

IPS 4-21 Peace Corps Overseas Post Operations during COVID-19 Response and Recovery

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1.0 Purpose

In March 2020, in response to the global pandemic caused by COVID-19, all Peace Corps Volunteers were evacuated and ultimately granted completion of service. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has continued, delaying the return of Volunteers to overseas service and preventing Posts from returning to pre-pandemic service levels. The Peace Corps has closely monitored the impact of the pandemic on host countries, devised criteria to be employed where relevant by the agency, and has developed plans for returning Volunteers when it is safe to do so.

The ever-evolving global pandemic has given the Peace Corps opportunities to develop innovative approaches to supporting host country partners while supporting the U.S. government (USG) priority of fighting the pandemic and paving the way for a global recovery. Posts have continued to implement the Peace Corps' mission with their host country partners and work with other USG agencies and host country partners to mitigate the devastating effects of COVID-19.

In July 2021, the administration issued the USG COVID-19 Global Response and Recovery Framework (USG COVID-19 Framework) (*see* Attachment C: Peace Corps Contributions to the USG COVID-19 Framework). The overarching goal of the Framework is to: end the pandemic; mitigate its wider harm to people and societies; and strengthen the global recovery and readiness for future pandemic threats.

This Interim Policy Statement (IPS) sets forth certain temporary Peace Corps policies regarding the status, including the Operational Status, of Posts during the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic and outlines the guiding principles to be upheld while the agency implements COVID-19 Response and Recovery activities and Peace Corps' contributions to the USG COVID-19 Framework.

2.0 Authority

In accordance with [the Peace Corps Act \(22 U.S.C. 2500 et. seq.\)](#) and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, Section 7015:

- (1) Except as provided in paragraph (2), the Director of the Peace Corps may not open, close, significantly reduce, or suspend a domestic or overseas office or country program or reopen a mission or a Post unless the Director has notified and consulted with the appropriate congressional committees at least 15 days in advance.
- (2) With the exception of the re-opening of a mission or a Post, the Director of the Peace Corps may waive the application of paragraph (1) for a period of not more than 5 days after an action described in such paragraph if the Director determines such action is necessary to ameliorate a substantial security risk to Peace Corps Volunteers or other Peace Corps personnel.
- (3) For the purposes of this subsection, the term “appropriate congressional committees” means —

- (a) the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives; and
 - (b) the Committee on Foreign Relations and the Committee on Appropriations of the Senate.
- (4) Any notification of or determination that consultation with appropriate Congressional Committees is required in accordance with this subsection 2.0 shall be referred to the Office of Congressional Relations (OCR) and the Office of the General Counsel (OGC). OGC shall coordinate with the OCR and provide guidance and clearance prior to Congressional notification or consultation by the agency.

3.0 Definitions

- (a) **Country Portfolio Review (CPR):** A transparent and replicable process for informing decisions related to the Peace Corps' portfolio of countries and Volunteer levels in each country. Six priority areas are evaluated in the CPR process: (1) safety and security, (2) medical care of Volunteers, (3) host country need and strategic interest, (4) host country commitment and engagement, (5) programmatic impact, and (6) Post management and costs. (*See Attachment B.*)
- (b) **Volunteers:** Includes Trainees, Volunteers and Peace Corps Response Volunteers, unless otherwise indicated.
- (c) **Staff:** Includes U.S. Direct Hires (USDHs), Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs) and Personal Services Contractors (PSCs), unless otherwise indicated.
- (d) **Operational Status:**
 - (1) **Full Operational Status:** A Post is deemed to have resumed full operations when Volunteers are present at Post.
 - (2) **Interim Operational Status:** A Post is deemed to be operational on an interim basis if it meets one or more of the following criteria:
 - a. Staff are conducting activities to facilitate Volunteers' return to Post, while supporting host country partners, including COVID-19 Response and Recovery activities and/or such other activities as approved by the Office of Global Operations (OGO).
 - b. Post is conducting a Virtual Service Pilot initiative to virtually support host country activities under the auspices of a Post's programming activities.
 - c. The Post is in the process of opening or reopening. (*See MS 340 Opening a Post.*)

