



The Peace Corps: Current Issues

Curt Tarnoff

Specialist in Foreign Affairs

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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. As of end September 2011, about 9,095 volunteers were serving in 76 nations.

In 2012, 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 2012, the Administration issued its FY2013 budget request, proposing \$374.5 million for the Peace Corps, \$500,000 less than the FY2012 level of \$375 million approved in December 2011 in the Consolidated Appropriations Act 2012 (Division I of P.L. 112-74, H.R. 2055).

The last Peace Corps funding 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. 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 November 21, 2011, the Kate Puze Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of 2011 was signed into law (P.L. 112-57). It puts into place a number of safeguards to address and reduce the incidence of volunteer rape and sexual abuse.

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.

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Recent Developments

On February 13, 2012, the Administration issued its FY2013 budget request, proposing \$374.5 million for the Peace Corps, \$500,000 less than the FY2012 level.

In February 2012, the Peace Corps completed a review of its operations and the security environment in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. As result, the agency will resume sending new volunteers to El Salvador and Guatemala later in the year. A decision on Honduras has not yet been reached.

On December 23, 2011, the Consolidated Appropriations Act 2012 (P.L. 112-74, H.R. 2055) was signed into law. Division I provides \$375 million for the Peace Corps, \$750,000 more than in FY2011.

On December 21, 2011, the Peace Corps announced that it would send no new volunteers to Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador while it conducted a review of its operations and the security environment in those locations. Currently serving Honduras volunteers were withdrawn pending the outcome of the review.

On November 21, 2011, the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of 2011 was signed into law (P.L. 112-57). It puts into place a number of safeguards to address and reduce the incidence of volunteer rape and sexual abuse. The bill, S. 1280 (S.Rept. 112-85), was approved by the Senate on September 26, 2011, and by the House on November 1, 2011.

On October 6, 2011, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a hearing on the future of the Peace Corps.

On October 4, 2011, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee held a hearing on H.R. 854, a bill that would establish a Peace Corps memorial.

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 2011 on the issue of volunteer safety and security. In 2012, the 112th Congress will consider the President's FY2013 funding request for the Peace Corps, 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 sends American volunteers to serve at the grassroots level in villages and towns across the globe to meet its three-point legislative mandate of promoting world peace and friendship by improving the lives of those they serve, helping others understand American culture, and sharing their experience with Americans back home. To date, nearly 200,000 Peace Corps volunteers have served in 139 countries. As of end September

2011, 9,095 volunteers were serving in 76 nations.¹ The Peace Corps director is Aaron S. Williams, a former volunteer.

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 non-governmental relief and development organizations. More than 1,000 Peace Corps Response volunteers have served in 45 countries, including post-tsunami Thailand and Sri Lanka and post-earthquake Haiti. 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.

Congressional Actions

FY2013 Appropriations

In February 2012, the Administration issued its FY2013 budget request, proposing \$374.5 million for the Peace Corps, \$500,000 less than the FY2012 level of \$375 million.

FY2012 Appropriations

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

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 did not take up the bill. On September 22, 2011, the Senate Appropriations Committee reported S. 1601, the FY2012 State, Foreign Operations Appropriations, providing \$375 million for the Peace Corps, \$750,000 more than the FY2011 level. The committee report on the bill, S.Rept. 112-85, contains a number of directives, on the implementation of which the committee requires reporting from the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps was directed to consult with the committee regarding any plans to open, close, or significantly reduce any office or country program; to take further steps to maximize volunteer safety; to adjust volunteer placement to ensure that they serve U.S. interests; to solicit volunteer and former volunteer views through regular surveys; to make statistics and information on the Peace Corps more publicly available; to adopt procedures to ensure the confidentiality of whistleblowers; and to review the capacity of volunteers to use PEPFAR (President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief) funds effectively.

On December 23, 2011, the Consolidated Appropriations Act 2012 (P.L. 112-74, H.R. 2055) was signed into law. Division I provides \$375 million for the Peace Corps, \$750,000 more than in FY2011 and \$64.6 million below the President's request.

