



The Peace Corps: Current Issues

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Summary

Founded in 1961, the Peace Corps has sought to meet its legislative mandate of promoting world peace and friendship by sending American volunteers to serve at the grassroots level in villages and towns in all corners of the globe. About 8,655 volunteers currently serve in 77 nations.

In 2011, the 112th Congress is considering the President's annual funding request for the Peace Corps, efforts to reauthorize the Peace Corps, and related issues. In February 2011, the Obama Administration issued its FY2012 budget request, proposing \$439.6 million for the Peace Corps, a 10% increase over the FY2010-appropriated level of \$400 million (H.R. 3288, P.L. 111-117) and a 17% increase over the final FY2011 appropriation of \$374.3 million (H.R. 1473, P.L. 112-10). The FY2011 appropriation follows a series of continuing resolutions and an across-the-board .2% rescission. It represents a cut of 6% for the Peace Corps from the previous year. On July 27, the State, Foreign Operations subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations marked up an FY2012 bill, providing \$374.3 million for the Peace Corps, equal to the FY2011 level. The full committee is expected to take up the bill in September.

The last Peace Corps authorization (P.L. 106-30), approved in 1999, covered the years FY2000 to FY2003. On July 21, the House Foreign Affairs Committee reported H.R. 2583, the Foreign Relations Authorization for FY2012, which includes language authorizing \$375 million for the Peace Corps in FY2012 as well as provisions addressing Peace Corps safety and security.

A comprehensive assessment of Peace Corps operations was published in June 2010. It makes 64 recommendations supporting a six-point strategy to be implemented in the coming years.

Current issues include the extent to which there is available funding for Peace Corps expansion, whether the Peace Corps has the institutional capacity to expand, and whether volunteers are able to function in a safe and secure environment.

This report will be updated as events warrant.

Contents

Recent Developments.....	1
Introduction	1
Background	1
Congressional Actions.....	2
FY2012 Appropriations.....	2
FY2011 Appropriations	2
Authorization.....	3
Peace Corps Comprehensive Assessment	5
Issues.....	7
Peace Corps Funding and Expansion.....	7
Volunteers, Programming, and Support	8
The Volunteer Force.....	8
Programming and Support.....	9
Safety and Security Issues	10
Legislative Proposals on Safety and Security.....	12

Tables

Table 1. Peace Corps Budget: FY2002-FY2012.....	8
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Contacts

Author Contact Information	13
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Recent Developments

On July 27, 2011, the State, Foreign Operations subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations marked up an FY2012 bill, providing \$374.3 million for the Peace Corps, equal to the FY2011 level. The full committee is expected to take up the bill in September.

On July 27, 2011, Senator Kerry introduced S. 1426, the Foreign Relations Authorization for FY2012 and FY2013, including language authorizing \$439.6 million for the Peace Corps in FY2012 and “such sums as may be necessary” for FY2013.

On July 26, 2011, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee ordered reported S. 1280, the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of 2011, a bill addressing Peace Corps safety and security concerns.

On July 21, 2011, the House Foreign Affairs Committee reported H.R. 2583, the Foreign Relations Authorization for FY2012, which includes language authorizing \$375 million for the Peace Corps in FY2012 as well as provisions addressing Peace Corps safety and security.

On May 11, 2011, the House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing focusing on safety and security issues in the Peace Corps. Among those testifying were volunteers who had been raped and the mother of a murdered volunteer.

In April 2011, Congress approved H.R. 1473 (P.L. 112-10), the FY2011 Continuing Appropriations, providing \$374.3 million for the Peace Corps (after a .2% across-the-board rescission), a cut of 6% from the previous year appropriation of \$400 million (H.R. 3288, P.L. 111-117).

In February 2011, the Obama Administration issued its FY2012 budget request, proposing \$439.6 million for the Peace Corps, a 10% increase over the FY2010-appropriated level and a 17% increase over the final FY2011 appropriation.