- (3) **Suspended Status:** Also known as suspension. Conditions at Post do not support Full or Interim Operational Status due to civil or political unrest, administrative barriers (i.e., inability to obtain visas) and/or concerns for Volunteers' and/or Staff safety and security and health. Volunteers have been evacuated from the host country and their service is ended. Staff reductions and asset disposition may begin in an orderly manner if it is likely a Post will be closed. USDHs may be on ordered or authorized departure as may be determined by the Department of State.
- (4) **Closed Status:** Also known as closure. There are no Volunteers, Staff, or offices operational in-country, and Post operations are terminated.
 - a. **Emergency Closure:** Post experiences a catastrophic and sudden situation, such as political upheaval, terrorist threat or armed conflict that is not expected to improve within 12 months of the Volunteers' evacuation.
 - b. **Non-emergency Closure:** A planned, phased closure of a Post that is not precipitated by emergency concerns. Closure decision is informed by the CPR process. A phasedown of Volunteers may occur after the Closure decision.

4.0 Roles and Responsibilities

4.1 Headquarters Offices

4.1.1 Director of the Peace Corps

With regard to the suspension and/or closure of Post operations, the Director is responsible for:

- (a) Directing senior Staff to conduct comprehensive assessments of relevant indicators and considerations necessary to determine the continued assignment of Volunteers to a Peace Corps program in a host country. Criteria to be employed may include but are not limited to:
 - (1) The host country's expressed need and the Peace Corps' ability to recruit and field Volunteers with suitable qualifications and appropriate assignments;
 - (2) The host country's commitment to and engagement in a Peace Corps program;
 - (3) Safety and security concerns;
 - (4) Medical care and health concerns;
 - (5) Programmatic impact; and
 - (6) Administrative and financial aspects of operations.

- (b) Making final decisions regarding a Post's Operational Status in light of all relevant conditions and circumstances.
- (c) Maintaining adequate documentation of key decisions and recommendations related to closing and suspending any overseas office or country program.
- (d) Ensuring timely and appropriate notification regarding potential reopening, suspension or closure of the Post in any host country: (1) by the Office of Congressional Relations, in consultation with the Office of the General Counsel, the Office to Management and Budget (OMB) and relevant Congressional committees; and (2) by the Office of the Director, or designee, to the Department of State, U.S. Ambassador and host country government.
- (e) Approving the timing and content of the formal notification to be given to the host government through the U.S. Ambassador.
- (f) Approving the timing and content of the formal notification of suspension or closure to be given to Volunteers, Staff and the general public.
- (g) Ensuring the agency develops guidelines and a process for the periodic assessment and possible reduction of staffing levels at Posts in Suspended Status.

4.1.2 Office of Global Operations

The Associate Director for the Office of Global Operations (OGO) and the appropriate Regional Director are responsible for:

- (a) Conducting routine reviews to assess the Operational Status of a Peace Corps Post.
- (b) Preparing Staff and operational plans, informed by routine operational reviews, and a CPR if relevant, for briefing key offices about the future of a Post's operations.
- (c) Preparing and implementing plans for the delay and/or cancellation of invitations for Invitees and Peace Corps Response Volunteers and briefing key agency offices.
- (d) Informing and working with the Office of Management, Office of the Chief Financial Officer, OGC, Office of Health Services (OHS), Office of Safety and Security (OSS), Office of Volunteer Recruitment and Selection, Office of External Affairs, and other offices as appropriate to support the transition of Post operations.
- (e) Approving the termination status and final departure dates of Volunteers and ensuring the safe and timely departure of Volunteers from Post.
- (f) Approving staffing and operational plans, with consultation as necessary with the Office of Human Resources (OHR) and the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO), that could lead to the downsizing and/or closure of Posts.

- (g) Keeping the Director, OGC, OCR, and Office of Strategic Information Research and Planning (OSIRP) apprised of any change in the Operational Status of a Post.
- (h) Ensuring appropriate guidance and systems are in place to implement, monitor and document COVID-19 Response and Recovery activities.

4.1.3 Office of the General Counsel

OGC is responsible for:

- (a) Providing legal review and advice on decisions regarding the Operational Status of a Post.
- (b) Providing legal review and advice to Posts on any actions to be taken by agency offices related to reopening, suspension or closure of Posts, including Staff reduction plans, leases or partnership agreements.