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.

Authorization Legislation

Both House and Senate took action in 2011 to authorize funding levels for the Peace Corps. 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 (H.Rept. 112-223), the Foreign Relations Authorization for FY2012, which includes language authorizing \$375 million for the Peace Corps in FY2012.

Despite repeated efforts during the past nine years, Congress has not enacted a new Peace Corps funding authorization. The last such Peace Corps authorization (P.L. 106-30), approved in 1999, covered the years FY2000 to FY2003. Appropriations bills, however, routinely waive the requirement of authorization of appropriations for foreign aid programs, as the FY2012 Continuing Appropriations Act (P.L. 112-36, Sec. 113) did in the case of FY2012 unauthorized foreign aid program appropriations, including those for Peace Corps.

In 2011, Congress took a number of steps to address Peace Corps volunteer safety and security concerns in authorization measures. H.R. 2583, noted above, contains provisions addressing Peace Corps safety and security. On September 26, 2011, the Senate approved S. 1280 (S.Rept. 112-82), the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of 2011, addressing safety and security. On September 21, 2011, the House Foreign Affairs Committee ordered reported both H.R. 2337, the companion bill to S. 1280, and H.R. 2699, the Peace Corps Volunteer Service Improvement Act of 2011. The House approved S. 1280 on November 1, 2011, and it was signed into law on November 21, 2011. These bills are discussed in the “Safety and Security Issues” section below.

In addition to safety provisions, H.R. 2699 contains other program-related requirements. 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 the Foreign Relations Authorization, S. 1426, contains the “Peace Corps Improvement and Expansion Act of 2011,” requiring the Peace Corps to submit a report on progress made toward implementing the recommendations of the comprehensive assessment issued in 2010 (see section below).

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).² As requested by the conferees (H.Rept. 111-366), the 204-page document specifically addresses a range of issues of concern to Congress regarding Peace Corps operations and procedures. While the report is thorough in its treatment of these issues, it should be noted that some points on which Congress has expressed an interest in recent years were not requested to be substantively addressed in the report. The report does not address such issues as safety and security, deferment of student loans, utilization of information technology, mechanisms for

² The report can be found at http://multimedia.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/opengov/PC_Comprehensive_Agency_Assessment.pdf.

soliciting volunteer views, the adequacy and impact of post-service benefits, and the accomplishments and plans of 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 were approved in principle by the Peace Corps director. All recommendations were placed in an implementation matrix with lead offices and proposed timing for implementation identified. Only a few of the recommendations required legislative action and, therefore, most could be launched immediately. As a result of the assessment team's findings, the Peace Corps adopted a strategy to guide its operations in the future, some key elements of which are noted below.

Country selection. The Peace Corps has moved 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 recommended that the Peace Corps conduct a formal annual portfolio review that would 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 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. The first portfolio review has been conducted and informed the agency's strategic planning and budget guidance to country posts in 2011.

Volunteer skill composition: generalists. The new Peace Corps strategy chose 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 determined, with some exceptions noted below, 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 recommended steps be taken to strengthen the quality of the volunteer force available by improving its technical, language, and cultural training. It called for hiring full-time training staff at country posts and providing more training time to volunteers.

Volunteer project focus. The new strategy suggested 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 argued 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. Since the report, an agency workshop proposed reducing the number of activities from 211 to 60, new training curricula for teaching English and for HIV/AIDS education are being developed, and an Africa focus on malaria prevention is being formulated.

Volunteer skill composition: specialists. The assessment addressed 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. Since the report was issued, the number of Peace Corps Response volunteers more than doubled and extensions of service for high performing volunteers have been encouraged. A pilot program to utilize others besides former volunteers for short-term, highly technical service is being developed.

Volunteer recruitment. To meet the strategy's call for efforts to better meet developing country volunteer needs and attract the best volunteer candidates, the agency has sought to improve its recruitment and placement process and strengthen diversity outreach.