Introduction

Generally viewed positively by the public and widely supported in Congress, the Peace Corps, the U.S. agency that provides volunteer skills internationally, drew congressional attention in recent years largely due to a 2002 presidential initiative to double the size of the volunteer force and to a series of reauthorization measures in the 108th, 109th, and 110th Congresses, some of which were approved by the House or Senate, but none of which made it into law. In 2009, the 111th Congress addressed the size of the volunteer force by providing a significant increase from the previous year in its FY2010 budget. In 2011, the 112th Congress is considering the President’s annual funding request for the Peace Corps, safety and security concerns, efforts to reauthorize the Peace Corps, and related issues. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Background

Founded 50 years ago, in 1961, the Peace Corps has sought to meet its legislative mandate of promoting world peace and friendship by sending American volunteers to serve at the grassroots

level in villages and towns in all corners of the globe. Living and working with ordinary people, volunteers have contributed in a variety of capacities—such as teachers, environmental specialists, health promoters, and small business advisers—to improving the lives of those they serve and helping others understand American culture. They also seek to share their understanding of other countries with Americans back home through efforts like the Paul D. Coverdell World Wise School program, which links serving volunteers with U.S. elementary school classrooms. To date, nearly 200,000 Peace Corps volunteers have served in 139 countries. About 8,655 volunteers currently serve in 77 nations. The Peace Corps director is Aaron S. Williams, a former volunteer.¹

In addition to its basic two-year tour of duty, the Peace Corps introduced in 1996 an initiative called Peace Corps Response (formerly Crisis Corps), drawing on former volunteers to provide short-term (usually three to six months) emergency, humanitarian, and reconstruction assistance at the community level with NGOs and relief and development organizations. More than 1,000 Peace Corps Response volunteers have served in 45 countries, including post-tsunami Thailand and Sri Lanka. In September 2005, Peace Corps Response volunteers were deployed to assist Hurricane Katrina relief, the first time in Peace Corps history that volunteers were used domestically. More recently, they are serving in Haiti.

Congressional Actions

FY2012 Appropriations

In February 2011, the Obama Administration issued its FY2012 budget request, proposing \$439.6 million for the Peace Corps, a 10% increase over the FY2010-appropriated level and a 17% increase over the final FY2011 appropriation.

On July 27, 2011, the State, Foreign Operations subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations marked up an FY2012 bill, providing \$374.3 million for the Peace Corps, equal to the FY2011 level. The full committee is expected to take up the bill in September.

FY2011 Appropriations

On February 1, 2010, the Obama Administration issued its FY2011 budget request, proposing \$446.2 million for the Peace Corps, a 12% increase over the FY2010-appropriated level.

On June 30, 2010, the House State, Foreign Operations Subcommittee marked up a draft FY2011 State, Foreign Operations Appropriations bill, providing \$446.2 million for the Peace Corps, matching the Administration request and \$46.2 million above the previous year's level.

On July 29, 2010, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved S. 3676 (S.Rept. 111-237), the FY2011 State, Foreign Operations Appropriations, providing \$420.15 million for the Peace Corps, \$20 million more than the previous year's appropriation and \$26 million less than the Administration request. In its report, the committee commended the recent Peace Corps

¹ Supporting Peace Corps operations are about 853 U.S. direct hire staff, 190 of whom are overseas, and about 2,000 locally hired employees at overseas locations.

assessment report and noted support for a number of its recommendations (see below). The committee also directed the Peace Corps to consider the use of volunteers with medical expertise to train foreign nationals to address the problem of fistula.

H.R. 1, the continuing resolution approved by the House in January 2011, would have provided \$330.8 million for the Peace Corps, a 17% cut from the FY2010 level.

In April 2011, following a series of continuing resolutions, Congress approved H.R. 1473 (P.L. 112-10), the FY2011 Continuing Appropriations, providing \$374.3 million for the Peace Corps (after a .2% across-the-board rescission). The appropriation represents a cut of 6% from the FY2010 level of \$400 million (H.R. 3288, P.L. 111-117).

Authorization

On July 27, 2011, Senator Kerry introduced S. 1426, the Foreign Relations Authorization for FY2012 and FY2013, including language authorizing \$439.6 million for the Peace Corps in FY2012 and “such sums as may be necessary” for FY2013. On July 21, 2011, the House Foreign Affairs Committee reported H.R. 2583, the Foreign Relations Authorization for FY2012, which includes language authorizing \$375 million for the Peace Corps in FY2012.

H.R. 2583 also contains provisions addressing Peace Corps safety and security. In July 2011, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee ordered reported a bill, S. 1280, addressing safety and security. Both bills are discussed in the “Safety and Security Issues” section below. A third piece of legislation, the Peace Corps Volunteer Service Improvement Act of 2011, introduced on July 29, 2011 (H.R. 2699), by the Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, contains safety as well as other program-related provisions. The non-safety provisions would exempt the agency Inspector General from the “five-year rule” and would require regular country portfolio reviews, evaluating the need for assistance, program costs, safety and security concerns, and the effectiveness of the post’s management, among other issues. Title V of S. 1426, the “Peace Corps Improvement and Expansion Act of 2011,” requires the Peace Corps to submit a report on progress made toward implementing the recommendations of the comprehensive assessment issued in 2010 (see section below).

