www. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/fastfact.html](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/fastfact.html)

<sup>2</sup> CDC, "Violence Prevention: Public Health Approach," [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/about/publichealthapproach](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/about/publichealthapproach)

## A Focus on Prevention

Key to the public health model is a shift from risk reduction to violence prevention. Prevention can be understood as the work done to stop violence before it occurs. While risk reduction works to reduce victimization, prevention works to reduce the root cause of violence.

While the SARRR program has always incorporated many elements of prevention, the Peace Corps has not previously used this prevention framing and the broader public health approach to tie all aspects of awareness, education, risk reduction, safety measures, and programming together to reduce sexual violence within the Volunteer community and the communities in which Volunteers are invited to serve.

The field of public health prevention defines three levels of intervention for a social or health problem. As defined by the CDC, prevention activities are typically categorized as primary, secondary, or tertiary.<sup>3</sup>

### Primary Prevention

Approaches that take place *before* sexual violence has occurred to prevent initial perpetration or victimization

Established primary prevention practices of the Peace Corps include:

- Security policies and procedures designed to promote safety and security where Volunteers live and work;
- Regular reviews of crime data for each host country to understand crime trends and develop mitigation measures accordingly;
- Trainings for Volunteers designed to help them navigate the cultural context of their country of service, how to be aware of potential threats, and ways to reduce their risk of experiencing a crime;
- Orientations for host families and counterparts about sexual harassment, sexual assault, and how to support Volunteers; and
- Volunteer-led programs that promote gender equity, healthy relationship norms, and sexual consent.

### Secondary Prevention

*Immediate responses after* sexual violence has occurred to deal with the short-term consequences of violence

Established secondary prevention practices of the Peace Corps include:

- Designated teams at post, including Peace Corps Medical Officers (PCMOs) who are trained in and provide emergency medical treatment for Volunteers who experience sexual assault;
- Safety planning for the Volunteer; and
- A designated Victim Advocate to accompany the Volunteer through a well-defined, trauma-informed, and confidential reporting and response system.

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<sup>3</sup> CDC, "Sexual Violence Prevention: Beginning the Dialogue," <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/svprevention-a.pdf>

## Tertiary Prevention

*Long-term responses after sexual violence has occurred to deal with the lasting consequences of violence*

Established tertiary prevention practices of the Peace Corps include:

- Mental health services for Volunteers who have experienced sexual violence;
- Legal support for prosecution, if desired by the Volunteer; and
- A peer support network of fellow Volunteers who are trained to assist others in developing healthy coping mechanisms to stress.

## The Future of the Peace Corps' Work Related to Sexual Assault

Since the SARRR program was established, the Peace Corps has continually expanded and improved agency-wide structures and programming to better mitigate the risk of sexual assault to Volunteers and to provide a supportive response to Volunteers in situations where sexual violence does occur. This work is adapted to 64 unique country operating environments where the Peace Corps serves. Following the onset of the #MeToo movement,<sup>4</sup> which has encouraged survivors to report the crimes they experience and the implementation of agency policies that bolstered trauma-informed survivor-centered practices and better encouraged survivor reporting, the agency has seen an increase in reports of sexual violence against Volunteers. With more reports, the agency has been able to identify where systems can be further fortified through standardization as well as internal checks and balances to eliminate systemic issues, included those related to human error.

Since the March 2020 global evacuation of Volunteers due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in preparation to return Volunteers to service, the Peace Corps has made significant investments in this area and has:

- Implemented a new Security Management System (SIMS) to better document, track, and analyze the agency's response to crimes, including sexual assaults. Through SIMS, staff will categorize crimes, record support services provided to Volunteer victims of crime and monitor related criminal proceedings. All regions and offices are required to utilize the system and have been trained to fully leverage its functionality.
- Standardized the process for maintaining and using site history files and information stored in SIMS to require that all safety and security incidents that occur at a Volunteer's site are documented and reviewed prior to future Volunteers being placed at that specific site. In addition, Country Directors will attest that all sites have been reviewed and properly vetted for security incidents.
- Established a post-level case management process that ensures post staff formally review sexual assault cases and identify challenges with documented cases and confirm all appropriate measures are followed. This process will serve as an opportunity for staff to assure Volunteers' needs are met in real time.
- Updated safety and security instructions to bolster host family and counterpart orientations. These updates include expanded guidance around unwanted attention, violence prevention,

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<sup>4</sup> #MeToo Movement, <https://metoomvmt.org/>

and bystander intervention. To ensure procedural compliance, field-based Peace Corps Safety and Security Officers will review all orientations, and incorporate any proposed modifications as requested by posts.

