

Testimony of Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
“Peace Corps at 50”
May 11, 2011

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Berman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the steps the Peace Corps has taken to improve the safety, security, support, and care of our Volunteers.

As Director of the Peace Corps, and as a former Volunteer, I am part of the extended Peace Corps family. The health, safety, and support of every member of that family is my number one priority. Peace Corps Volunteers represent the best America has to offer, and we owe them our best in return.

Peace Corps’ Commitment to Volunteers and their Families

We give our Volunteers extensive training and we work hard to make sure that their service is rewarding, productive, and safe. But we recognize that there is always room for improvement. Since I became Director 20 months ago, it has become apparent to me that the Peace Corps has not always been sufficiently responsive or sensitive to victims of crime and their families. I sincerely regret that. None of us wants to inflict any additional trauma upon the victims of crime. That is not Peace Corps policy. That is not the Peace Corps way. All of us, past, present, and future Volunteers, are valued members of the Peace Corps community. A crime against one is a crime against all of us.

Since the Peace Corps was founded 50 years ago, more than 200,000 Americans have served as Volunteers in 139 countries, and we are all enormously proud of their remarkable service to the United States. I know that you share that pride. Volunteers embody compassion, generosity, and an unbridled belief that together we can achieve more than we ever could by working alone. It is these qualities that deepen our pain when there is a loss. We care profoundly about the welfare of our Volunteers. Every life lost and every act of violence against a Volunteer is a tragedy. The names of Volunteers who have died while serving are engraved on a memorial at our headquarters. They are not forgotten.

I have met personally with the parents of Kate Puzey, the outstanding Volunteer who was murdered in Benin in March of 2009. I assured Lois and Harry Puzey that the Peace Corps and the United States Government are united with them in seeking justice for Kate. Lois and Harry have shown incredible strength, and I am grateful to them for helping us to improve how we handle sensitive information and support the families of fallen Volunteers. I thank them for that and I regret that the Peace Corps did not do a better job supporting and communicating with them early on.

The Peace Corps has also met with a number of returned Volunteers who have shared personal experiences of rape and sexual assault. I would like to thank them publically for their courage in coming forward and for helping us to make needed reforms. Their insights are invaluable and have helped shape our commitment to make the survivor's perspective a critical part of our reforms. I am sorry for what they went through and I am committed to ensuring that their experiences are not repeated.

Over the past 20 months, we have put in place new policies to minimize the risks faced by Volunteers and to improve the way we respond to victims of crime. We have been working closely with our Inspector General's office and have implemented or are implementing all of the recommendations from the Inspector General's report last year on our Volunteer safety and security program. While the Peace Corps cannot eliminate every risk Volunteers face during their service, I am committed to making sure that we do everything we can to protect Volunteers and provide effective support to them and their families when a tragedy occurs.

Implementing a Reform Agenda

The world is more complicated than it was in 1961, and we have tried our best to adapt. Despite our efforts to learn from our experiences, we haven't always succeeded. There is no doubt that the Peace Corps faces challenges. We can, however, do our best to decrease the risks Volunteers face and offer compassionate support. Our Volunteers deserve as much.

Under my leadership, the Peace Corps has taken a number of steps to ensure we fulfill our commitment to Volunteers:

- We trained overseas staff in how to respond appropriately when Volunteers bring allegations of wrongdoing to their attention. The agency's policy, which dates to early 2009, requires any Peace Corps staff member who receives or has knowledge of a Volunteer allegation to treat the allegation with the utmost discretion and confidentiality, to take appropriate measures to ensure the Volunteer's safety, and to ensure the allegation is given serious consideration including referral to the Inspector General when appropriate.
- We issued Peace Corps' *Commitment to Sexual Assault Victims*, a set of core principles to ensure we provide timely, effective, and compassionate support to victims of sexual assault. The Commitment makes clear that all Volunteers must be treated with dignity and respect, and that no one deserves to be a victim of a sexual assault.
- We implemented new *Guidelines for Responding to Rape and Major Sexual Assault* that detail our victim-centered approach and the specific procedures

posts must follow in order to respond promptly to an incident and provide proper support to a victim. We have also trained staff on the new *Guidelines*, which include the *Commitment to Sexual Assault Victims*.

- I tasked the agency's Sexual Assault Working Group with developing a comprehensive sexual assault prevention and response program, and I appointed a former Peace Corps Country Director with expertise in rape crisis response to lead the Working Group. The Sexual Assault Working Group, which was created in early 2008, includes former Peace Corps Volunteers and survivors of rape and sexual assault, as well as staff with expertise in trauma response. The Sexual Assault Working Group has examined best practices in the field and reached out to experts within and outside of government, including the Department of Defense's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, the Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women, and Speaking Out About Rape (SOAR).
- We signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, to collaborate and share resources on sexual assault prevention and response.
- I created a new Victim's Advocate position to coordinate victim support services, and hired a nationally recognized leader in victims' rights to serve as the first advocate. The idea for this position was suggested by First Response Action, among others, and I thank them for it. Victims of crime will now be able to turn to a skilled, capable Peace Corps staffer who will make certain they receive the emotional, medical, legal, and other support they need during and after their service.
- At the suggestion of Congressman Poe, who serves on the Committee, I created the Peace Corps Volunteer Sexual Assault Panel, made up of outside experts and former Volunteers who were victims of sexual assault. The individual members of this Panel will assist the Peace Corps in the design and implementation of the agency's sexual assault risk reduction and response strategies. Representatives of the Department of Defense's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, and the Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women and Office for Victims of Crime, have agreed to serve on the Panel.
- Since last year, we have been developing comprehensive new training materials for Volunteers on sexual assault prevention and response. Starting this summer, we will implement new online training, which will be required for Volunteers prior to departing the United States. This will be followed by additional in-country training both before and during their service.

