

SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION AND RESPONSE PROGRAM

PERFORMANCE REVIEW AND REPORT
FISCAL YEARS 2021–2023

April 2024



Peace
Corps

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PEACE CORPS - APRIL 2024

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sexual assault stands in direct opposition to the Peace Corps' mission of promoting world peace and friendship. As an agency, the Peace Corps is deeply committed to addressing this issue for the safety, security, and well-being of Peace Corps Volunteers,¹ staff, and the people in the host countries where the Peace Corps is invited to serve.

The Peace Corps' Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR)² program was established by the Kate Puzey Volunteer Protection Act of 2011.³ Although not required by law, the Peace Corps has produced this performance review and report to detail the significant progress made during the last three fiscal years (October 1, 2020, through September 30, 2023) to strengthen the agency's work in preventing and responding to sexual assault through the implementation of high-quality and evidence-based services and approaches. Given the March 2020 to March 2022 suspension of overseas Volunteer operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a longer reporting period was selected to capture enhancements made to the SAPR program before and after Volunteers returned to service. Moving forward, the agency plans to produce a biennial report on the SAPR program to provide regular updates to the public on the Peace Corps' ongoing efforts and progress toward strengthening its sexual assault prevention and response activities.

Over the last decade, since the SAPR program's establishment, a growing wave of researchers, organizations, and advocates have raised global consciousness about the entrenched pervasiveness of sexual assault around the world and have contributed quality research and best practices to the field. One of the most notable changes resulting from this research is that the framework through which sexual assault is viewed has shifted beyond the individual level to a community context. This new viewpoint focuses on ways to prevent sexual violence by combatting its root causes at a societal level. Organizations around the world now widely recognize sexual assault prevention as a more effective approach than relying solely on individual-level risk-reduction approaches. A prevention approach is also viewed to have a greater long-term impact on communities.⁴

Like many organizations, the Peace Corps has historically focused on behaviors and structures to reduce an individual's risk of exposure to perpetrators of sexual assault. As a result, the agency developed a strong foundation of safety and security systems and policies,⁵ training resources, site management operations, and support protocols for the SAPR program to build upon as the agency further embraces a prevention model.

The heightened global awareness surrounding sexual assault and an evolving body of research has assisted the agency in making substantial improvements to the SAPR program. This report details the enhancements made over the last three fiscal years to:

- **Expand the agency's approach to include sexual assault prevention** to support the safety and well-being of Peace Corps Volunteers and community members where Peace Corps Volunteers live and work.
- **Improve sexual assault response** by strengthening the services provided to Volunteer victims/survivors⁶ and reducing real and perceived barriers to reporting.

1 In this report, the term "Volunteer" is inclusive of Peace Corps Trainees, Peace Corps two-year Volunteers, and Peace Corps Response Volunteers.

2 Previously known as the Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response program. See page 7 for more information.

3 The Kate Puzey Volunteer Protection Act of 2011 mandated that the Peace Corps: provide comprehensive sexual assault risk-reduction and response training to Volunteers; develop and implement a comprehensive sexual assault policy; establish an Office of Victim Advocacy and a Sexual Assault Advisory Council; and take other specified measures to enhance Volunteer safety and security and the Peace Corps' response to victims of sexual assault.

4 Mary Ellebert, Diana J Arango, Matthew Morton, Floriza Gennari, Sveinung Kiplesund, Manuel Contreras, Charlotte Watts, "Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls: What Does the Evidence Say?," *The Lancet* 385, no. 9977 (2015), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0140673614617037>

5 MS 270 Volunteer/Trainee Safety and Security, Peace Corps, October 1, 2019, <https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/MS-270-Policy.pdf>

6 Because some individuals who have experienced sexual assault prefer the term "victim" while others identify with "survivor," this report uses both terms interchangeably.

- **Deepen the trauma-informed organizational culture** to better support Volunteer victims/survivors of sexual violence and minimize additional trauma.
- **Strengthen and integrate systems** to better document services, analyze, and use data to improve the SAPR program.

The Peace Corps recognizes that accountability is a key component of organizational trust in the field of sexual assault prevention and response. During the period of FY 2021–2023, the Peace Corps closed 13 sexual assault-related recommendations from the Office of Inspector General (OIG). At the time of publication, the agency has no outstanding OIG recommendations related to sexual assault or the SAPR program.

Additionally, in March 2022, the Peace Corps issued a white paper, titled *Broadening the Peace Corps' Approach to Sexual Assault Prevention*,⁷ also known as the “roadmap,” which publicly announced the agency’s expansion of the SAPR program to include sexual assault prevention. This marked a notable shift in accordance with current sexual violence research, best practices in the field, and feedback from key Peace Corps’ stakeholders. Although the Peace Corps did not previously employ a prevention model, the agency did implement informal prevention practices that now serve as the foundation for the integrated sexual assault prevention work to which the agency is committed.⁸

In joining the worldwide effort to prevent sexual violence, the Peace Corps is committed to responsibly advancing this work in partnership and collaboration with the 65 host countries where Volunteers are currently invited to serve,⁹ including countries in some of the most remote regions of the globe. Through their work across the agency’s six program sectors,¹⁰ Volunteers partner directly with community members to address the development priorities identified by the host country. Volunteers often touch on socio-cultural and economic drivers of inequalities embedded within systems of gender norms, power, poverty, education, and healthcare—societal forces that can create an enabling environment for sexual violence to exist. In this way, the Peace Corps is well situated to advance sexual assault prevention work through its development programming.

Through continuous improvement to the SAPR program, the Peace Corps is further committed to strengthening response services for Volunteers who have experienced sexual assault, understanding and breaking down the real and perceived barriers to reporting, and ensuring that agency staff with primary responsibilities for sexual assault response have advanced and ongoing training in trauma-informed approaches. Additionally, the agency is continuing to train Volunteers on risk-reduction strategies tailored to their host country’s norms and working to ensure that systems and support structures are in place for Volunteer victims/survivors to receive the quality medical, legal, and psychosocial services they seek.

The roadmap outlined the Peace Corps’ investments and commitments to improve the SAPR program. To date, all components of the roadmap have been completed. These include:

- **Hiring of a Prevention Specialist** to help develop the agency’s comprehensive sexual assault prevention strategy. See page 9.
- **Implementation of video tele-health services** on new platforms to optimize real-time support for Peace Corps Medical Officers (PCMOs) and Volunteers. See pages 12–13.

⁷ Peace Corps, *Broadening the Peace Corps' Approach to Sexual Assault Prevention* (Washington, DC: Peace Corps, 2022), https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/20220315_SARRR_Brief_and_Roadmap_FINAL.PDF

⁸ This can be seen through the Peace Corps’ development work that Volunteers conduct in partnership with local community members across the agency’s six program sectors that challenge harmful social norms that normalize sexual violence. By formalizing its commitment to broaden the scope of the SAPR program to include prevention, the Peace Corps is intentionally engaging in community-level prevention programming that supports the global effort to end sexual violence.

⁹ As of April 2024, the Peace Corps has programs in 65 countries, with Volunteers living and working in 58 countries. In FY 2024, the Peace Corps announced it will also re-open programs in two additional countries: El Salvador and Palau.

¹⁰ The Peace Corps implements development programming across six sectors: Health, Education, Agriculture, Environment, Youth Development, and Community Economic Development.

- **Strengthening of partnerships** with national and international organizations to incorporate best practices into the SAPR program and enhance the agency’s sexual assault prevention activities. See pages 10 and 18–21.
- **Implementation of case management review protocols** that require post staff to formally review sexual assault cases, to confirm that all appropriate policies and protocols were followed, and to identify any challenges with documented cases. See page 13–14.
- **Completion of a gap analysis** of the Peace Corps’ existing prevention activities. See page 9–10.
- **Engagement of a Tele-Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (Tele-SANE)** to guide Peace Corps Medical Officers (PCMOs) as they conduct forensic exams and complete documentation. See page 18.
- **Development of a sexual assault prevention strategy** (to be released by December 2024) informed by results from the gap analysis. See page 10.
- **Supplemental training in trauma-informed care** for Peace Corps staff at all levels. See pages 20–22.
- **Engagement on SAPR priorities at Peace Corps staff conferences** to ensure global reach of best practices, strengthen knowledge around trauma-informed approaches, and help guide the strategic direction of the SAPR program.

The Peace Corps also included the ongoing strengthening of the SAPR program in the agency’s FY 2022–2026 Strategic Plan. Progress on the measurable performance goals of this plan is reported to Congress and the public each fiscal year and serves as a further testament to the agency’s commitment to addressing sexual assault and accountability for the SAPR program.