Despite repeated efforts during the past nine years, Congress has not enacted a new Peace Corps funding authorization.² The last such Peace Corps authorization (P.L. 106-30), approved in 1999, covered the years FY2000 to FY2003. Annual State, Foreign Operations appropriations bills, however, routinely waive the requirement of authorization of foreign aid programs, as the FY2011 Continuing Appropriations Act (P.L. 112-10, sec. 1108) did in the case of currently unauthorized foreign aid programs, including the Peace Corps.

² Comprehensive bills approved by the Senate in 2002 (both S. 2667 and S. 12) and by the House in 2003 (H.R. 1950) would have authorized appropriations that would double the size of the Peace Corps as well as institute a wide range of reforms and new programs. The Peace Corps Empowerment Act, S. 732 (Dodd), introduced on March 1, 2007, and the subject of hearings held by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 25, 2007, would have authorized appropriations for the Peace Corps and make substantive changes to the program. It contained provisions that sought to strengthen the effectiveness of volunteers in the field, provide a larger role for volunteers in the administration of Peace Corps, and address volunteer personnel and benefit concerns. H.R. 5535, the Peace Corps Reauthorization Act of 2008 (Farr), introduced in March 2008, contained two provisions—a funding authorization and an increase in the readjustment allowance provided to Peace Corps volunteers for use on their return home (from \$125 per month of service to \$225).

The 111th Congress took two major steps to authorize Peace Corps programs. On June 10, 2009, the House approved H.R. 2410, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for 2010 and 2011 (H.Rept. 111-136). Title VI of the act contained several Peace Corps provisions.

- The bill stated that it is the policy of the United States to double the size of the Peace Corps, improve the coordination of agency programs with those of other development agencies, and to promote volunteerism by Americans in developing countries.
- The bill would have amended the Peace Corps Act to authorize the Peace Corps Response Program (discussed above).
- The bill would have required that Peace Corps work with other government agencies to “identify synergies” and coordinate programs. In its report on the bill (H.Rept. 111-136), the House Foreign Affairs Committee asserted that USAID and others could benefit from the community-based programs that individual innovative volunteers have created.
- The bill would have increased the readjustment allowance provided to volunteers completing their term of service from “at least \$125 per month” of service to “at least \$225.” Until recently, volunteers were provided \$225 per month of service on their return to the United States, a level, the committee report notes, that is less than AmeriCorps volunteers. The committee suggested that, minimally, parity with AmeriCorps should be established and an even higher stipend should be considered, given that volunteers must resettle after living abroad.³
- The bill would have authorized an appropriation level of \$450 million in FY2010 and “such sums as may be necessary” in FY2011.
- The bill would have required two reports. One, within a year, on the accomplishments, challenges, and plans for the Peace Corps Response Program and another, annually, on progress made carrying out the legislation, including efforts to increase cooperation with other federal aid agencies.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee did not address H.R. 2410 and the Peace Corps provisions it contains.

On April 27, 2010, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported S. 2971, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for FY2010-2011. It incorporated most of the language of the Peace Corps Improvement and Expansion Act of 2009, introduced as S. 1382 on June 25, 2009, and reported out of the committee on April 13, 2010 (S.Rept. 111-219). Apart from authorizing appropriations indefinitely (“such sums as may be necessary”), the bill required that the Peace Corps undertake an extensive assessment on how to strengthen management capabilities and program effectiveness, to expand opportunities for volunteers, and to increase the size of the Peace Corps. Based on that assessment, the Peace Corps was required to develop a strategic plan with one-year and five-year goals and benchmarks for these objectives as well as a strategy for country distribution of volunteers. The bill required a report to Congress on the assessment and strategic plan.

³ Effective April 1, 2010, the readjustment allowance was increased to \$275 per month of service.

Peace Corps Comprehensive Assessment

In June 2010, the Peace Corps submitted to Congress a “comprehensive agency assessment” in response to a directive included in the FY2010 State, Foreign Operations appropriations (P.L. 111-117, Division F).⁴ As requested by the conferees (H.Rept. 111-366), the 204-page document specifically addresses the improvement of a range of Peace Corps operations and procedures, including those involving recruitment of a diverse and skilled volunteer force; training and medical care for volunteers and staff; placement of volunteers based on U.S. interests, country needs, and volunteer skills; coordination with international and host country organizations; early termination rates; management practices and independent evaluation; and other steps that might ensure an effective use of volunteers and resources. The other step that the assessment team chose to include is a discussion of third goal activities.