- We have taken steps to improve the medical care we provide Volunteers by giving our medical professionals at headquarters overall responsibility for hiring, credentialing and managing Peace Corps Medical Officers (PCMOs) at every post and by providing enhanced guidance to those PCMOs on how to handle serious medical issues. New Regional Medical Officers were hired to assist in the health care of Volunteers and a Quality Improvement Council was established to monitor and report on ongoing health care issues.
- Based on recommendations made by the Office of Inspector General, we gave the Office of Safety and Security at headquarters greater authority to oversee the agency's global safety and security program.
- We developed standard operating procedures for our overseas Safety and Security Coordinators (SSCs), who are responsible for coordinating the safety and security programs that support Volunteers at each post. We also conducted a highly successful two-week training program in August 2010 that brought together for the first time all of our Safety and Security staff from headquarters and the field, including SSCs.
- We revised notification procedures for serious incidents to ensure key staff is rapidly informed of major crimes against Volunteers.
- I tasked the Deputy Director of the Peace Corps to lead a team that has visited overseas posts to gather Volunteer input on safety concerns and evaluate the effectiveness of the agency's efforts to prevent crimes against Volunteers and support victims of crime.
- We put in place new policies to better reflect our commitment to the families of fallen Volunteers. We formalized the agency's existing practice of sending a Peace Corps staff member to be with the family of a fallen Volunteer within 24 hours of the notification of the death of the Volunteer, unless the family requests otherwise. This staff member will serve as the primary liaison to the family. We also standardized procedures for returning possessions of fallen Volunteers to their families by requiring that all personal effects of a fallen Volunteer be personally delivered by Peace Corps staff to the family, unless requested otherwise.

These reforms complement the work we are doing to implement our June 2010 Comprehensive Agency Assessment. As directed by Congress, the Peace Corps conducted a thorough assessment and submitted a report to Congress last year that clearly articulates the agency's strategic vision for, among other things, Volunteer placement, Volunteer and staff training, Volunteer programming, medical care of Volunteers, and agency recruitment efforts. The Assessment is a strategic roadmap

for major agency decisions, and we are working to implement its recommendations.

Effective Training and Support

The reforms of the past two years build on the extensive information, training and support we already provide to our Volunteers. The process of educating prospective Volunteers about health and safety issues begins long before they step off the plane. The Peace Corps remains committed to transparency, and we are completely open about the extent of crimes committed against Volunteers. We publish an annual *Report of Volunteer Safety* that includes detailed data regarding crimes against Volunteers, including rapes and sexual assaults, as well as trends for the past 10 years. Reports from the last five years are posted on the Peace Corps website.

When we invite applicants to serve, we provide them with country-specific information on health, safety, and security, and crime data to help them make an informed decision about whether Peace Corps service is right for them. After they accept the invitation, we give Volunteers an average of 10 weeks of in-country training before they begin their service, plus additional training throughout their 27-month commitment. This training covers technical, cross-cultural, health, and safety and security issues. In addition, the Peace Corps provides instruction in 250 languages to our Volunteers serving in some 77 countries around the world. We also provide Volunteers with a monthly living allowance and comprehensive medical coverage throughout their service.

Every Peace Corps post has a Peace Corps office and staff managed by a Country Director. The country staff includes the Safety and Security Coordinator, one or more medical professionals, and program managers and trainers. The country staff is responsible for, among other things, evaluating and selecting Volunteers' work and housing sites. In selecting sites for our Volunteers to live, we carefully consider factors such as access to medical care, proximity to other Volunteers, availability of communications and transportation, crime rates, and the potential for obtaining and maintaining the support of local authorities and the community at large.

All posts receive regional and global support in health and safety operations. The Office of Safety and Security at headquarters oversees all Peace Corps security programs, both domestically and overseas. The office has more than two dozen staffers, including ten Peace Corps Safety and Security Officers who are based in regions around the world and who provide technical expertise, guidance, and training to Peace Corps posts. This office is headed by a security professional who has 27 years of experience in security and law enforcement, both in the United States and overseas.

In the event of an emergency, we immediately work with our leadership team in

country to assess the situation and implement an effective solution; in the case of a medical emergency, the solution may entail local hospitalization or a medical evacuation to a regional site or back to the United States. Each post also has a country-specific emergency action plan, tested on an annual basis, which instructs Volunteers on how to respond to events such as natural disasters or civil unrest.