While the Peace Corps has made great strides to improve the SAPR program with critical input from agency staff, Volunteers (current and former), subject matter experts, and numerous stakeholders, this work is not done. The SAPR program will continue to incorporate new research and best practices to prevent sexual assault, support Volunteer victims/survivors of sexual assault, and contribute to the larger effort to end sexual assault as a global issue.

ACRONYMS

AVS	All Volunteer Survey
BHO	Behavioral Health and Outreach Unit
CARS	Coordinated Agency Response System
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CME	Continuing Medical Education
OHS	Office of Health Services
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OSS	Office of Safety and Security
OVA	Office of Victim Advocacy
PCMO	Peace Corps Medical Officer
PCSSO	Peace Corps Safety and Security Officer
RQS	Response Quality Survey
SAAC	Sexual Assault Advisory Council
SAFE	Sexual Assault Forensic Exam
SANE	Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner
SAPR	Sexual Assault Prevention and Response
SARL	Sexual Assault Response Liaison
SIMS	Security Incident Management System
SIQ	Security Incident Questionnaire
SSA	Safety and Security Assistant
SSM	Safety and Security Manager
UN	United Nations
VIDA	Volunteer Information Database Application
VPF	Volunteer Preference Form

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to reliably measure the frequency and prevalence of sexual violence around the world. This global issue occurs in public and private spaces, in countries of all economic levels, and among acquaintances, colleagues, intimate partners, relatives, and strangers. Anyone can be a perpetrator of sexual assault. Anyone can be a victim/survivor of sexual assault.

Due to a complex interplay of social, cultural, and legal factors, sexual assault often goes unreported, rendering it nearly impossible to know the accurate rate of occurrence and—more importantly—making it difficult for victims/survivors to access essential services to support their recovery. The known data about the prevalence of sexual violence is alarming. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), over half of women and almost a third of men in the United States have experienced sexual violence in their lifetimes.¹¹ Globally, the picture is even more severe. As reported by United Nations (UN) Women, almost a third of women ages 15 years or older have endured physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner, non-partner sexual violence, or both. Tragically, less than 40 percent of women who are subjected to such violence seek help, and less than 10 percent of those seeking help report to law enforcement authorities.¹² Global data on male victims/survivors of sexual violence is also scarce due to non-reporting and legal and cultural norms that may not recognize sexual assault against men.

The UN characterizes sexual- and gender-based violence as a “preventable pandemic.”¹³ This word choice not only emphasizes the global pervasiveness of sexual violence but also calls attention to the issue as a public health crisis. Further, it reflects the major developments in sexual violence research and best practices in recent years—elevating and recognizing that sexual violence is a preventable threat to global public health.

This lens was shared by the Peace Corps’ Sexual Assault Advisory Council (SAAC), an independent advisory council of returned Volunteers and experts in sexual violence. The SAAC was established by Congress through the Kate Puzey Volunteer Protection Act of 2011 to respond to the needs of the Peace Corps and Volunteers as the agency strengthened its Volunteer-centered sexual assault risk reduction and response program. Initially mandated through 2018, the SAAC was extended through the end of FY 2023 by the Sam Farr and Nick Castle Peace Corps Reform Act of 2018. Per statute, the SAAC ceased formally operating on September 30, 2023. Though Congress has not, to date, reauthorized the SAAC nor extended its exemption from the Federal Advisory Committee Act,¹⁴ the Peace Corps’ SAPR program remains committed to continuing to strengthen its prevention and response efforts by meeting with individual experts to review current policies and procedures.

In April 2021, the SAAC responded to the request of the Peace Corps to review the previous five years of SAAC recommendations for progress and continued relevance. In November 2021, the SAAC published its findings and 37 recommendations in its public *2021 Annual Report*,¹⁵ advising the agency on ways to further strengthen the SAPR program.

The SAAC’s recommendations focused on four key priorities:

- **Supporting a culture shift** within the Peace Corps to prioritize expertise in identifying and addressing sexual violence and trauma-informed prevention and response.

¹¹ “Fast Facts: Preventing Sexual Violence,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 22, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/fastfact.html>

¹² “Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women,” UN Women, September 21, 2023, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

¹³ “The Preventable Pandemic: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence,” United Nations, Accessed January 26, 2024, <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/preventable-pandemic-sexual-and-gender-based-violence>

¹⁴ Passed in 1972, the Federal Advisory Committee Act is the legal foundation for defining how federal advisory committees operate: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-86/pdf/STATUTE-86-Pg770.pdf>

¹⁵ Peace Corps Sexual Assault Advisory Council, *2021 Annual Report* (Washington, DC: Peace Corps, 2021) https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/open-government/SAAC_2021_report.pdf

- **Integrating prevention** by using national and global expertise and incorporating risk and protective factors that address the root causes of sexual violence.
- **Ensuring trauma-informed programming and approaches** that meet the six guiding principles that underlie a trauma-informed approach established by the CDC.¹⁶
- **Strengthening accountability** by identifying “owners” for outcomes, collecting high-quality data that informs programming, and achieving results.¹⁷

To complement these recommendations from the SAAC, the Peace Corps invited the public to contribute suggestions for strengthening the SAPR program. Thirty-five public submissions were made to the agency for consideration.

The Peace Corps reviewed and prioritized the SAAC’s recommendations and public comments for implementation. The Office of SAPR is working closely with the agency’s Compliance and Risk Office to track the status, progress, and timeline of all recommendations, as well as identifying if and where there may be barriers to implementation.

The SAAC’s recommendations and the public’s comments, together with an examination of the developing field of research around public health, were central to the Peace Corps’ process of determining the next phase for strengthening the SAPR program. The agency announced its commitment to sexual assault prevention with the March 2022 release of *Broadening the Peace Corps’ Approach to Sexual Assault Prevention*. In this white paper, the Peace Corps publicly committed to developing a comprehensive prevention strategy to implement programming tailored to the communities where Volunteers are invited to live and work.¹⁸

Data on sexual assault against Volunteers from FY 2021 to FY 2023 does not appear in this report. Following the global evacuation of Volunteers in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Peace Corps began returning Volunteers overseas in March 2022, doing so with intentionally small numbers as the agency adapted to a post-pandemic environment and tested systems for supporting Volunteers. As of April 5, 2024, there are over 2,600 Volunteers in service—this is approximately 35 percent of the number of Volunteers who were serving overseas in March 2020. Given the substantially smaller sample size of Volunteers, FY 2023 data on incidents of sexual assault neither provides a useful comparison to FY 2021 pre-pandemic sexual assault data nor lends itself well to identifying trends. Furthermore, publishing the absolute number of sexual assaults could also increase the likelihood of a victim/survivor’s anonymity being compromised.

¹⁶ “Infographic: 6 Guiding Principles to a Trauma-Informed Approach,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 17, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/orr/infographics/6_principles_trauma_info.htm

¹⁷ Peace Corps Sexual Assault Advisory Committee, *2021 Annual Report*, 7–8.

¹⁸ Peace Corps, *Broadening the Peace Corps’ Approach to Sexual Assault Prevention*, 5.

EXPAND THE PEACE CORPS' APPROACH TO INCLUDE PREVENTION

The Peace Corps' SAPR program is managed by the Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR), whose mandate is to develop and oversee the agency's policies, procedures, and trainings related to sexual assault. Because sexual assault is a multi-faceted issue, the SAPR program involves the following five additional implementing offices, each of which brings a specific lens of expertise and scope of responsibilities to the overall program:

- **Office of Victim Advocacy (OVA):** Provides advocacy and case management to Volunteer victims/survivors and continuous training to Sexual Assault Response Liaisons (SARLs).¹⁹
- **Office of Safety and Security (OSS):** Responds to crime incidents, including sexual assaults against Volunteers; develops SAPR trainings for staff and Volunteers; conducts analyses of crime response (e.g., systems, trends, and data); manages the agency's case management system; and monitors and evaluates the SAPR program for quality improvement.
- **Office of Global Operations:** Provides support for SAPR activities in countries where the Peace Corps operates through the design of community-level prevention programming for implementation by Volunteers and host community members.
- **Office of the General Counsel:** Ensures the SAPR program complies with applicable legal requirements, comports with agency policy and procedures, and leads the process for addressing sexual misconduct.²⁰
- **Office of Health Services (OHS):** Provides Volunteer victims/survivors with medical forensic examinations, clinical care, and mental health care; conducts clinical oversight and monitors and evaluates clinical outcomes; and provides continuous trauma- and culturally-informed training to PCMOs.