- Improved standardized operating procedures for vetting and selecting host families to ensure that vetting occurs in a systematic and consistently documented manner.
- Published country-specific health, safety, Volunteer satisfaction, and early termination information. Data regarding these topics can be found within each country's webpage on the [Peace Corps website](#). After reviewing this information, invitees will have an opportunity to request consideration for another country placement.
- Created regional and post-level quality assurance positions to oversee the collection, filing, and review of all site management and site history file documents to ensure that systems and processes are followed, all required files are complete and up-to-date, and compliance occurs at all levels across the agency.

## The New Approach

Applying the recommended public health approach to the SARRR program will more explicitly align the program to the Peace Corps' values. Violence, in all its forms, is a direct threat to the agency's mission of promoting world peace and friendship. The Peace Corps is committed to doing its part to stop violence before it occurs – not just for the health, safety, and well-being of Volunteers, but also for the health and safety of individuals in the communities where Peace Corps Volunteers are invited to serve. While risk reduction is extremely important and directly reduces victimization, addressing sexual violence using the public health approach will allow the agency to maximize the potential of coordinated interventions at multiple levels of programming and across all programmatic sectors. As evidenced by current research, this approach is more likely to impact the root causes of violence and have a greater, long-term impact in a community.

The Peace Corps will develop a comprehensive strategy to identify interventions that can be applied to a variety of contexts. The prevention strategy will focus on activities and interventions that are tailored to the communities in which Volunteers serve, and should, over time, lead to a reduction in incidents of sexual violence. This reduction will be achieved through research and analysis of established programming and safety measures of the Peace Corps. By evaluating the impact of these activities on the root causes of violence, the Peace Corps will prioritize and implement the highest impact activities.

### Immediate Priority Actions

As the agency works to develop a comprehensive sexual assault prevention, risk reduction, and response strategy, the Peace Corps will continue to strengthen the SARRR program through many of the other practical recommendations made by the SAAC and agency's stakeholders. The immediate priority actions of the agency are highlighted in the Figure 1 roadmap along with recent changes made to strengthen the program.

# INVESTING IN SOCIETAL CHANGE

Our Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response (SARRR) program will broaden its approach to sexual assault prevention.