Support for Victims of Sexual Assault

The Peace Corps, as an agency and as a family, is committed to providing the highest quality support and service to Volunteers who have been the victims of sexual violence or other crimes. From the moment a Volunteer first reports a rape or sexual assault we must be ready, willing, and able to provide compassionate and effective support and assistance. That is my commitment, and I believe that we have, as an agency, taken enormous strides in the past few years toward making it a reality, thanks in part to the productive conversations we have had with the broader Peace Corps community and outside experts.

As part of the Peace Corps' victim-centered approach we have put in place systems to allow victims to report rapes and obtain prompt, compassionate assistance without fear of being judged. Dedicated specialists from the medical, mental health, security, and legal fields are available from Peace Corps headquarters to help Volunteers, as needed, with the response and recovery process.

The Peace Corps' Counseling and Outreach Unit at headquarters is key to our victim-centered approach to responding to an emergency. Mental health counselors are available to all Volunteers for any of their needs, ranging from routine check-ins to coping with major traumatic events. The Counseling and Outreach Unit is trained to deal with emergencies and offers support to both victims and their families. The unit trains Peace Corps medical staff at posts to provide initial emotional support services to all Volunteers, including victims of sexual assault. Should a Volunteer need specialized care that is beyond the expertise of Peace Corps medical staff, the Peace Corps will provide access to medical professionals who can effectively support the Volunteer's needs. The Peace Corps Counseling and Outreach Unit also maintains a 24-hour hotline for families to get more information about natural disasters, like tsunamis and earthquakes, or other emergencies.

In addition to providing support to victims, the Peace Corps makes every effort to protect Volunteers from sexual violence. Both staff and Volunteers participate in regular training on safety and security. This training covers a variety of topics related to sexual assault, and other risks that Volunteers may face while serving. The Peace Corps has a reporting system to track and analyze safety and security incidents and the data collected is used to instruct our operations and improve Volunteer and staff security.

When an assault occurs, we work with our partners in host countries to bring perpetrators to justice. In 2009 and 2010, arrests were made in 65 percent of the rape, attempted rape and major sexual assault cases in which the victim elected to file a report with local police.

Honoring the Service of Volunteers

Before completing my testimony, I would like to take a moment to honor the more than 8,600 Americans, ranging in age from 21 to 86, and from all 50 states, who are currently serving as Peace Corps Volunteers. We deeply appreciate the willingness of these dedicated Americans to leave the comforts of home to serve our country in some of the least developed and most remote areas of the world. The work is often challenging, and the pay is minimal, but these committed, patriotic Americans perform heroically, whether they are teaching English, promoting business development or working to improve sanitation and health. In the words of President Reagan, "Nowhere has the proud American tradition of voluntarism been better illustrated than through the Peace Corps."

Volunteers personify hope, in a way that speaks to the core of the American character. All Volunteers share an enduring devotion to service, and an acute awareness of the challenges and opportunities in our world. These are exactly the skills our country needs to lead in these times.

Volunteers target some of the most debilitating diseases around the world. For example, they play a key role in our country's global response to HIV/AIDS, promoting behavior change and sustainable, culturally appropriate solutions to the pandemic. By mobilizing isolated communities and helping orphans and vulnerable children, Volunteers turn hope into action. And, through education about malaria and the distribution of mosquito nets, Volunteers combat a leading cause of death and disease in many developing countries. In all their work, Volunteers represent our country's highest values and ideals.

Peace Corps Volunteers serve as America's most effective grassroots ambassadors. In doing so, they help to dispel misperceptions about the United States and to counter anti-American sentiment in areas of the world that may have little direct exposure to Americans. That is one reason why, throughout its history, across different Congresses and administrations, the Peace Corps has received strong bipartisan support for its important mission, including from this Committee. And, in turn, our Volunteers receive tremendous support from the communities in which they serve. The Peace Corps only operates in countries where we are invited and those countries are deeply grateful for the work we do. In fact, the Peace Corps receives millions of dollars annually in cash and in-kind contributions from the countries in which we serve – some of the poorest countries in the world.

Volunteers' service to our country continues long after they have left the Peace Corps. As President Obama has said, "Returned volunteers, enriched by their experiences overseas, bring a deeper understanding of other cultures and traditions back to their home communities in the United States." Many former Volunteers use their training and experience to become leaders in society, in areas ranging from private industry to development work, and from community service to Congress. The skills they acquire while serving -- whether fluency in a foreign language, complex problem-solving, familiarity with a foreign culture or expertise in agricultural practices -- are invaluable to the United States, as is the sense of service that the Peace Corps promotes. Ultimately, the investment that we make in our Volunteers is re-paid many times over, at home and abroad.

I am deeply grateful to our Volunteers for their dedication and service, and I am committed to doing all I can as Director of the Peace Corps to protect and support them. I know that the members of the Committee share this goal and I look forward to working with you and others to ensure the continued success of this agency and its Volunteers.

Thank you.

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