While the report is thorough in its treatment of these issues, it should be noted that some points that would be required for study in the above-mentioned proposed authorization bills are not substantively addressed here. These include deferment of student loans, utilization of information technology, mechanisms for soliciting volunteer views, the adequacy and impact of post-service benefits, and the accomplishments and plans for the Peace Corps Response Program.

The assessment report doesn’t just discuss a wide range of issues—it is a blueprint for change in the agency. The assessment team’s 64 recommendations have been approved in principle by the Peace Corps director. All recommendations have been placed in an implementation matrix with lead offices and proposed timing for implementation identified. Only a few of the recommendations would require legislative action and, therefore, most can be launched immediately.

As a result of the assessment team’s findings, the Peace Corps is adopting a six-point strategy to guide its operations in the coming years. First, it will move to rationalize its selection of host countries by establishing clear criteria for entry. In part, this move seeks to address congressional concerns that the selection of Peace Corps host countries may not sufficiently reflect U.S. interests. Since 2002, the Peace Corps has received letters of request or inquiry from 27 countries where there is no current program. How the agency determines whether to establish a program has not been a transparent and well-documented process, leading some to conclude that it was not a rational process. The assessment team found that certain essential conditions have always been applied to the question of country entry—the extent of host country commitment, the safety and security of volunteers, and the level of resources available to the Peace Corps. Other key considerations have included compatibility of country objectives with those of Peace Corps, presence of potential projects, cost effectiveness, and congruence with U.S. national interests.

The assessment team has recommended that the Peace Corps conduct a formal annual portfolio review that will look not just at applicant countries but at all existing programs and apply specific criteria to judge where the agency should operate. In addition to existing criteria, the team has recommended that two new criteria be introduced into deliberations on country entry and termination—a measure of the level of development, such as the U.N. Development Program’s Human Development Index, and a measure of potential volunteer impact.

⁴ The report can be found at http://multimedia.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/opengov/PC_Comprehensive_Agency_Assessment.pdf.

The second point in the new Peace Corp strategy is to recognize and make the best use of one of its most notable characteristics—a volunteer force composed largely of generalists. Today, as has largely been the case throughout its history, 85% of volunteers are recent college graduates and 84% are under the age of 30. While some have argued that the Peace Corps should alter its composition to meet the increasing needs of developing countries for educated specialists, the assessment team appears to have determined, with some exceptions noted below under point four, to accept demographic reality and the constraints of career paths in the United States that would likely limit the number of older specialists available to it. Instead, the team recommends steps be taken to strengthen the quality of the volunteer force available by improving its technical, language, and cultural training. It calls for hiring full-time training staff at country posts and providing more training time to volunteers.

The third point in the new strategy suggests that, in order to maximize the effectiveness of the large pool of generalists recruited by the Peace Corps, it would be best to focus on a more limited range of project areas. Currently, volunteers are assigned to one of six broad technical sectors—education, health, agriculture, environment, youth development, and business/IT. Within those sectors, volunteers work in 50 different technical programs, from which 211 different project plans have been developed, perhaps meeting specific needs in a developing country, but for each of which volunteers in that project must be trained. The assessment team argues that by focusing more on what volunteers do best, what communities most want, and what volunteers can best be trained to do, the agency can maximize the capacity of volunteers and the impact they may have. The recommendation, therefore, is that Peace Corps management assess and determine a more narrow framework of work assignments and strengthen technical training in those areas. However, the assessment did not suggest which technical sectors or program areas should be eliminated or maintained.

The assessment’s fourth key point addresses the exception to the rule of use of generalists. Both to meet needs of countries that might require greater expertise and experience and to best attract and utilize those volunteer applicants that possess a higher level of skills than the norm, the assessment team recommends that some innovations be made in Peace Corps programs. In particular, it suggests that the Peace Corps Response Program be expanded in size and be open to highly qualified individuals without previous Peace Corps experience. The Response Program should also maintain its current flexible time commitments (i.e., less than the usual 27 months for regular volunteers) and be used in both regular Peace Corps countries as well as in countries where there is no standard Peace Corps presence.