Since the inception of the SAPR program in 2013 (then known as the Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response program), the agency has strengthened Volunteer safety primarily through a risk-reduction framework, focusing on the behaviors that Volunteers and Peace Corps staff can adopt, minimize, or avoid in order to mitigate exposure to sexual assault. Examples of risk-reduction activities might include Volunteers not walking alone at night or Peace Corps staff identifying Volunteer sites that have low crime profiles.

Such risk-reduction activities are a critical component of sexual assault prevention and, along with Volunteers integrating into their host communities, remain the bedrock of the Peace Corps' overall approach to Volunteer safety. Risk-reduction activities alone, however, cannot address the root causes of sexual violence, which are driven by inequitable societal norms that allow abuses of power to exist.

In May 2022, the Peace Corps confirmed the agency's commitment to Volunteer safety and the global effort of sexual assault prevention. Signaling this expanded approach, the Peace Corps officially changed the name of the Office of Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response to the Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response.

Shifting an organizational culture and approach does not happen swiftly or automatically. It requires intentional effort, time, and consistency. In FY 2022, the Peace Corps initiated an educational campaign to introduce the sexual assault prevention approach to over 3,000 staff members in the U.S. and 65 countries around the globe. In addition to facilitated in-person and virtual meetings, the SAPR team also created a training module on sexual assault prevention, which all Peace Corps staff are now required to complete.

¹⁹ A SARL is a full-time host country national staff member who has received training to serve as a first responder, along with other members of the Designated Staff team, for incidents of sexual assault. SARLs receive specialized training from the Office of Victim Advocacy to be certified to carry out this role and must complete an annual minimum of continuing education hours to maintain their certification.

²⁰ "Interim Policy Statement 1-12 Volunteer/Trainee Sexual Misconduct" Peace Corps, July 3, 2019, <https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/IPS-1-12-Interim-Policy.pdf>

Additional dialogue and training on prevention were held in-person at multiple Peace Corps staff and leadership conferences throughout FY 2022 and FY 2023. The socialization of prevention as a critical element of the Peace Corps' approach to sexual violence will continue until it is fully integrated into the agency's core operations.

PROGRAM ENHANCEMENTS

Adopted a Public Health Approach to Prevention

Building on current sexual assault prevention research, the Peace Corps adopted the public health prevention model as the organizing framework through which its sexual assault prevention strategy would be developed. This shift represents a notable enhancement of the agency's longstanding public safety approach, which emphasizes individual-level risk reduction, to a public health approach, which emphasizes societal-level violence prevention with community stakeholders.

It is important to note that when viewed through a public health lens, sexual assault prevention includes risk-reduction strategies in addition to strategies to address the root causes of sexual violence. The public health prevention model is defined by and organized into the following three categories:

1. **Primary Prevention:** Actions taken before sexual violence occurs (e.g., site preparation processes, programming for youth on topics such as sexual consent).
2. **Secondary Prevention:** Actions taken immediately after sexual violence occurs (e.g., emergency medical care, crisis counseling) to care for the physical, mental, and safety needs of the victim/survivor.
3. **Tertiary Prevention:** Long-term actions taken after sexual violence has occurred (e.g., expanded mental health care beyond the crisis) to prevent further re-traumatization and to reduce the risk of further victimization.

While the adoption of the public health approach is new to the Peace Corps, it is important to note that the Peace Corps has long been engaged in development activities that address gender inequities and harmful social norms, which are key factors that enable sexual assault. These programs, however, were not considered part of the SAPR program, which had historically focused on individual risk-reduction.

The Peace Corps also engages in a suite of activities to reduce risks to Volunteers as a strategy to prevent crime. For example, before Peace Corps Trainees arrive in their country of service, staff work diligently to prepare Volunteer sites in host communities that include safe and secure housing, identify counterparts, and vet host families. In coordination with OSS, staff at each post engage in primary prevention operations, such as:

- Security policies and procedures designed to promote safety, security, and community integration, where Volunteers—by learning the host language and culture—become members of their host communities;
- Regular review of country-level crime data 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, be aware of potential threats, and reduce their risk of experiencing a crime; and,
- Orientations for host families and counterparts about sexual harassment, sexual assault, and how to support Volunteers.

The holistic public health model of prevention opens additional pathways for the agency to intentionally deepen its investment in sexual assault prevention at every level, including widening the Peace Corps' focus on Volunteer safety to include the well-being of the host community members who work alongside Volunteers. By building upon the Peace Corps' longstanding development programs which can address the root causes of sexual violence (e.g., harmful gender norms, poverty, etc.) and by promoting the individual and societal factors that can protect against sexual violence (e.g., gender fairness, conflict resolution skills, strong support networks, etc.), host communities can become safer environments for the members of those communities as well as for the Peace Corps Volunteers that live and work in them.

Hired a Prevention Specialist

Following a recommendation in the SAAC's 2021 *Annual Report*,²¹ the Peace Corps recruited and hired the agency's first Senior Prevention Specialist in FY 2022. This key staff member is a new addition to the SAPR team and has spearheaded the Peace Corps' work to develop a formal, comprehensive sexual assault prevention strategy by evaluating agency activities and applying promising practices and evidence-based research.

Completed Gap Analysis

To inform the agency's sexual assault prevention strategy, in FY 2023 the Peace Corps hired an external consultant to conduct a gap analysis to assess the agency's existing prevention efforts and identify needs and gaps where additional resources should be allocated. To inform this work, the consultant assessed data from agency documents and conducted interviews and surveys with staff from Peace Corps Headquarters and overseas posts.

The evaluation consultant found that the Peace Corps already had a robust repository of programming documents, policies, procedures, and training materials that support primary prevention efforts. They also found that staff had a varying understanding of sexual assault prevention, and that

Promoting Community-Level Prevention in Samoa

While Volunteers in Samoa live with host families and work in schools, each day of their Peace Corps service is experienced from within a host community. To strengthen the community's role in supporting the safety and security of a Volunteer, the staff of Peace Corps/Samoa introduced a community orientation program that included sexual assault and harassment prevention.

Over the course of two months in FY 2021, orientation events were held in 41 communities across Samoa. Each event was opened by a district supervisor from the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture, after which Peace Corps staff reviewed various dimensions of Peace Corps service and opportunities for community support.

Each community orientation included extended conversations about sexual harassment and sexual assault. Peace Corps staff engaged the community members in the concepts and definitions of sexual harassment and assault as well as their physical and psychological impacts. Furthermore, participants discussed strategies for preventing sexual harassment and assault in their communities, including how to intervene safely to halt inappropriate behavior and contact Peace Corps staff for assistance.

Talking directly about sexual assault and harassment is considered taboo in Samoa. To communicate more credibly with Samoa's High Chiefs, Peace Corps staff learned the Orators' version of the Samoan language, which conveys information indirectly through parables and complicated vocabulary. These important discussions, led with cultural sensitivity, have the potential to heighten awareness and spur a sense of community agency on sexual assault and harassment.

²¹ Peace Corps Sexual Assault Advisory Committee, 2021 Annual Report, 11.

the agency lacked an overarching strategy to establish the primary prevention direction. Additionally, the evaluation report indicated that the Peace Corps' diverse operating context across 65 countries could pose an implementation challenge to prevention work in communities that vary widely in culture and levels of development.

To remedy these gaps, the consultant recommended that the Peace Corps:

1. Work to create a unified understanding of the term "prevention" and the public health approach among Peace Corps staff, including a definitive sexual assault prevention strategy/policy.
2. Appropriately resource sexual assault prevention and hire additional personnel to expand the agency's SAPR work.
3. Broaden the current emphasis on individual prevention efforts to include relationship-, community-, and societal-level prevention efforts.
4. Develop evaluation mechanisms to assess prevention strategies and interventions.
5. Collect data to monitor the effectiveness of the agency's culture shift from a public safety approach to prevention to a public health approach to prevention.²²

THE WAY FORWARD

The Peace Corps is working to address the five recommendations issued at the conclusion of the gap analysis. By December 2024, the agency will release a *Sexual Assault Prevention Strategy*, defining the agency's approach to sexual assault prevention by employing the public health model (Recommendation 1). The strategy codifies the vision and theory of change that will guide the agency's work in sexual assault prevention. It will also serve as the foundation for the forthcoming *Sexual Assault Prevention Implementation Plan*, which will outline the standardized programs that Volunteers can implement in their communities to address the key socio-cultural and economic drivers of sexual assault (Recommendation 3).

In FY 2024, the Peace Corps committed additional resources to the SAPR program and hired a consulting firm²³ to conduct a comprehensive review of the agency's current policies and training materials on sexual assault (Recommendation 2). The firm has begun to facilitate trainings for all staff on trauma-informed communication.²⁴

Furthermore, as part of the development of the Peace Corps' *Sexual Assault Prevention Strategy and Implementation Plan*, monitoring and feedback mechanisms will be established to evaluate the effectiveness of the SAPR program (Recommendations 4 and 5).