4.1.4 Office of Congressional Relations

The Director of OCR, in consultation with OGC, is responsible for appropriate consultation with and/or notification of Congress regarding the opening, reopening, closure, significant reduction, or suspension of an overseas office or country program in accordance with legal requirements.

4.1.5 Office of Safety and Security

The Associate Director of OSS, in coordination with the Associate Director for OGO and the relevant Regional Director, is responsible for conducting a safety and security assessment and providing recommendations and mitigating strategies, as necessary.

4.1.6 Office of Health Services

The Associate Director of OHS, in coordination with the Associate Director for OGO and the relevant Regional Director, is responsible for conducting an assessment of healthcare capabilities and health risks and providing recommendations and mitigating strategies, as necessary. In the event of closure of a Post, OHS advises Peace Corps Medical Officers on the maintenance of medical records, disposition of medical supplies and equipment, and other activities related to closure of a Post's medical office.

4.1.7 Office of the Chief Financial Officer

The Chief Financial Officer is responsible for advising and supporting the Region and Post on financial and administrative matters. Further, the Chief Financial Officer is responsible for providing contracting review and advice to Posts on any actions to be taken by agency offices related to Staff reduction plans that include PSCs, leases, or supplies/services contracts.

4.1.8 Office of Strategic Information Research and Planning

OSIRP conducts data analyses for the CPR process and manages the process for regular quarterly meetings. Off-cycle meetings are managed by OGO to consider Post suspension or closure.

4.1.9 Office of Management

The Associate Director of Management acts as the Senior Agency Official for Records Management and is responsible for coordinating with the Regional Director, Country Directors and OGC to ensure that Posts' records management, retention and disposition meet the legal requirements under the Federal Records Act and other laws and regulations. The Office of Management, through the Office of Administrative Services, ensures appropriate support to the Post and Region regarding Volunteers' travel.

4.1.10 Office of Communications

In conjunction with the relevant Region and Post, the Office of Communications:

- (a) Develops and issues the communication related to any significant change in Post operations, including talking points, press releases, and agency communication with the media and the public; and
- (b) Coordinates as needed with U.S. Embassies' public affairs offices.

4.2 Post

4.2.1 Country Director

The Country Director is responsible for:

- (a) Ensuring COVID-19 Response and Recovery activities that are supported by Volunteers and/or Staff adhere to Peace Corps guidance, documentation requirements, and agreements with host country partners.
- (b) Keeping the Regional Director and the U.S. Ambassador informed of significant in-country issues related to Post operations, including assessment of potential governmental, institutional, and public reaction to Staff-supported COVID-19 programming, the withdrawal or return of Volunteers, and other significant disruptions in the Post's Operational Status.
- (c) Notifying Volunteers, Staff and host country partners of decisions to initiate suspension or closure of the Post, once authorized by the Regional Director to make such notifications.
- (d) Developing, reviewing and managing staffing and operational plans and procedures related to suspension or closure of the Post, in consultation with the appropriate Regional Director.

- (e) Determining what technical and personnel assistance related to suspension or closure of the Post is needed from Peace Corps headquarters and requesting assistance.
- (f) Planning, in coordination with the U.S. Embassy, correspondence with host country government officials and partners, and, in the event of closure, a close-out ceremony, as appropriate.
- (g) Informing the U.S. Embassy of any in-country media inquiries, and coordinating in-country media responses through the U.S. Embassy and the Peace Corps Office of Communications.
- (h) Ensuring that Staff adhere to agency policies and requirements regarding the suspension and closure of a Post, including but not limited to:
 - (1) Financial obligations and disposition of property, as specified by the Office of the Chief Financial Officer;
 - (2) Records retention and disposition, as specified by the Office of Records Management;
 - (3) Transfer and disposal of medical supplies and narcotics, as specified by MS 734 *Medical Supplies and Equipment*;
 - (4) Termination/end of contracts including personal services contracts, leases, and supplies/services contracts in accordance with MS 732 *Peace Corps Overseas Acquisition System* and the Overseas Contracting Handbook (OCH); and
 - (5) In consultation with OGC, any other agency policies and procedures and local laws related to the withdrawal of Volunteers, termination of Staff and closure of a Post.