The fifth point in the strategy calls for efforts to more fully and effectively address the so-called “third goal,” the legislative mandate that Peace Corps volunteers “help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.” This objective has always received less attention and funding (\$1.9 million of its \$400 million FY2010 budget) than the other two goals of assisting development and promoting understanding of Americans to the people served, both aspects which focus on the agency’s work abroad. The “third goal” was singled out recently as an area of emphasis by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in its report on the Peace Corps Improvement and Expansion Act (S. 1382, and incorporated into S. 2971), the committee arguing that the “third goal” had not received enough priority. “Third goal” activities include efforts by volunteers and former volunteers, sometimes forming country member groups, to convey their experiences through blogs, public talks, community service in the United States, and charitable fundraising. Most prominent among Peace Corps-sponsored activities is the Paul D. Coverdell Worldwise Schools program, which connects volunteers with school classrooms throughout the United States. The assessment report recommendations include increasing funding for these

purposes; establishing an intern program that would place exceptional volunteers in international NGOs, business, and U.S. agencies; and developing an agency-wide strategy to achieve “third goal” objectives.

The sixth point of the strategy is to strengthen Peace Corps management and operations. It recommends an updating of the agency’s strategic plan to include the new strategies encompassed in the assessment report, and a wide range of improvements to the planning and budgeting process, staffing, evaluation and oversight, recruitment procedures, training, and provision of health care to volunteers.

In its report accompanying the FY2011 State, Foreign Operations Appropriations (S.Rept. 111-237), the Senate Appropriations Committee noted support for several of the assessment report’s recommendations, including incorporating U.S. national interests and budget considerations into new criteria for volunteer placement, focusing resources on key areas, and attracting a wider diversity of highly skilled volunteers by establishing new technical programs through an expanded Peace Corps Response Program.

According to the Peace Corps, as of mid-March 2011, 12 of the 64 recommendations had been fully implemented, with work begun on 42 others. The six strategies were all in the process of being advanced, with varying degrees of progress on each. As noted above, S. 1426, introduced on July 27, 2011, would require submission of a report detailing the progress of implementation of the assessment recommendations, including the impact of the portfolio review on planned distribution of volunteers throughout the world.

Issues

Peace Corps Funding and Expansion

From the perspective of 2011, it is difficult to define a trend over the past decade in Peace Corps funding and volunteer numbers. When the George W. Bush Administration supported a substantial increase, Congress denied it. When the Obama Administration supported a more modest increase, Congress provided a substantial gain. For FY2011, a significant increase request has been met by a substantial cut, and while most other international programs face cuts in the FY2012 version of the State, Foreign Operations appropriations marked up by the House State, Foreign Operations subcommittee on July 27, 2011, the Peace Corps would be maintained at the previous year’s level.

Despite a 2002 expansion initiative by President Bush to double its size within five years, the Peace Corps saw only a 16% increase in end of fiscal year volunteer numbers between 2002 and 2009. Meant to raise the number of volunteers from below 7,000 in 2002 to 14,000 in 2007, the initiative would have required an appropriation of at least \$485 million by FY2007—more than \$200 million greater than FY2002. In the end, however, Congress had to weigh whether sufficient funds were available vis-à-vis other foreign aid priorities (e.g., HIV/AIDS, terrorism, and Afghanistan) to warrant appropriating the amounts sought by the Administration, and large annual expansion funding requests were rejected. In addition to the overall availability of foreign aid funding, Members also expressed a concern regarding the managerial capacity of the agency to implement an expansion while maintaining an effective volunteer force.

Despite the Obama Administration's more modest stated objective of a 9,400-volunteer force by 2012 and 11,000 by 2016, the incremental annual increases in appropriations since 2002 and a significant congressional bump-up in FY2010 led to an end of FY2010 volunteer level of 8,655, a 13% increase from the previous year, and the highest level since 1970.⁵ Whether deficit concerns, which severely impacted foreign aid accounts in FY2011, have placed a temporary or long-term hold on Peace Corps expansion is not yet clear.

Table I. Peace Corps Budget: FY2002-FY2012

Fiscal Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Request (\$ mil)	275.0	317.0	359.0	401.0	345.0	336.7	333.5	343.5	373.4	446.2	439.6
Appropriation (\$ mil)	278.7	295.1	309.3	317.4	319.9	319.6	330.8	340.0	400.0	374.3	
Total Volunteers	6,636	7,533	7,733	7,810	7,749	8,079	7,876	7,671	8,655		

Sources: Peace Corps and CRS.