²² EvalGroup, Peace Corps Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program (SAPR): Gap Analysis (Los Altos, California: EvalGroup, 202

²³ See pages 19-20 for more information.

²⁴ For more information, see pages 20-22.

IMPROVE SEXUAL ASSAULT RESPONSE

The interdisciplinary SAPR program team, as detailed on page 7, is responsible for the policies and procedures that govern the agency's sexual assault response protocols and services available to Volunteer victims/survivors. Recognizing the substantial impact that sexual assault can have on an individual's physical and mental well-being, the Peace Corps established the following commitment to Volunteer victims/survivors, which all staff are accountable for demonstrating in actions and words. This commitment is codified in Peace Corps Manual Section 243:

- **Compassion:** We will treat Volunteers with dignity and respect. No one deserves to be a victim of a sexual assault.
- **Safety:** We will take appropriate steps to provide for the Volunteer's ongoing safety.
- **Support:** We will provide Volunteers with the support they need to help their recovery.
- **Legal:** We will help Volunteers understand the relevant legal processes and their legal options.
- **Open Communication:** We will keep Volunteers informed of the progress of their case should they choose to pursue prosecution.
- **Continuation of Service:** We will work closely with Volunteers to make decisions regarding their safety and continued service.
- **Privacy:** We will respect Volunteer privacy and will not, without the Volunteer's consent, disclose the Volunteer's identity or share the details of the incident with anyone who does not have a specific need to know.²⁵

The first responders and service providers for Volunteer victims/survivors of sexual assault are known as Designated Staff.²⁶ This team at each Peace Corps post is comprised of the following:

- PCMOs
- Safety and Security Manager (SSM), Safety and Security Assistant (SSA),²⁷ and back-up SSM²⁸
- SARLs

Additionally, the regional Peace Corps Safety and Security Officer (PCSSO) is a remote member of the Designated Staff who the SSM or SSA can reach out to for guidance, when needed.

Since 2013, the Peace Corps has offered a comprehensive suite of support services to Volunteers who have experienced sexual assault using two reporting modalities. The Volunteer victim/survivor drives the sexual assault response process, selecting the reporting level (restricted or standard as outlined below) and choosing the services they prefer to receive.

²⁵ "MS 243 Responding to Sexual Assault Procedures," Peace Corps, December 30, 2021, 8, <https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/MS-243-Procedures.pdf>

²⁶ Only the Designated Staff who have a specific need to know to support the health and safety of a specific Volunteer, and those that Volunteer victim/survivor has elected to involve, are involved in a sexual assault case.

²⁷ Not all Peace Corps posts have an SSA. The position depends on post-specific factors, such as the number of Volunteers and the complexity of the post's security environment.

²⁸ A back-up SSM is a host country national staff member who has taken on the collateral duty and received training to support Volunteer safety and security when the SSM and/or SSA are away from post.

RESTRICTED REPORT SERVICES	STANDARD REPORT SERVICES
<p>Medical Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency health care • Medical treatment plan • Sexual Assault Forensic Exam (SAFE) • Mental health services • Medical evacuation • Respite leave <p>Advocacy Support Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victim advocate services • SARL services • Incident summary review <p>Safety and Legal Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety planning • Explanation of legal options by a local lawyer 	<p>All Services Available for Restricted Reports, Plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law enforcement and additional legal services • Report to local law enforcement • Retention of a local lawyer • Report to or request assistance from the OIG <p>Administrative Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site change • Host family change • File a complaint against another Volunteer under the Sexual Misconduct Policy²⁹ • Support and assistance from the Country Director or other non-Designated Staff • Any other service deemed necessary

The Peace Corps also maintains a confidential sexual assault helpline that offers crisis intervention, support, and information to Volunteers who may have been affected by sexual assault. The PC SAVES (Peace Corps Sexual Assault Volunteer Education and Support) Helpline is accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and is operated by RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network) through the Armed Forces Services Corporation.

PROGRAM ENHANCEMENTS

The Peace Corps is committed to continually improving its approach to sexual assault response, both in the quality of services provided to Volunteer victims/survivors as well as in identifying and minimizing real or perceived barriers that may hinder a Volunteer victim/survivor from reporting a sexual assault.

As a program with more than a decade of implementation, SAPR has collected data and feedback which, when combined with best practices in the field of sexual violence research, offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of the agency's services to Volunteer victims/survivors of sexual assault. The Peace Corps has strategically analyzed its response policies, procedures, and services between FY 2021 and FY 2023 to identify opportunities for enhancement, utilizing feedback from staff, the SAAC, Volunteers, and returned Volunteers.

Expanded Mental Health Services

The psychosocial impacts of sexual assault can endure long past the original incident. Therefore, the Peace Corps has expanded its mental health services for Volunteer victims/survivors of sexual assault. In addition to psychological assessments for care plans and supportive counseling, Volunteer victims/survivors can

²⁹ "IPS 1-12 Volunteer/Trainee Sexual Misconduct," Peace Corps, July 3, 2019, <https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/IPS-1-12-Interim-Policy.pdf>

participate in evidence-based and culturally sensitive therapy from their host community via telephone or Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)-compliant virtual calls.³⁰

Recognizing that ongoing self-care can prevent some issues from becoming severe and requiring medical attention, and in accordance with a recommendation from the SAAC,³¹ the Peace Corps' Behavioral Health and Outreach Unit (BHO) has also introduced non-clinical resources and services for Volunteers to access. In FY 2023, BHO launched *My Well-Being Hub*, an app and website³² repository of resources curated to promote Volunteer well-being. The *My Well-Being Hub* offers four sites for tailored support:

- **Be Well** offers videos, podcasts, articles, activities, and meditation resources to address specific well-being concerns, such as feeling down, stress, interpersonal conflict, and navigating diversity.
- **UThrive** provides guidance and multimedia resources to support the four foundational pillars of well-being: mind, body, spirit, and connections.
- **Well-Being Tele-Coaching** provides Volunteers access to private sessions with a coach to discuss non-clinical life stressors. The Peace Corps' tele-coaches are certified by the International Coaching Federation.
- **Adaptive Mindsets** offers tools to build skills in navigating life's challenges through four research-driven areas: emotional agility, flexible thinking, problem solving, and social connection and empathy.

Addition of Stalking to Immunity Policy

In FY 2015, the Peace Corps adopted Manual Section 240, which set forth the agency's policy of granting immunity to Volunteer victims/survivors and witnesses of sexual assault for any policy violations that may have occurred in connection with the sexual assault incident (e.g., if a Volunteer victim/survivor was sexually assaulted while in violation of a travel restriction). The intent of this policy is to eliminate a barrier to reporting sexual assaults.

In accordance with a recommendation from the SAAC,³³ in FY 2022, this Manual Section was expanded to include immunity³⁴ from disciplinary action for Volunteer victims/survivors and witnesses of stalking. This addition is intended to clear a wider path for Volunteers who experience stalking to report the incident to the Peace Corps and receive appropriate support and services.

Bi-Monthly Case Management Reviews

In FY 2022, the Peace Corps established a new management process requiring post staff to formally review sexual assault cases to confirm that all appropriate policies and protocols were followed and to identify any challenges with documented cases. This review process—which does not include personally identifying information about the Volunteer victims/survivors—fosters an environment that supports the continuous improvement of the overall response to Volunteers who report a sexual assault. The bi-monthly case management review meeting requires the Designated Staff and Country Director at each post to:

- Review the post's response to Volunteer victims/survivors of sexual assault;
- Ensure system accountability; and
- Identify and address systematic barriers that may exist.

³⁰ "HIPAA Compliance Datasheet," Zoom, August 2021, <https://explore.zoom.us/docs/doc/Zoom-hipaa.pdf>

³¹ Peace Corps Sexual Assault Advisory Committee, *2021 Annual Report*, 16.

³² "My Well-Being Hub," Peace Corps, September 30, 2023, <https://peacecorps.libguides.com/mywellbeinghub>

³³ Peace Corps Sexual Assault Advisory Council, *2020 Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: Peace Corps, 2021)

³⁴ "MS 240 Immunity from Disciplinary Action in Sexual Assault and Stalking Incidents," Peace Corps, February 18, 2022, <https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/MS-240-Policy.pdf>

In the after-action review of each case of sexual assault, the Designated Staff and Country Director discuss the response to the Volunteer victim/survivor including what worked, challenges encountered, if and how the team overcame challenges, and lessons learned. In this manner, time for reflection and review is built into the response process, thus prompting a discussion with Designated Staff to consider and explore potential areas for improvement.