“Third goal.” 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” (Peace Corps Act, P.L. 87-293, Sec. 2). This objective has always received less attention and funding (\$1.9 million of the \$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. In 2010, the “third goal” was singled out 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 World Wise 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. Since the report was published, the agency has promoted the “third goal” through a campaign to encourage greater participation by volunteers and former volunteers. The Peace Corps invited all U.S. graduate schools to participate in the Paul Coverdell Fellows Program, through which the schools offer financial assistance to returned volunteers—in December 2010, nine new graduate schools joined the program.

Management and operations. In addition to policy decisions encompassed by the report, the assessment calls for strengthening of Peace Corps management and operations. It recommends updating the agency's strategic plan to include the new strategies 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. Since the report was issued, a new monitoring and evaluation policy for the whole agency and an overseas staff orientation guide for host country national staff are being developed. Efforts are being made to build new partnerships with international organizations, U.S. government agencies, and others. In an effort to strengthen volunteer medical care, new Regional Medical Officers were hired and a Quality Improvement Council was established. A number of changes have also been made to safety and security operations (discussed below).

Congressional reaction to the assessment report and strategy. 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. As noted above, S. 1426, the Foreign Relations Authorization, 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

It is difficult to define a trend over the past decade in Peace Corps funding and volunteer numbers. Despite a 2002 expansion initiative by President Bush to double its size to about 14,000 volunteers within five years, the Peace Corps saw only a 16% increase in end of fiscal year volunteer numbers between 2002 and 2009. In early 2010, the Obama Administration proposed a more modest objective of a 9,400-volunteer force by 2012 and 11,000 by 2016. Annual incremental increases and a significant congressional bump-up in FY2010 funding helped lead to an end of FY2010 volunteer level of 8,655, a 13% increase from the previous year, and the highest level since 1970. At end of September 2011, volunteer numbers had reached 9,095. Congress approved an FY2011 appropriation of \$374.3 million for the Peace Corps, a 6% cut from FY2010, and the FY2012 level is nearly unchanged from the previous year. Peace Corps projections based on these recent funding levels suggest a decline in volunteer numbers to an estimated 8,540 in FY2012 and 7,400 in FY2013.

Although there appears to be broad support for the agency, when considering funding increases, Congress has had to weigh whether sufficient funds were available vis-à-vis other foreign aid priorities to warrant appropriating the amounts sought by both Bush and Obama Administrations. In addition, some Members have questioned the managerial capacity of the agency to implement an expansion while maintaining an effective volunteer force.

Table I. Peace Corps Budget: FY2002-FY2012

Fiscal Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Request (\$ mil)	275.0	317.0	359.0	401.0	345.0	336.7	333.5	343.5	373.4	446.2	439.6	374.5
Appropriation (\$ mil)	278.7	295.1	309.3	317.4	319.9	319.6	330.8	340.0	400.0	374.3	375.0	—
Total Volunteers	6,636	7,533	7,733	7,810	7,749	8,079	7,876	7,671	8,655	9,095	n/a	—

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 FY2011, 61% of volunteers were women, 20% were minorities, 93% were single, and the average age was 28.³

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 and FY2011, only 7% of volunteers were 50 or older, compared with 5% in FY2008 (the number of older *applicants* represented 7% of applicants in FY2011).⁴

Volunteers work in a range of sectors—in FY2011, 40% in education, 23% in health and HIV/AIDS, 12% in business development, 12% in the environment, 5% in youth, 4% in agriculture, and 4% in other activities. According to the June 2010 assessment report, 85% of volunteers were recent college graduates with little professional experience. The Peace Corps, while adept at recruiting generalists and providing them with sufficient training to carry out

³ Peace Corps volunteers are 4% African American, 5% Asian American, and 7% Hispanic/Latino origin.

⁴ Peace Corps Fact Sheet, October 25, 2011 and Peace Corps communications with CRS.

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.⁵ 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 FY2011, about 12,206 applied to be volunteers, compared to 8,897 in FY2001, but a 10% decrease from FY2010.