Notes: Figures reflect across-the-board rescissions and supplemental appropriations. Total volunteers are number at end of the fiscal year.

Volunteers, Programming, and Support

A continual concern for Congress over the years has been how the Peace Corps addresses the make-up of the volunteer force, programming of volunteer projects assignments, and support of volunteers in implementing those projects. This concern is particularly acute in the context of expansion efforts as it was used as an argument for not meeting the George W. Bush Administration's funding requests that would enable doubling the size of the agency. With this concern in mind, the 2009 House Appropriations Committee report on the FY2010 State, Foreign Operations appropriations (H.Rept. 111-187) asked the Peace Corps to review its management practices in order to accommodate larger numbers of volunteers, and the Senate's Peace Corps Improvement and Expansion Act of 2009 (S. 1382) similarly aimed to ensure that the Peace Corps is prepared to deal with the whole range of management issues. As noted above, the FY2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-117, Division F) required the Peace Corps to submit a report assessing its operational model and proposing a strategy for reform.

The Volunteer Force

The volunteer force *is* the Peace Corps. Aspects of its composition have been a focus of interest in Congress over the years. In FY2010, 60% of volunteers were women, 19% were minorities, 93% were single, and the average age was 28.

In the past several years, Peace Corps made an objective of increasing the number of volunteers aged 50 and older, which, some would argue, might lead to a more specialized work-experienced volunteer force. However, the proportion of volunteers aged 50 or over appears to have changed in a positive direction only slightly. In FY2010, only 7% of volunteers were 50 or older,

⁵ Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification Foreign Operations Fiscal Year 2011*, p. 84.

compared with 5% in FY2008 (on the other hand, the number of older *applicants* increased by 44% between FY2007 and FY2008 and represented 9.2% of applicants in FY2008).⁶

Volunteers work in a range of sectors—in FY2010, 37% in education, 22% in health and HIV/AIDS, 14% in business development, 13% in the environment, 5% in youth, 4% in agriculture, and 5% in other activities. According to the June 2010 assessment report, 85% of volunteers are recent college graduates with little professional experience. The Peace Corps, while adept at recruiting generalists and providing them with sufficient training to carry out useful assignments in these fields, has not emphasized the provision of highly skilled professionals, such as doctors, agronomists, or engineers, which, many argue, more accurately reflects the current needs of developing countries and which the agency may be under greater pressure to supply if it intends to expand volunteer numbers.⁷ Weighed against this view is the belief that the Peace Corps is an agency of public diplomacy as much as it is a development organization, and personal interaction and demonstration of U.S. values is as important as providing specialized technical expertise.

As noted earlier, the assessment team has recommended that the Peace Corps accept the demographic features that have long characterized the volunteer force and, while embracing the use of generalists, seek to strengthen their capabilities through better training and more focused sector activities. At the same time, the team has recommended continued efforts to utilize experienced and skilled volunteers through innovative approaches. In particular, it suggests that the Peace Corps Response Program be used as a platform for new, more flexible, programs that may accommodate different types of volunteers.

Whatever the skill sets and demographic characteristics sought by the agency, it is the recruitment of volunteers with appropriate skills and willingness to live in unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable conditions that is essential to the overall mission of the Peace Corps. A substantial spike in applicants and those expressing interest in applying since September 11, 2001, has made it easier for the Peace Corps to meet its recruitment goals. In FY2010, about 13,500 applied to be volunteers, compared to 8,897 in FY2001, but a 12% decrease from FY2009.

Programming and Support

The Peace Corps has been criticized in the past for providing inadequate programming and support of volunteers. This view was reflected in a 1990 Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigation.⁸ It noted that some volunteers had little or nothing to do or had spent six or more months developing their own assignments, without benefit of site visits by Peace Corps staff. The GAO attributed the programming problem to a failure of planning, evaluation, and monitoring systems. Since then, the Peace Corps maintains that it has addressed these weaknesses with systematic approaches to project development, annual project reviews, and increased opportunities for site visits and volunteer feedback. While most volunteers do rate their overall experience highly, volunteer anecdotal accounts suggesting poor programming and staff support still occur, and the 2008 volunteer survey found that between 19% and 24% of volunteers were

⁶ “Peace Corps Reaches 40-Year High,” Press Release, October 28, 2010; *Peace Corps 2010 Congressional Budget Justification*, p. 38 and 85.