Security Incident Questionnaire Analysis

Upon closure of their Peace Corps service, all Volunteers are provided with a Security Incident Questionnaire (SIQ), which collects anonymous information on reported and unreported crimes that occurred during Peace Corps service. Additionally, the survey collects data related to the reason(s) why each Volunteer respondent may not have reported a crime to Peace Corps staff.

In FY 2019, Volunteers who experienced sexual assault but did not report the incident to Peace Corps staff cited one or more of the following reasons in the SIQ:

- The belief that the incident was not that serious or threatening
- The belief that there is nothing the Peace Corps could do
- The belief it was handled another way
- Fear of how Peace Corps staff might respond
- Possible adverse consequences that might occur (such as administrative separation or site change)
- The difficulty of the reporting process
- The incident was too upsetting to talk about
- The belief that the victim/survivor was partly responsible³⁵

Analysis of this information is critical to understanding the real and/or perceived barriers to reporting sexual assaults and to addressing issues that may be occurring at the post level or are due to systemic organizational challenges.

Response Quality Survey Analysis

Launched in 2014, the Response Quality Survey (RQS) is sent to all individuals (Trainees, Volunteers, and recently returned Volunteers) who report a sexual assault during their service. Sent within 30 days of the Volunteer reporting the incident, the purpose of the survey is to assess satisfaction with the response provided by Peace Corps staff.

To gain a more complete view of the Peace Corps' management of sexual assault response, in FY 2023 the agency began analyzing RQS data and compiling quarterly reports. Shared only with the Director of the Office of SAPR and a senior member of OSS, these reports now enable the agency to conduct regular quality assurance checks and identify general themes from the responses. This data offers an important feedback mechanism for continuous quality improvement in sexual assault response.

Additionally, respondents to the RQS now have the option to request communication with the Director of the Office of SAPR to confidentially discuss their user experience with the Peace Corps' sexual assault response services.

³⁵ "2019 Annual Report of Crime Against Volunteers," Peace Corps, September 2020, https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/open-government/Annual_Report_of_Crimes_Against_Volunteers_2019.pdf

Required Training for All Staff

While the members of the Designated Staff at each post undergo specialized training for responding to sexual assault, any member of the Peace Corps staff may receive the initial disclosure of a sexual assault from a Volunteer. Thus, all staff must be prepared to respond compassionately, confidentially, and in accordance with the procedures set forth in Manual Section 243 to connect the Volunteer victim/survivor with support services.

Therefore, Peace Corps staff are required to complete the following courses during the first months of their employment and later as refresher trainings:

TITLE	DESCRIPTION	AUDIENCE	FREQUENCY
Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Training	Provides an introduction to the Peace Corps' SAPR program, including defining what is sexual assault and how staff can support Volunteer victims/survivors.	All Staff	Within 30 days of the start of employment
SAPR Post All-Staff Training	The topic of this annual training for overseas staff changes each year. FY 2021's training focused on culturally informed support in the context of sexual assault. FY 2022's training examined active listening and validation skills with victims/survivors. And FY 2023's training explored interpersonal support skills for Volunteers who have witnessed violence.	Overseas Staff	Annually (alternates between in-person and online training every other year)
Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, and Stalking	Provides information and Peace Corps resources to assist staff on how: to help fellow employees who are experiencing violence; to address performance issues that may be a byproduct of violence; and to create an organizational culture that supports victims/survivors of violence.	All U.S. Direct Hire and Personal Service Contractor Staff	Within 60 days of the start of employment, and every three years afterward
Domestic Staff SAPR Refresher Training	This training was updated in 2022 to focus on the SAPR program's expansion to include prevention.	Domestic Staff	Annually
Active Listening and Validation	This scenario-based training models two key interpersonal support skills: active listening and validation.	Overseas Staff	Within 30 days of the start of employment

Continuous Training for Designated Staff

New PCMOs, SSMs, and SSAs must complete an online New Designated Staff Training course before they can access restricted reports of sexual assault. This is typically accomplished between 30-45 days of their joining the Designated Staff team. For new SARLs, OVA provides a separate, live webinar training.

Following the worldwide evacuation of Volunteers in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Peace Corps began returning Volunteers to overseas service in March 2022. To refresh post staff's sexual assault response skills and knowledge of SAPR policies, case management, and trauma-informed care, the Peace Corps required all Designated Staff to complete the *Return to Service SAPR Training for Designated Staff* training within 30 days of the arrival of each post's first group of Volunteers following the evacuation.

Each post's Designated Staff team is also required to meet on a quarterly basis to review a specific topic related to sexual assault that has been prepared by the SAPR team. These quarterly meetings provide consistent opportunities for Designated Staff to learn new information together, review policies and procedures, discuss prepared scenarios, and enhance their teamwork. During the period of FY 2021 through FY 2023, the Designated Staff quarterly meetings examined the following topics:

FISCAL YEAR	QUARTER	DESIGNATED STAFF MEETING TOPICS
FY 2021	Q1	Review of changes to <i>Manual Section 245: Respite Leave</i> ³⁶ and supporting male victims of sexual assault
	Q2	Preparation for the all-staff training on culturally informed support
	Q3	Self-care resources
	Q4	Case management
FY 2022	Q1	Sexual Assault Case Management Review Meeting
	Q2	Review of changes to <i>Manual Section 240: Immunity from Disciplinary Action in Sexual Assault and Stalking Incidents</i>
	Q3	Conversation on building safe spaces online
	Q4	Review case management review process, Volunteer Preference Form (VPF), and the <i>Peace Corps Approach to Sexual Assault Prevention Roadmap</i>
FY 2023	Q1	Practice explaining the services listed on the VPF and self-care strategies
	Q2	Documentation of stalking incidents in the Security Incident Management System (SIMS); ³⁷ review of the Coordinated Agency Response System (CARS) ³⁸ call procedures to protect Volunteer confidentiality; and reflection on case management meetings
	Q3	Scenario-based practice on responding to complex incidents; guidance for Volunteers who witness violence; documenting cases in SIMS; and self-care strategies for Designated Staff
	Q4	Continued practice on responding to complex incidents and classification of crimes

³⁶ "MS 245 Respite Leave," Peace Corps, September 30, 2020, <https://files.peacecorps.gov/documents/MS-245-Policy.pdf>

³⁷ See page 23–24 for more information on SIMS.

³⁸ See page 26 for more information on CARS.

Continuous Training for Peace Corps Medical Officers

As critical members of the Designated Staff at each Peace Corps post, PCMOs play a lead, first-responder role in managing the agency's response to sexual assaults and supporting Volunteer victims/survivors. In addition to the all-staff and Designated Staff trainings listed above, all PCMOs must complete a *Sexual Assault Forensic Exam (SAFE) Training* within 45 days of the start of their employment and annually after that.

PCMOs are also required to attend a week-long continuing medical education (CME) training each year, which includes sessions to deepen their skills in various aspects of sexual assault response. At the FY 2021 CME, 144 PCMOs received training on injury assessment and documentation of sexual assault and intimate partner violence for medical and legal examinations. The FY 2022 CME provided 140 PCMOs with additional training on SAFE and trauma-informed physical exams. In the FY 2023 CME, 126 PCMOs received expert training on strangulation assessment (common in sexual assault crimes) and the forensic collection of evidence for legal purposes.

Continuous Training for Sexual Assault Response Liaisons

The responsibility of a SARL—a full-time host country national staff member who has volunteered and received training to serve as a first responder—is in addition to their primary role as a Peace Corps staff member. SARLs are key members of the Designated Staff team who liaise directly with Volunteer victims/survivors to provide support and accompaniment throughout the in-country sexual assault response process. SARLs follow a formal continuing education program and must complete a minimum of 10 hours of annual professional development to maintain their certification as a SARL.

In FY 2021 and FY 2022, OVA facilitated more than 30 live virtual workshops on topics such as providing on-going survivor-centered support, addressing ethical dilemmas, maintaining professional boundaries, navigating complex cases, as well as self-care topics like wellness journaling.

Partnering with Law Enforcement in Belize

The SSM for Peace Corps/Belize has developed and maintained organizational relationships with the local law enforcement at every site considered for Volunteer placement. After becoming aware of the Peace Corps' vast training resources in sexual assault and trauma-informed support, law enforcement authorities in the capital, Belize City, requested training assistance for their officers responsible for domestic violence response and the first responders who staff the front desk at police stations.

