

Testimony of Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams
Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and Global Narcotics Affairs
Hearing on “Peace Corps, The Next 50 Years”
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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Rubio, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. This is an exciting time at the Peace Corps as we draw on 50 years of lessons learned and put in place new measures to ensure the agency and our outstanding Volunteers continue to thrive for decades to come. I am pleased to have the opportunity to tell you about the work we are doing to strengthen and reform all aspects of agency operations, and in particular our efforts to better protect the health, safety, and security of our Volunteers, who are the heart of Peace Corps.

The Mission of the Peace Corps

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy launched an innovative program to spearhead progress in developing countries and to promote friendship between the American people and peoples overseas. From its start, the Peace Corps had three goals: to help countries meet their need for trained men and women; to promote a better understanding of Americans overseas; and to promote a better understanding of foreign peoples and cultures here at home. Fifty years later, the agency’s mission and goals are not only still relevant, they are more important than ever in an increasingly complex world.

The Peace Corps achieves its goals by recruiting and training some of the most talented and dedicated people our country has to offer. They work in six different sectors -- agriculture, business development, education, environment, health and HIV/AIDS, and youth development – and serve in 76 countries, from Central America to Africa, from the Middle East to Asia, and from Eastern Europe to the islands of the Pacific.

Currently, more than 9,000 Americans, ranging in age from their 20s to their 80s, and from all 50 states, are serving as Peace Corps Volunteers. We deeply appreciate their willingness to leave the comforts of home to serve our country in some of the least developed and most challenging areas of the world. The work is often demanding, and the pay is minimal, but these patriotic Americans do incredible work, whether they are teaching English, training entrepreneurs or promoting sustainable farming practices. In the words of President Reagan, “Nowhere has the proud American tradition of voluntarism been better illustrated than through the Peace Corps.”

There are other foreign aid agencies and programs in the federal government, but the Peace Corps is unique. Volunteers spend 27 months living and working in areas that other programs are often unable to reach. During their service, Volunteers do not just work with the community – they become part of it. They eat the same food, live in the same kind of housing, speak the same language and use the same transportation as other members of the community. By doing so, they build mutual trust and respect, and they are able to advance the development needs of the host country more effectively, while

demonstrating American values of hard work, compassion and commitment.

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. Volunteers are also taking on the fight against malaria. Through education about malaria and the distribution of mosquito nets, Volunteers are combating 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 also serve as America's most effective grassroots ambassadors. By building person-to-person connections, 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 Subcommittee.

And, in turn, our Volunteers receive tremendous support from their host communities and countries. 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 substantial support annually in cash and in-kind contributions from the countries in which we serve – some of the poorest countries in the world. These contributions help to keep our costs down, allowing the agency to operate globally on a shoestring budget – Peace Corps receives roughly 1% of the federal government's overall foreign assistance spending.

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 – or, as we call them, returned 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 commitment to public service that the Peace Corps instills. Ultimately, the investment that we make in our Volunteers is re-paid many times over, at home and abroad.

Peace Corps' Comprehensive Agency Assessment: A Blueprint for Reform

The Peace Corps has had many successes, but there have been setbacks, too. In order to build on our achievements, improve our operations, and ensure we meet new challenges and opportunities head-on, the agency has embarked on a wide-ranging series of reforms.

As directed by Congress, the Peace Corps conducted a thorough self-assessment and

submitted a report to Congress last year that clearly articulates the agency's strategic vision for, among other things, Volunteer recruitment and placement, Volunteer and staff training, Volunteer programming, and medical care of Volunteers. The Comprehensive Agency Assessment is a blueprint for reform throughout the agency. It lays out a clear strategic vision -- the Peace Corps will be a leader, in partnership with others, in the global effort to further human progress and foster understanding and respect among people. In order to achieve this vision, the Assessment puts forth a six-part strategy and a number of specific recommendations. In just over a year we have made significant progress in advancing the six strategies of the Assessment, and we have implemented or are implementing over 3/4ths of the Assessment's recommendations, putting us on track to meet our aggressive timeline for implementation.

Many of these recommendations, of course, require sustained and comprehensive efforts that will take some time, and some of them depend on action by Congress. I am grateful to the Foreign Relations Committee for approving one proposal, included in Senator Isakson's bill, that would address a serious management problem at our posts overseas. The provision would help provide for greater efficiency and consistency in how we hire and manage overseas staff, and I look forward to its enactment.

The Assessment recommended that the agency take a deliberate, evidence-based approach to the countries where we operate and to the allocation of Volunteer and financial resources. This process, which we call country portfolio review, represents a significant step forward. The agency conducted the first ever portfolio review last year and work is already underway on this year's portfolio review. The portfolio review data was used to inform decisions about potential country openings, country closures, and the allocation of Volunteers.

The Assessment also recommended that we strengthen the technical assistance we provide around the world by focusing on and scaling up a limited number of highly effective projects. As a result, our overseas posts are focusing their efforts on activities and projects with the greatest impact. At the headquarters level, the agency is in the process of developing program guidance and training packages that can be used all over the world to ensure greater consistency and quality. Our first training package will be Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Peace Corps has taken an important first step toward implementing a dynamic recruitment strategy. We are currently in the process of automating our application system so that we can create a more streamlined, customer-focused, competitive, state-of-the-art process for recruitment, selection and placement of Volunteers. And we are working to launch a pilot program that will expand opportunities for Americans who have highly specialized skills and significant work experience, but who may not be able to make a 2-year commitment, to serve for shorter periods of time.