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.⁶ 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 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 2010 volunteer survey found that 21% and 27% of volunteers were dissatisfied with regard to support received from Peace Corps staff in site selection and job assignment respectively.⁷ One sign of volunteer dissatisfaction—the resignation rate—has improved in recent years, with 6.0% resigning in FY2011 versus 9.8% in FY2001.⁸

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

⁵ 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.

⁶ *Peace Corps: Meeting the Challenges of the 1990s*, May 1990, NSIAD-90-122

⁷ *Peace Corps 2010 Annual Volunteer Survey*, October 2010, p. 20.

⁸ “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.

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

The safety and security of volunteers has long been a prime concern of the Peace Corps. Because of where they live and work, Peace Corps volunteers appear to many Americans to be especially vulnerable to crime. The threat of anti-American terrorism in the years following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, has increased that perception. Fears were further raised in 2003 when the *Dayton (Ohio) Daily News* ran a series of reports suggesting that the Peace Corps was failing in its obligation to provide adequate security; a congressional hearing was held and legislation was approved by the House (H.R. 4060, June 2004) that sought to address this concern.⁹

In January 2010, the issue of safety and security received renewed public attention due to two reports on the ABC television newsmagazine *20/20*, one concerning the 2009 murder of volunteer Kate Puzey in Benin and the other addressing the rape of volunteers. The stories catalogued incidents illustrating failure of some Peace Corps staff to maintain whistleblower confidentiality, inaction in response to volunteer reports of threatening behavior, a lack of compassion for victims of crime, a tendency to blame the victim, and insensitivity to the parents of a crime victim. Since the *20/20* reports and a House hearing on the subject held on May 11, 2011, more rape victims have come forward with stories further suggesting disregard for the victims and a possible institutional failure to offer adequate support. While expressing support for the Peace Corps mission, First Response Action, an organization representing volunteer victims, sought stronger actions to reduce assault incidents and better address the needs of victims where assaults occur. In 2011, several pieces of legislation were introduced in the House and Senate that sought to answer this call. On November 21, 2011, the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of 2011 was signed into law (P.L. 112-57).

Peace Corps IG report. The concerns generated by the *20/20* reports and victims' accusations followed on the heels of a Peace Corps IG report on volunteer safety and security released in April 2010.¹⁰ While noting that the Peace Corps had made significant changes in its safety and security program since 2002 and "maintained a much larger safety and security workforce than comparable international non-governmental organizations," the IG "identified multiple areas where Peace Corps needed to improve" (page i), mostly including a lack of effective processes, standardized training, and skilled personnel to manage and implement discrete aspects of its safety and security programs. Perhaps most troubling, the IG found numerous instances between FY2004 and FY2009 of re-occurring evaluation findings, such as posts not thoroughly completing housing/site inspections, volunteers engaged in unsafe behaviors, various cities where volunteers were in locations considered unsafe, and inadequate emergency action plans, suggesting problems in safety and security program compliance over the long-term.¹¹

⁹ "Casualties of Peace," *Dayton Daily News*, October 26-November 1, 2003.

¹⁰ Peace Corps, Office of the Inspector General, Final Audit Report: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security Program, IG-10-08-A, April 2010.

¹¹ Peace Corps, Office of the Inspector General, Final Audit Report: Peace Corps Volunteer Safety and Security (continued...)

The IG report made 28 recommendations. Among these are that the Peace Corps Director should establish clear lines of authority to ensure that the Office of Safety and Security can manage the safety and security program; that the Director adequately track Safety and Security Officer recommendations to make sure they are being met; that the chief compliance officer establish a process to identify re-occurring problems and take steps to address them; that the role, number, and salaries for Safety and Security Coordinators be reviewed to ensure agency needs are met; that the Office of Safety and Security develop and implement a training program for Officers and Coordinators based on needed skills; that the Office of Safety and Security develop a comprehensive plan that includes the agency's safety and security strategy, risks, and policies to mitigate those risks; and that volunteers be provided with a consolidated handbook on the basic principles of volunteer safety during the recruitment and staging process and be required to sign a code of conduct on basic security principles before departure.¹²