With encouragement from Belize's Minister of Home Affairs and Deputy Commissioner of Police, Peace Corps staff in Belize organized four full-day trainings to take place, one in each cardinal direction of the country. Utilizing existing Peace Corps training resources, the comprehensive curriculum covered:

- Combatting bias;
- The danger of a single story;
- Sexual assault awareness;
- Understanding trauma and its impact;
- Trauma-informed interviewing guidance and practice;
- Self-care for police officers and victims/survivors; and
- Interpersonal support skills

In total, Peace Corps/Belize staff trained 54 police officers and 44 first responders. They view this work as critical in creating a safer and more supportive environment both for Volunteers and the people of Belize.

In FY 2023, OVA hosted all 121 SARLS at a three-day continuing education conference designed to deepen their knowledge of the Peace Corps' SAPR program, communicate updates on the Peace Corps' security systems, and foster learning about trauma-responsive facilitation.

Continuous Training for Safety and Security Staff

The roles and responsibilities of SSMs and SSAs in response to a sexual assault may include managing the immediate safety needs of a Volunteer victim/survivor; documenting the details of the crime; and accompanying the Volunteer victim/survivor to a police station to make a report. The importance of these tasks and the sensitivity in carrying them out are critical to supporting a Volunteer victim/survivor during a highly vulnerable time.

Additionally, SSMs and SSAs play the lead role in delivering a standardized set of safety and security trainings (known as the Global Core) to all Volunteers. In FY 2021, prior to Volunteers returning to posts, SSMs and SSAs participated in a required online training of trainers, consisting of three half-day sessions, that refreshed their understanding and ability to facilitate the safety and security Global Core training package, including the sessions on sexual assault. Supplemental review sessions on the Global Core trainings were further provided to SSMs and SSAs in FY 2022.

THE WAY FORWARD

To support secondary prevention, the Peace Corps will continue to enhance training for posts' Designated Staff. For example, the agency's OHS recently created a comprehensive training plan for PCMOs that includes annual clinical skills refreshers, quarterly webinars to address emerging topics in forensic and clinical care, and an improved mentorship training program for onboarding medical officers.

Moving forward, the Peace Corps is working to improve the Volunteer Preference Form (VPF), which documents the services that a Volunteer victim/survivor selects and consents to receive. To ensure that services are clearly and consistently communicated by staff across all Peace Corps posts, the agency is developing a conversation guide to accompany the VPF. The guide will be particularly useful to staff for whom English is a non-native language, as it will help them convey information to Volunteers in a trauma-informed manner. The Peace Corps is also introducing a new user-friendly, digital VPF option that will be integrated into SIMS, making the archival documentation of service selection seamless. The paper VPF will remain available, especially for in-person conversations with Volunteer victims/survivors and can be uploaded by staff to SIMS after intake.

In March 2024, following a recommendation in the SAAC's *2021 Annual Report*,³⁹ the Peace Corps contracted with a Tele-SANE service to provide live assistance and consultation to PCMOs as they conduct SAFE exams. This tele-health program is designed to enhance the sexual assault exam with trauma-informed and expert clinical care from a certified Tele-SANE nurse who conducts such exams on a regular basis. This new enhancement to the forensic exam procedure is an important extension of the Peace Corps' commitment to high quality sexual assault response services.

To identify continual quality improvement opportunities, in FY 2024 the SAPR team will analyze the narrative reports from each post's bi-monthly case management meetings. These narratives contain valuable insights and feedback about the Peace Corps' response protocols to sexual assault and have the potential to illuminate patterns of challenge and/or best practices at the post, regional, and global levels.

³⁹ Peace Corps Sexual Assault Advisory Committee, *2021 Annual Report*, 34.

DEEPEN A TRAUMA-INFORMED ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

According to the CDC, trauma is a “physical, cognitive, and emotional response caused by a traumatic event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced as harmful or life-threatening.”⁴⁰ Traumatic experiences can be the result of a range of events—both past and present—such as abuse, neglect, poverty, violence or witnessing violence, discrimination, and other adverse experiences. Moreover, trauma can have long-lasting effects, such as health problems, mental health challenges, and an inclination toward risky behaviors.⁴¹

The collective understanding of trauma’s effect on the brain and its role in human lives and well-being has dramatically increased in recent years because of dedicated research and a concerted effort to move trauma-informed approaches beyond the clinical setting and into the public space.

Systems and interpersonal approaches that are trauma-informed assume that most people have a history of trauma and recognize and respond to the effects of trauma. With a trauma-informed lens, the Peace Corps can structure support services (e.g., interviews and physical exams for victims/survivors of sexual assault) to minimize the potential for triggering or exacerbating trauma—or adding new trauma.⁴²

Trauma-informed approaches can have a multi-level, positive effect. At an individual level, trauma-informed services have the potential to improve victim/survivor outcomes for their health and well-being. At an organizational level, trainings, prevention programs, and responses that are developed and implemented with a trauma-informed lens can create a culture of trust. At the Peace Corps, if Volunteers who have experienced sexual assault have confidence that their physical and psychological safety will be supported in a trauma-informed manner upon disclosure, the potential for Volunteer victims/survivors to seek services may expand.

At the same time, those who receive sexual assault disclosures and/or provide services—such as Peace Corps staff—to victims/survivors may experience vicarious (or secondary) trauma. This can be manifested through a range of negative psychosocial symptoms, causing potentially harmful effects to their well-being. As the Peace Corps develops an organizational culture that is trauma-informed, the agency is also taking care to assist Designated Staff with self-care strategies and connections to the employee assistance program for free and confidential counseling.

PROGRAM ENHANCEMENTS

Engagement of Trauma-Informed Consultant

In FY 2023, the Peace Corps contracted with a consulting firm to support the agency’s cultural shift toward being more trauma-informed and survivor-centered. The firm’s mission is “to equip helpers, healers, and protectors to better handle trauma”⁴³ which is accomplished through assessments, design, consultation, and coaching for trauma-informed organizational change. In addition to quarterly consultation meetings with SAPR, the scope of the consulting contract with the Peace Corps includes:

- A trauma-informed review of all SAPR policies, procedures, and surveys;
- A trauma-informed review of the revised Global Core safety and security trainings and the *My Safety Guide*;⁴⁴

40 “Building Trauma-Informed Communities,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 25, 2022, <https://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2022/05/trauma-informed/>

41 Alexandra Maul and Christopher Menschner, *Key Ingredients for Successful Trauma-Informed Care Implementation* (Hamilton, New Jersey: Center for Health Care Strategies, 2016), 1, https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/childrens_mental_health/atc-whitepaper-040616.pdf

42 “What is Trauma-Informed Care?,” Buffalo Center for Social Research, Accessed January 26, 2024, <https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/social-research/institutes-centers/institute-on-trauma-and-trauma-informed-care/what-is-trauma-informed-care.html>

43 “About Greenleaf Integrative,” Greenleaf Integrative, Accessed January 29, 2024, <https://greenleafintegrative.com/about-greenleaf-integrative/>

44 The Peace Corps’ *My Safety Guide* is a comprehensive resource written by returned Volunteers that covers safety and security risks that are common to Peace Corps service. The guide complements safety and security trainings and policies.

- The delivery of eight role-specific, trauma-informed trainings for staff.

After a comprehensive review of the Peace Corps' sexual assault policies, trainings, and guides using a trauma-informed lens, the external consultant identified opportunities for the inclusion of more compassionate and relational language, more consistent terminology across documents, and the depersonalization of role plays and scenarios in training content. The consultant has also proposed that the Peace Corps integrate a trauma-informed commitment into the agency's policies, trainings, and documents related to sexual assault, which the agency is implementing.

Video Series: *On Being Trauma-Informed*

In FY 2022, as part of the journey to develop a trauma-informed workforce, the SAPR program created a staff development video series entitled *On Being Trauma-Informed*. Consisting of 15 interviews with Peace Corps staff, including the agency's Director, this series explores the meaning of being trauma-informed and the impacts of not taking a trauma-informed approach. Collectively, the interviews conducted by Peace Corps' BHO psychologists, are based on the four "Rs" of a trauma-informed approach:

1. Realize the prevalence and pervasive impact of trauma.
2. Recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma.
3. Respond with the aim of restoring an individual's sense of control and belief in humanity.
4. Resist re-traumatization.

The video series is accompanied by a master facilitator's guide that provides additional information on the trauma-informed approach and discussion questions in response to each video. As a resource created by and for Peace Corps staff, the *On Being Trauma-Informed* video series provides a direct application of a trauma-informed approach to the Peace Corps' unique operating context.

Revised Safety and Security Training Sessions for Volunteers

All Volunteers receive comprehensive safety and security training in the pre-service and in-service environments. The safety and security Global Core training package includes five standardized pre-service trainings, six additional safety and security topics on which posts deliver sessions tailored to the host country context (not standardized), one standardized in-service training, and the *My Safety Guide*. These trainings address personal security, unwanted attention, bystander intervention, and sexual assault. Sessions are designed to equip Volunteers with an awareness of their new country context, including potential threats and how to mitigate and respond to the risks inherent in Peace Corps service. Volunteers also learn about relevant policies and procedures and the support services available to them.