5.0 Peace Corps Contributions to the USG COVID-19 Framework

5.1 Guiding Principles

The following principles shall be upheld while the agency implements COVID-19 Response and Recovery activities, regardless of service model:

- (a) The Peace Corps' mission and three goals are central to Peace Corps' activities and Staff engagement.
- (b) The Peace Corps considers the health, safety and well-being of Volunteers, Staff and host communities to be of paramount importance.
- (c) The Peace Corps is committed to working alongside other USG agencies to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigate its wider harms to society.
- (d) The Peace Corps is committed to addressing host country needs through partnerships and working in the spirit of mutual respect.

- (e) The Peace Corps' approach to development — which is grassroots, people-to-people and focused on sustainable development — is the basis of all of its programming work.
- (f) The Peace Corps looks at all programming efforts through the lenses of intercultural competence, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.
- (g) The Peace Corps is committed to utilizing technology and new service models to strengthen and expand its work during the global pandemic.

6.0 Disruption of Post Operations

The disruption of a Post's Full Operational Status can be precipitated by a range of circumstances, including but not limited to: (1) safety and security, (2) medical care of Volunteers, (3) host country need and strategic interest, (4) host country commitment and engagement, (5) programmatic impact, and (6) post management and costs. The withdrawal of Volunteers may be sudden and unanticipated or planned, temporary or permanent, depending upon the specific conditions affecting Post operations. If a Post encompasses more than one host country, the withdrawal of Volunteers and disruption of Post operations may be limited to a single host country rather than the entire Post.

7.0 Host Country Partner Agreements

Posts are not expected to execute new Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with host country partners in order to implement COVID-19 Response and Recovery activities, unless there is an express desire on the part of a host country partner to sign an MOU. In the absence of any agreement on the part of a host country partner to support Peace Corps' COVID-19 programming, then the Post will continue with its normal activities or projects.

In the event of a Post's closure, country agreements remain in force unless expressly terminated by the U.S. or the host country government.

8.0 Volunteers

8.1 Volunteers who are removed from the host country may be temporarily relocated to another Peace Corps Post or neighboring country, and/or sent to their homes-of-record. Volunteers who are sent to their homes-of-record may be placed on Administrative Hold while assessments are conducted to determine the future of Post operations (*see* subsection 8.2, MS 220 *Leave for Volunteers/Trainees*).

8.2 When Volunteers' service is curtailed due to a decision to suspend or close a Post, their service will be ended (*see* MS 281 *Completion of Service Date Advancement and Extension of Service* and MS 284 *Early Termination of Service*).

9.0 Staffing following Suspension and Closure Decisions

9.1 Once the Director has made an official decision to suspend or close a Post, the Country Director shall prepare a plan for the phase-down of Staff in accordance with continuing needs for certain roles at Post. Any Staff reduction plan shall be approved by the Associate Director, Office of Global Operations and the relevant Regional Director, in consultation with OCFO, OHR, and OGC as necessary, and subsequently approved by the Director before Staff are informed of any change in their employment/contract status.

9.2 Personnel actions for FSNs shall conform with the local compensation plan; personnel actions for PSCs shall conform with their personal services contracts with the Peace Corps – to include the minimum notice period required. Further, in accordance with the OCH Chapter on Personal Services Contracts, OGC will guide Post through a consultation process with a local labor lawyer prior terminating/ending a personal services contract.

9.3 During Suspended Status or after the Director has made a decision to close a Post, USDHs may be assigned temporary duties at other Peace Corps Posts or within headquarters, and PSCs or FSNs may be assigned temporary duties within the Peace Corps, as appropriate, pending approval by the Associate Director of OGO.

9.4 OHR must be consulted before any decisions are made regarding the potential reassignment or termination of USDHs at the affected Post.

10.0 Effective Date

The effective date of this IPS is the date of issuance.

Due to the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, this IPS will be reviewed by the Senior Policy Committee within one year of its issuance and again each year until it is rescinded. As soon as practicable in light of the evolution of the pandemic, this IPS will be rescinded and replaced by a new MS 341 on the suspension and closure of Posts. This IPS requires implementation through procedures to be developed by the sponsoring office in collaboration with stakeholder offices, including OCFO, OHR, OSS, OHS, the Office of Management, and OGC.