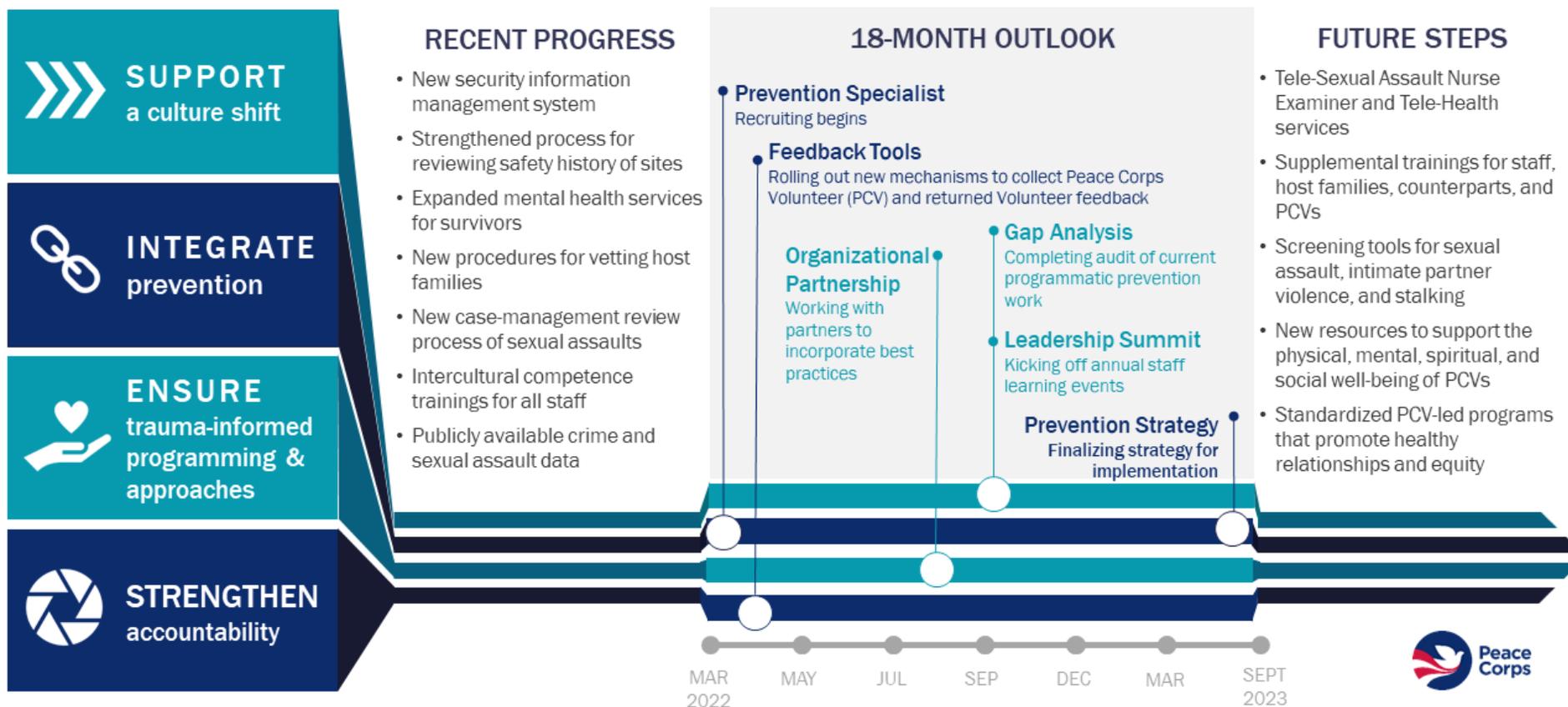


Figure 1. A Roadmap for Broadening the Peace Corps' Approach to Sexual Assault Prevention

The Peace Corps is committed to taking several actions to continuously strengthen the work of the SARRR program and offices agency-wide and to invest in long-term change. These actions include:

- Hiring a Prevention Specialist who will help to develop the formal, comprehensive strategy by evaluating agency-wide activities and applying promising practices and evidence-based research. Recruitment for this position will begin in March 2022.
- Implementing tele-health services, maximizing technology to have virtual, “in-the-moment” health care support for Peace Corps Medical Officers and Volunteers. Tele-health services will be offered consistently with Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) requirements and all Peace Corps clinicians will be trained by April 2022 in its use.
- Strengthening partnerships with national and international organizations to enhance sexual violence prevention capacity building of Volunteers, staff, and community members and to incorporate best practices into the SARRR program on an ongoing basis. Additional partnerships will be established by August 2022 and the Peace Corps will continue to pursue opportunities for collaboration to align with leading industry practices.
- Conducting a gap analysis to account for the prevention elements already in place at the Peace Corps. An external consultant, in the process of being contracted by the agency, will complete the analysis by September 2022.
- Launching annual SARRR Leadership Summits for Peace Corps staff to share initiatives and best practices, enhance knowledge around trauma-informed approaches, and help guide the strategic direction of the SARRR program as it works toward broadening its approach and adopts a prevention approach. The first of these summits is scheduled for September 2022.
- Enhancing feedback mechanisms to collect Volunteer and RPCV feedback and incorporate this input into Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) strategies. Initial tools will be rolled out in April 2022 and an updated CQI process will be incorporated into the SARRR Leadership Summit in September 2022.
- Contracting a Tele-Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) provider to guide Peace Corps Medical Officers as they conduct exams and complete documentation. The tele-SANE provider will be contracted by October 2022.
- Developing a comprehensive sexual assault prevention and response strategy. With framework provided by the gap analysis to be completed by September 2022, the comprehensive prevention strategy will be finalized and published by September 2023.
- Supplementing training for Peace Corps staff at all levels, with a focus on trauma-informed care. Training to be fully aligned with the comprehensive prevention strategy by the end of September 2024.

In addition to these immediate priority actions, the Peace Corps will work to further improve established training, oversight, and communication mechanisms so that all are being used effectively and consistently and so as to further cultivate accountability and transparency in the SARRR program.

## Conclusion

The Peace Corps is committed to broadening our overall lens, bolstering prevention activities, ensuring trauma-informed programming and approaches, and strengthening accountability.

Violence in any form is a threat to the Peace Corps' mission. Guided by the valuable feedback received from agency stakeholders, the Peace Corps is committed to applying a broader, public health, prevention lens to its established SARRR program and agency-wide work to determine where its structures, systems, policies, and procedures can be recalibrated to incorporate current research and best practices.

Through a holistic, integrated public health approach to sexual violence prevention, the Peace Corps will better lead with our values and serve our bold mission of "promoting world peace and friendship." And by anchoring the agency's activities, including the programmatic activities of Volunteers, into a comprehensive prevention strategy, the Peace Corps will communicate how Peace Corps activities contribute to the reduction of sexual violence perpetration and victimization.

Sexual violence prevention, risk reduction, and response is a field that has and will continue to evolve. The Peace Corps is dedicated to evolving according to the field's best practices and to working to understand and help dismantle the root causes of violence in the communities where Volunteers are invited to serve.