In FY 2023, the Peace Corps embarked upon a comprehensive update and revision to the safety and security Global Core training package. In addition to incorporating feedback from multiple stakeholders, BHO and the external contractor reviewed the draft versions of the revised sessions through a lens that would ensure that trauma-informed approaches are embedded within each training. Pilot versions of each training have been tested with five posts, allowing end-user Volunteers and staff to provide additional feedback for further refinement.

Trauma-Informed Communication Training for Safety and Security Staff

When a Volunteer experiences a sexual assault, the SSM or SSA documents the incident details based on the Volunteer's description. This conversation of recounting a sexual assault has the potential to cause additional trauma to the Volunteer victim/survivor. To mitigate this risk, in FY 2023 all SSMs and SSAs

participated in required virtual training facilitated by an expert instructor to learn about trauma-informed communication based on Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview principles.⁴⁵ SSMs and SSAs first viewed a series of trauma-informed interview videos produced by the University of Texas and completed corresponding online training activities. Then the SSMs and SSAs participated in six hours of live virtual webinars on trauma-informed communication, building each participant's skills in collecting the important details of sexual assault while minimizing potential trauma.

Trauma-Informed Training for Peace Corps Medical Officers

PCMOs interact with every Volunteer victim/survivor of sexual assault. For individuals who have already experienced the trauma of assault, it is critically important that medical history-taking and physical exams incorporate the principles that underlie trauma-informed practices.

In their annual CME conferences for the period FY 2021 through FY 2023, the Peace Corps deepened the training for PCMOs through dedicated sessions on: sexual assault and trauma-informed care; crisis intervention and victim responses; and trauma-informed physical exams. The International Association of Forensic Nurses worked with the PCMOs to demonstrate trauma-informed history-taking skills, and the Peace Corps' OHS hosted a standalone webinar in June 2022 to strengthen PCMOs' trauma-informed, interpersonal support to Volunteer victims/survivors.

Trauma-Informed Facilitation Training for Sexual Assault Response Liaisons

As key staff dedicated to supporting the needs of Volunteer victims/survivors of sexual assault, SARLs are in a unique position to be change agents at every post as part of the journey toward a trauma-informed workplace environment. In September 2023 all SARLs role received training on trauma-informed facilitation. In addition to learning about the neurobiology of trauma, SARLs explored the critical components of trauma-informed facilitation: noticing stress; supporting physical and emotional safety; communicating clearly; encouraging choice; sharing control; and connecting to the present.

THE WAY FORWARD

After extensive piloting and feedback, all SSMs and SSAs received training on the revised safety and security Global Core training package at a weeklong conference in October 2023. The facilitation of each training session was demonstrated for the SSMs and SSAs, who played the role of Volunteers. OSS collected additional feedback at the conference for inclusion in the final version of the training sessions, which were released to all posts in the second quarter of FY 2024 along with a revised version of the Volunteer learning assessment. These revised training sessions incorporate new elements of trauma-informed and public health approaches to sexual assault prevention. The *My Safety Guide* handbook also underwent a revision to align with the new Global Core training package and will be sent to posts for Volunteers to utilize in conjunction with the new training sessions. Lastly, OSS will revise the online course that Volunteers can take before they arrive in their host country, entitled *Orientation to Safety and Security*, to align with the updated Global Core safety and security trainings.

As part of the roll-out of this new training curriculum, OSS is offering a suite of support services as posts prepare to implement the new training sessions. Training session plans and guides will assist posts in the delivery of these sessions. Office hours and consultations for SSMs and other Designated Staff will address any questions or concerns, provide training tips and reminders, and discuss implementation in the context of posts' pre-service training calendars. Additionally, posts' senior staff will also receive presentations on the revised Global Core training package during regularly scheduled virtual meetings.

⁴⁵ In response to a recommendation in the SAAC's 2021 Annual Report (page 25), the Peace Corps agreed to identify and train selected staff on how to conduct sexual assault interviews in a trauma-informed and compassionate manner.

As a follow-up to their six hours of trauma-informed communication, SSMs and SSAs applied their skills during the October 2023 conference with five additional hours of trauma-informed communication and facilitation practice. The SAAC's *2021 Annual Report* recommended annual trainings on trauma-informed communication,⁴⁶ and the SAPR team plans to develop an online course to support this recommendation, including an annual refresher course for all Designated Staff.

In February and March of 2024, the Peace Corps conducted a series of in-person and live virtual seminars to advance the agency's trauma-informed organizational culture and demonstrate trauma-informed facilitation techniques. Participants in this webinar series included senior staff, Associate Directors and Regional Directors at Peace Corps Headquarters, members of the SAPR team, Country Directors at posts, and members of each post's Designated Staff (SSMs, SSAs, PCMOs, and SARLs). Finally, the results from the trauma-informed document review will be incorporated into the SAPR program's policies, procedures, trainings, and surveys.

⁴⁶ Peace Corps Sexual Assault Advisory Committee, *2021 Annual Report*, 26.

STRENGTHEN AND INTEGRATE SYSTEMS

The Peace Corps operates in some of the most remote and under-resourced regions of the world. Supporting Volunteer safety and security, including sexual assault prevention and response, is a top priority in these dynamic contexts. This is reflected in the agency's investment in safety and security staff, databases, policies, procedures, surveys, and trainings. Individually, each of these components has a defined impact on Volunteer safety and security. When connected, however, they have the potential to create a comprehensive system that holistically exemplifies the agency's organizational commitment to Volunteer safety and security.

Integrating the agency's safety and security staff, databases, policies, procedures, surveys, and trainings is a key priority for the Peace Corps. While best practices in any field or organization highlight areas of promise, merging those best practices into an entire system brings efficiency, standardization, and consistent application of the SAPR program to the 65 countries where the Peace Corps operates.

SYSTEMS ENHANCEMENTS

Security Incident Management System and Security Incident Questionnaire

To support quality data collection, in FY 2021 the Peace Corps launched SIMS,⁴⁷ a custom-built information database that records data and tracks the case management of all crimes and security incidents involving Peace Corps Volunteers and staff, including sexual assault and stalking.⁴⁸ User restrictions ensure that only staff who are authorized to view sexual assault data have access to that information. All users of SIMS must complete a training course prior to gaining access to the database.

The SIMS database records geographic information related to each security incident and, most significantly, links this information to the site history data stored in the agency's Volunteer Information Database Application (VIDA). While the Peace Corps has always required that posts document crime incidents that occur at Volunteer sites, no standardized process was consistently followed. In FY 2023, the Peace Corps strengthened the system for maintaining site history information by automating the linkages between SIMS and VIDA. This documented history of safety and security incidents is reviewed prior to placing future Volunteers at each site.

OSS also runs regular compliance reports from SIMS, using the data to track a variety of measures: the number of reported crime incidents per region in each country; the classification of crime incidents, including sexual assault; whether the crime incidents were entered into SIMS within the required timeframe; and the number of revisions to the crime incident narrative needed to bring it into compliance with established requirements.

Each crime recorded in SIMS includes a detailed description of the incident. To ensure that the summary description of sexual assaults is recorded accurately, the Volunteer victim/survivor may request to review the description and make any needed amendments. SIMS also incorporates an important quality assurance function by tracking the services received by Volunteer victims/survivors of sexual assault. This feature ensures that sexual assault response services are administered in compliance with Peace Corps policies.

⁴⁷ SIMS replaced the Peace Corps' previous security incident database programs, known as the Consolidated Incident Reporting System (CIRS) and CARS.

⁴⁸ SIMS also collects information on select non-criminal incidents, such as harassment, Volunteer deaths, and vehicular accidents.

For various reasons, some Volunteers who experience crime do not report those incidents to Peace Corps staff. To obtain as complete a picture as possible of crime against Volunteers, the Peace Corps sends departing Volunteers the SIQ, which allows them to anonymously report any crimes they experienced during their service and, if they did not previously report the crimes to Peace Corps staff, their reason(s) for not having disclosed them.

In response to a SAAC recommendation to review existing surveys from the perspective of the Volunteer (or with Volunteer input) to minimize additional trauma and maximize the response rate,⁴⁹ OSS surveyed a group of returned Peace Corps Volunteers in 2022 and subsequently revised the SIQ based on that input. Changes include streamlined definitions of sexual assault crimes and clarified terminology to prompt Volunteer victims/survivors to note whether crimes were committed by an intimate partner, if applicable. Additional changes were made to the format and layout of the questionnaire to enhance clarity and improve Volunteer engagement. These changes have contributed to a more comprehensive, user-friendly, and trauma-informed survey instrument that supports a data collection process that is both effective and respectful of the sensitive nature of the topic.