⁷ In its Mexico program, launched in 2004, the Peace Corps has been able to provide more specialized technical volunteers offering skills in water and environmental engineering.

⁸ *Peace Corps: Meeting the Challenges of the 1990s*, May 1990, NSIAD-90-122

dissatisfied with regard to support received from Peace Corps staff in site selection and job assignment.⁹ One sign of volunteer dissatisfaction—the resignation rate—has improved in recent years, with 7.3% resigning in FY2009 versus 9.8% in FY2001.¹⁰

The assessment report discusses but does not thoroughly explore causes of volunteer dissatisfaction and resignation, noting that 97 recommendations to reduce it have been made in previous studies since 1969, many of which have been adopted. It also does not address questions regarding the quality of volunteer assignments. However, the report does offer possible avenues that might help correct these concerns, such as improving volunteer and staff training, developing initiatives to better utilize skilled and experienced volunteers, encouraging third-year extensions, and strengthening program evaluation and oversight.

Safety and Security Issues

One issue the 2010 assessment report was not asked to and does not address is the safety and security of volunteers, possibly because it has long been a prime concern of the Peace Corps. Because they live and work at the grassroots level in developing countries, Peace Corps volunteers appear to many Americans to be especially vulnerable to crime. The threat of anti-American terrorism since September 11, 2001, has increased that perception.

These fears were further raised in 2003 when the *Dayton (Ohio) Daily News* ran a series of reports highlighting—many former volunteers say exaggerating—the dangers potentially faced by volunteers, and suggested that the agency was failing in its obligation to provide adequate security. As a result, congressional hearings were held and legislation was approved by the House (H.R. 4060, June 2004) that sought to address some security concerns.

The issue emerged again in January 2011 when the ABC television newsmagazine *20/20* broadcast two reports—one concerning the 2009 murder of a volunteer in Benin and the other concerning volunteer rape. Both stories suggested that the Peace Corps had been insensitive to the victims and their families, raised questions about the enforcement of its security policies, and emphasized the security risks of Peace Corps service.

Following the television programs, the Peace Corps Director issued statements noting that the programs did not accurately reflect Peace Corps policy and practice regarding the safety and security of volunteers. The Director of the Peace Corps also offered apologies to the family and friends of the murder victim if the agency could have been more compassionate.¹¹ In addition, the Peace Corps issued a formal *Commitment to Sexual Assault Victims*, which included, among other things, promises to treat victims of sexual assault with dignity and respect, to take appropriate steps to provide for their safety, to support volunteers in their recovery, and to work closely with them in decisions regarding continuation of service. In February 2011, Peace Corps published a detailed set of *Guidelines for Responding to Rape and Major Sexual Assault* for the use of agency personnel.

⁹ *Peace Corps 2008 Volunteer Survey Global Report*, June 2009, p. 52.

¹⁰ “A resignation is a decision made by the volunteer and trainee who no longer wish to continue in the Peace Corps.” Assessment Report, pp. 171-172.

¹¹ *Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams’ Response to ABC News’ 20/20*, January 14, 2011 and January 27, 2011.

The Peace Corps says that it gives the safety and security of its volunteers the highest priority. In the past decade, it has launched a number of initiatives, including establishment of a stand alone Safety and Security Office, deployment of U.S. direct hire field-based safety and security officers and local hire safety and security personnel, and appointment at headquarters of regional desk officers and a chief compliance officer to monitor compliance with new security rules and procedures. These personnel develop programs and provide training to staff and volunteers from recruitment through close of service. In 2008, Peace Corps established a sexual assault working group to adopt best practices, and in 2010, it approved creation of a victim's advocate position to support crime victims from the crime through post-Peace Corps service, including helping sort through the red tape to receive benefits.

The use of statistics to suggest a high level of threat can be misleading. The 20/20 allegation that "more than 1,000 volunteers" had been "raped or sexually abused" in the past decade failed to disaggregate the data, which would show that there had been 221 rapes or attempted rapes in the 10-year period, 15 in 2009. The charge that Peace Corps was covering up its safety record is belied by the annual publication of safety statistics available on the agency website.

Peace Corps safety statistics, varying from year to year and by type of assault, may be selectively interpreted. From 2000 to 2009, the incidence of rape and attempted rape declined by 48% in the 10 years, from .67 per 100 female volunteer years to .35; and the rate for major sexual assault has increased by 75% from .25 per 100 female volunteer years to .46. On the other hand, according to the Peace Corps, *from 1997*, when comparable data were first tracked, to 2009, the rate of decline in rape and attempted rape was only 27% and the incidence of major sexual assault *decreased* by 34%.