The Assessment emphasized the need to elevate what we at Peace Corps call the "Third Goal" -- helping to promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. The Third Goal is a critical component of our mission. This year we

commemorated our 50th anniversary and through activities and events, including Peace Corps being featured at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, we have been able to educate Americans about peoples around the world. We encourage returned Volunteers to share their overseas experiences with Americans by, for example, speaking to elementary, secondary, and postsecondary classrooms in their communities through our Coverdell World Wise Schools Speaker's Match program

The most comprehensive strategy in the Assessment addresses the need to strengthen management and operations through updated technology, innovative approaches and improved business processes. It covers many activities and every office within the Peace Corps. The agency is working to turn these ideas into reality by emphasizing evidence-based performance management, providing additional training to staff, and conducting studies of operational activities and staffing patterns of several staff offices to identify efficiencies and streamline operations.

Improving the agency's management structure has been one of my priorities since I was sworn in as director in 2009, which is why I hired the agency's first Director of Innovation and created the Office of Global Operations. Working closely with offices throughout Peace Corps, the Office of Innovation is spearheading efforts to find new, more efficient and effective ways to organize and operate across the agency, as well as to address the recommendations that resulted from the Assessment. The Office of Global Operations was created to provide overarching strategic support and management to the agency's direct Volunteer operations. This office is working to disseminate best practices, provide an organized, cohesive voice to agency leadership, and coordinate the activities of all overseas operations.

Peace Corps' Commitment to Volunteers

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

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 two years ago, it has become apparent to me that the Peace Corps has not always been sufficiently responsive or sensitive to victims of crime and their families. I sincerely regret that. 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 wall at our headquarters. They are not forgotten.

The Peace Corps has 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 suffered, and I am committed to ensuring that their experiences are not repeated.

Over the past two years, we have put in place new policies to minimize the risks faced by Volunteers and to improve the way we respond to victims of crime. 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 may face during their service, I am committed to making sure that we do everything we can to protect Volunteers and provide effective, compassionate support to them and their families when a tragedy does occur.

I welcome efforts in Congress to codify the reforms we have put in place and I would like to recognize a member of the Subcommittee, Sen. Johnny Isakson, for his remarkable commitment to the well-being of Peace Corps Volunteers. I am very grateful to Senator Isakson for his efforts to ensure justice for the murder of Kate Puzey, an outstanding Volunteer who was killed in Benin in March of 2009. Sen. Isakson and Sen. Boxer, another member of the Subcommittee, have been working diligently to ensure all Volunteers – particularly victims of sexual assault – receive the support and services they need. I thank them for their willingness to work with all parties to ensure that their legislation, which passed the Senate in September, meets our mutual goal of enhancing the support and safety of Volunteers.

Enhancing the Health, Safety and Security of Volunteers

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

- 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 Sexual Assault* that detail our victim-centered approach and the specific procedures staff 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 hired a nationally recognized leader in victims' rights to serve as the agency's first Victim Advocate. Victims of crime can now turn to a skilled, capable Peace Corps staff member who will make certain they receive the emotional, medical, legal, and other support they need during and after their service.
- We prepared new standardized and comprehensive training for Volunteers on sexual assault awareness, risk reduction strategies, Peace Corps reporting and response protocols, and bystander intervention. This replaces and improves upon the sexual assault training currently provided to Volunteers. We are in the process of training overseas staff at all of our posts on the new sexual assault curriculum at regional "training of trainer" workshops, which will be complete by the end of the year. The new curriculum was developed by the agency's Sexual Assault Working Group, which includes returned Peace Corps Volunteers and survivors of rape and sexual assault, as well as staff with expertise in trauma response.
- We signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, to collaborate and share resources on sexual assault prevention and response. RAINN has been an invaluable partner for Peace Corps, and we are very grateful for the advice and expertise they have provided us.
- I created the Peace Corps Volunteer Sexual Assault Panel, made up of outside experts and returned Volunteers who were victims of sexual assault. The individual members of this Panel provide advice and input on the Peace Corps' sexual assault risk reduction and response strategies. The panel includes representatives of RAINN, 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, among others.
- 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 Peace Corps' Office of Inspector General when appropriate. We are also training Volunteers on policies and procedures for bringing confidential concerns to the attention of appropriate staff.

- We issued guidance for overseas staff on the specific procedures to follow when Volunteers express concerns about their safety, or in any other situation that may threaten the well-being of Volunteers.
- 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.

These are just some of the many steps we have taken to better protect and support Volunteers.

Effective Training and Support for Volunteers

Peace Corps' success depends on our Volunteers, and we provide them with extensive information, training, and support to succeed. The process of educating prospective Volunteers about service in the Peace Corps begins long before they step off the plane in their country of service. The Peace Corps is 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, plus instruction in any of the many languages we teach – over 120 in Africa alone. 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 staff, including ten Peace Corps Safety and Security Officers who are based regionally 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 to the productive conversations we have had with the broader Peace Corps community and outside experts. That work is still ongoing.

As part of the Peace Corps' victim-centered approach we have put in place systems to allow victims to report sexual assaults 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. 70% of the rapes, attempted rapes and major sexual assaults of Peace Corps Volunteers that took place in 2009 and 2010 and were reported to local authorities resulted in arrests. 46% have resulted in convictions, and a number of other cases are scheduled for trial or still under investigation.

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude to the Volunteers, past and present, who have served their country so selflessly. I am deeply grateful to them for their dedication and service, and I am committed to doing all I can as Director of the Peace Corps to protect and support them. I know that the members of the Subcommittee share this goal and I look forward to working with you and others to ensure the continued success of this agency and its Volunteers.

Thank you.