The Peace Corps makes public the high-level, anonymized data captured in SIMS, SIQ, and the Annual Volunteer Survey (AVS), in the form of Country Crime Profile reports for each Peace Corps post. These reports, which also include early termination data, are published on the Peace Corps' website, and individuals who are considering applying to become a Peace Corps Volunteer are encouraged to review the crime data for their countries of interest as part of their decision-making process. Additionally, yearly data from SIMS, SIQ, and AVS is aggregated to create the Annual Report of Crimes Against Volunteers, which includes—among other things—data on all crime incidents and perceptions of safety in each country.

Annual Volunteer Survey

The AVS is a self-administered online survey that solicits feedback from current Volunteers on a wide range of topics, including their perceptions of safety and exposure to discrimination and harassment. These responses assist the Peace Corps in assessing progress toward its goals and identifying areas for improvement.

Key findings related to safety and security in the FY 2023 AVS include the following:

- Respondents reported generally feeling safe or very safe where they work (95 percent) and live (92 percent). That perception decreases when traveling outside their host communities, in terms of both personal security (74 percent feel safe or very safe) and transportation security (63 percent feel safe or very safe).
- The most frequently cited occurrences of insensitive comments, harassment (of any kind), or discrimination experienced by Volunteers in their host countries are related to sex, race/color/ethnicity, and/or their U.S. nationality. Each was cited by about one out of every three respondents (33–34 percent). Nearly three out of ten (27 percent) respondents stated they have not experienced any insensitive comments, harassment, or discrimination during the previous 12 months.
- “Catcalling” is the most frequent form of sexual harassment experienced by Volunteers, with half of respondents (50 percent) stating that they experienced this at least monthly and 15 percent stating that they experienced it daily. Strangers were cited by respondents as the most common offenders, with catcalling occurring most frequently on streets and sidewalks. Volunteer sentiment about the Peace Corps' services regarding sexual harassment ranges from 73 percent of respondents who felt the Peace Corps provides adequate training on identifying and reporting sexual harassment to 52 percent who expressed confidence in the Peace Corps' ability to effectively address reported occurrences.

⁴⁹ Peace Corps Sexual Assault Advisory Committee, 2021 Annual Report, 20.

Site Management

One of the most significant aspects of Peace Corps operations that affects safety and security is site management. Each Peace Corps Volunteer is assigned to a host community or site where they live and work for the entirety of their service. Prior to the Volunteer's arrival in-country, each site must be identified and prepared by Peace Corps staff. To support this critical operation, the Peace Corps has created quality assurance positions at each post to, among other duties, provide oversight of the site management process, including ensuring that the collection, filing, and review of all site management and site history information is done in compliance with Peace Corps policies.

In addition to the enhancement provided by linking the SIMS and VIDA databases, other improvements have also been implemented in the site management process to support Volunteer safety and security. In FY 2021, OSS issued a new standardized process for evaluating and selecting the host families that Volunteers live with during their pre-service and/or in-service periods. Posts are required to conduct assessments of all host families prior to Volunteer placement, including discussions with the local police/law enforcement or other community members (e.g., traditional chiefs, village leaders) to learn if the potential host family has any history or suspicion of domestic violence, sexual violence/abuse, criminal conduct, alcohol or drug abuse, frequent visitors, sexual/racial/religious harassment, physical violence, or negative recommendations from previous Volunteers. Documentation of host family evaluations is stored in VIDA, which allows staff to access this important information into the future.

In FY 2023, the Peace Corps updated its procedures to strengthen orientations for host families and counterparts. Prior to living with a host family or in a host community/site with independent housing, at least one adult member of each host family and a designated person of authority at the site (counterpart or supervisor) are provided orientation by Peace Corps staff on sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention and response, consent, stalking, unwanted attention, violence prevention, and bystander intervention. Host families and counterparts learn how to discuss potential safety risks with Volunteers, provide guidance, or intervene when it is safe to do so to stop inappropriate sexual behaviors toward a Volunteer. Host families and counterparts are provided information on how to respond and support a Volunteer who has experienced sexual harassment and/or sexual assault. To ensure that these important and sensitive orientations are consistent with the Peace Corps' values, the agency's OVA and PCSSOs review all orientation materials in advance.

THE WAY FORWARD

Quality assurance and compliance is an ongoing priority for the Peace Corps, and the agency expects that 80 percent of the new quality assurance positions at posts will be filled by the end of FY 2024 to provide oversight of the implementation of systems and policies that support Volunteer safety and security. Regional quality assurance officers based at Peace Corps Headquarters have worked with posts to simplify and streamline the agency's site management protocols, while integrating compliance directly into the process. The information gained from significant input from the field resulted in the release of global site management guidance in March 2024, including a suite of revised and simplified forms and revisions to several policies. In tandem with this guidance, enhancements to VIDA have been deployed so that it systematically supports site management.

The Peace Corps will continue to incorporate new functionalities to VIDA to provide large-scale enhancements to the agency's site management processes, including storing site history information in intuitive and efficient input fields; documenting that Volunteer sites and houses meet established criteria; and tracking compliance with site management requirements, including host family and counterpart orientations on sexual assault and harassment.

Once a sexual assault has occurred, there may be an ongoing concern for the Volunteer victim/survivor's safety, particularly if the crime occurred within their host community. To manage the complex nature of sexual assault incidents, post staff may leverage the CARS team, which is comprised of expert staff⁵⁰ from key offices at Peace Corps Headquarters, to seek input and assistance. In FY 2024, the agency will review the protocol for calls between post staff and the CARS team to assess the effectiveness of the support provided for sexual assault cases.

Just as collecting data from various sources is a key part of the Peace Corps' approach to sexual assault prevention and response, collecting data on the SAPR program itself is also critical. To address a recommendation in the SAAC's *2021 Annual Report*,⁵¹ the Peace Corps is developing a standard operating procedure for its continuous quality improvement strategies to analyze various sources of data and measure the effectiveness and impact of SAPR's processes and procedures. This additional data will institutionalize feedback mechanisms for the Peace Corps to continue adapting the SAPR program to best meet the needs of Volunteers, staff, and host communities.

⁵⁰ The CARS team may include the following staff from Peace Corps Headquarters: Designated Security Specialist; Victim Advocate, Regional Security Advisor, Regional Chief of Operations, Regional Director, BHO Counselor, Field Support Clinician, Regional Attorney, PCSSO, Quality Improvement Nurse, and the Chief of the Crime Response Unit. It is important to note that not all members of the CARS team are involved in every case of sexual assault.

⁵¹ Peace Corps Sexual Assault Advisory Committee, *2021 Annual Report*, 14.

CONCLUSION

Every person has the right to live free of sexual violence, including the threat of sexual violence. As part of its obligation to the safety and security of Volunteers, the Peace Corps has a responsibility to continually utilize research and best practices to improve its systems that support the prevention of sexual violence and offer a trauma-informed response to Volunteers who experience sexual assault. The agency is fully committed to this ongoing work at every level. From training staff and Volunteers, leveraging data, and incorporating feedback, the Peace Corps works to ensure that all Volunteers are supported with high-quality and trauma-informed services.

Building on the SAPR program's foundation, the Peace Corps has made substantial progress in expanding and strengthening its SAPR operations over the past three years. The SAPR program continues to leverage access to best practices and research to improve the Peace Corps' sexual assault response services and procedures. Additionally, by broadening the SAPR program's scope to include sexual assault prevention and deepening a trauma-informed culture, SAPR programming touches on all parts of the agency's work with Volunteers and host communities. Through the Peace Corps' forthcoming *Sexual Assault Prevention Strategy*, the agency will further develop prevention programming that can be tailored to Volunteer host communities to support social and cultural norms that are protective factors against sexual violence.

Global issues like sexual violence require global action. The Peace Corps' work to broaden and strengthen the SAPR program is a whole-of-agency endeavor, involving the global Peace Corps network—every staff member, every Volunteer, every host family, and partners, community members, and counterparts. With operations in 65 countries, including some of the most remote regions of the world, the Peace Corps is well-positioned to contribute to the worldwide movement to end sexual violence through prevention programming that addresses the root causes of sexual violence such as harmful gender norms, unhealthy relationships, and power inequities.

While much has been accomplished in the period covered by this report, the Peace Corps will remain adaptive and determined in its approach to sexual assault prevention and response, continuing to learn from research and best practices. The work and voices of sexual violence victims/survivors, organizations, and researchers will continue to inform how the agency addresses this critical priority.

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