The most recent Peace Corps figures show the rate for other sexual assaults has increased by 49%, from 1.17 per 100 female volunteer years to 1.75 between 2000 and 2009. They also show a 51% increase in those 10 years in rates of theft, from 6.53 per 100 volunteer years in 2000 to 9.85 in 2009; and an 89% increase in burglary from 2.49 per 100 volunteer years in 2000 to 4.70 in 2009. A change in recent years in the definition of aggravated assault and other physical assaults makes identification of any 10-year trend in these crimes difficult. The GAO pointed out in a 2002 report that since the number of events is small, there may be some question as to whether the apparent trends are significant.¹² Further these statistics also reflect volunteer reporting rates, which likely produce undercounting, and do not take into account other factors specific to the crime. When surveyed in 2010, volunteers themselves reported feeling "usually safe" or "very safe" where they live and where they work by 87% and 91%, respectively.¹³

In recent years, the Peace Corps has been particularly concerned with threats of terrorism, crime, and civil strife, and has responded by upgrading communications, testing emergency action plans, and other security measures. Evacuations and closure of missions to insure the well-being of volunteers in cases of political instability and civil unrest have constrained the growth of the Peace Corps. In the past 10 years, volunteers have been evacuated from at least 27 countries for these reasons, including three attributed to the events of September 11—Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic (they have since returned to the latter two countries).

¹² Peace Corps, *Safety of the Volunteer 2009: Annual Report of Volunteer Safety*. General Accounting Office, *Peace Corps: Initiatives for Addressing Safety and Security Challenges Hold Promise, but Progress Should be Assessed*, page 40, GAO-02-818, July 2002.

¹³ *Peace Corps Statement Issued to ABC News' 20/20*, January 11, 2011.

Despite the appeal of using Peace Corps volunteers to convey U.S. culture and values directly to the grassroots of Islamic countries, many of these countries of U.S. foreign policy interest might be considered unsafe for Americans over the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, according to the Peace Corps, about 25% of all volunteers, at this time, are serving in 16 countries with Muslim populations of over 40%. In FY2010, the Peace Corps launched a program in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world. In general, the Peace Corps has argued that the close interpersonal relationship between volunteers and members of their host country community helps to make them safe.

Legislative Proposals on Safety and Security

Congress has responded to the recent safety and security concerns with a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on May 11, 2011, and by introducing several pieces of legislation amending the Peace Corps Act—S. 1280, the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of 2011, ordered reported on July 26, 2011, by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; Title X of H.R. 2583, the Foreign Relations Authorization for FY2012, reported on July 21, 2011, by the House Foreign Affairs Committee; and H.R. 2699, the Peace Corps Volunteer Service Improvement Act of 2011, introduced by the Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee on July 29, 2011.

S. 1280 and H.R. 2583 mostly share the same language on safety and security issues. Both specify that volunteers receive sexual assault risk reduction and response training, including training tailored to the country of service covering safety plans in the event of an assault, medical treatments available, medevac procedures, and information on the legal process for pressing charges. Peace Corps applicants would be provided with a historical analysis of crimes and risks in the proposed country of service. Trainees would be provided with contact information of the Inspector General for purposes of reporting violations of the sexual assault protocol and of the victims advocate. The legislation requires that sexual assault protocols and guidelines be developed by the Peace Corps director and training provided to staff regarding implementation of the protocol. Volunteers could request removal from a site, which would then be evaluated for its safety. Sexual response teams would be established to respond to reports of sexual assault by volunteers. Alternative reporting systems would be established that allow volunteer anonymity. A victims advocate position would be established to assist sexually assaulted volunteers and facilitate access to available services. A Sexual Assault Advisory Council would be established composed of returned volunteers and experts on sexual assault to review training and policy to ensure they conform to best practices. An annual survey would be conducted regarding the effectiveness of Peace Corps programs and safety. A process would be established to allow reports of incidents while protecting the confidentiality of volunteers.

In addition to these shared provisions, H.R. 2583 would require that the Peace Corps and State Department Bureau of Diplomatic Security agree to a memorandum of understanding on the duties and obligations of each with respect to protection of Peace Corps volunteers and staff. Other legislation introduced in the House, H.R. 2699, contains provisions on different aspects of Peace Corps policy, including some on safety and security. It repeats the provision on the memorandum of understanding and also requires annual submission to Congress of safety and security reports.

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