On April 12, 2010, the Peace Corps Director responded to the IG recommendations, concurring with 27 of the 28, and partially concurring with the remaining recommendation.¹³ The agency reports that implementation of these recommendations is ongoing. Twenty-five recommendations have been closed, and agency responses to the others had been submitted to the IG for review. The remaining recommendation, regarding the need for formal documentation to clarify the roles of the Department of State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security and Peace Corps, has resulted in a draft memorandum of understanding (MOU), currently under review by the Department of State.

The Peace Corps response to the 20/20 stories and victims' charges. 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 Peace Corps immediately 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. 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.¹⁴

In addition to noting its ongoing efforts to improve on its safety record and better serve volunteers, the Peace Corps points out that volunteers themselves in their annual survey have reported feeling "usually safe" or "very safe" where they live and where they work, respectively 87% and 91% in 2010.¹⁵

The Peace Corps asserts that its operating procedures in response to sexual assault and training offered to volunteers have resulted in "a significant decline in the incidence of rape and major sexual assault among Volunteers over the past 14 years."¹⁶ According to the Peace Corps, between

(...continued)

Program, IG-10-08-A, April 2010, page 17.

¹² Ibid., p. 49-51.

¹³ The Director only partially concurred with the recommendation regarding presentation of safety and security information to volunteers at the staging (pre-departure) step, noting that security mitigation would be better conveyed in-country as the information is post-specific.

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

¹⁵ *Peace Corps Statement Issued to ABC News' 20/20*, January 11, 2011.

¹⁶ *Peace Corps Fact Sheet: Sexual Assault Prevention and Response*, January 2011.

1997 and 2009 there was a 27% decline in the incidence of rape and attempted rape and a 34% decline in the incidence of major sexual assault.¹⁷

A statement issued by the Peace Corps claimed that there are procedures in place “to respond quickly and compassionately to Volunteers.”¹⁸ Further, the Peace Corps has taken a number of steps to improve its procedures in the months following the 20/20 reports. These are discussed below.

PC processes to address safety and security. The Peace Corps has always had in place various procedures and processes to address the issues of volunteer safety and security, but such efforts have been particularly pronounced in the past decade. Following a 2002 Government Accountability Office (GAO) finding that “Peace Corps efforts to ensure effective implementation of its safety and security policies have produced varying results,” the Peace Corps launched numerous initiatives—including establishment of a stand alone Safety and Security Office to direct and oversee all security programs, 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.¹⁹ Nonetheless, GAO reported on March 24, 2004, that some “unevenness” in compliance with procedures mandated by headquarters likely remained.²⁰

Peace Corps has taken additional steps to improve safety and security, most notably, in 2008, establishing a Sexual Assault Working Group to examine risk factors, analyze training, and adopt best practices to reduce risk and address victims’ needs. In late 2010, the agency approved establishment of a victim’s advocate position in response to suggestions from returned volunteers. The advocate supports volunteer victims of crime, from the crime through post-Peace Corps service, including helping them sort through the red tape to receive post-service health benefits. In February 2011, the Office of Safety and Security issued a document on *Guidelines for Responding to Rape and Major Sexual Assault* that captures the policies and procedures in place to assist and respond to volunteer rape or major sexual assault. Peace Corps staff are expected to serve as advocates for the volunteer and ensure “that what happens next is in the Volunteer’s best interest.”²¹ This includes ensuring a safe environment and emotional stability, providing medical care and counseling, and helping preserve a volunteer’s right to prosecute.

Political instability and terrorism. The Peace Corps has been particularly concerned in recent years with threats of terrorism and civil strife and has responded by upgrading communications, testing emergency action plans, and other security measures. The Peace Corps addresses these larger security concerns, including natural disasters or civil unrest, through country-specific Emergency Action Plans (EAP) that are to be in place in each Peace Corps country. The plan, to be tested and revised annually, defines roles and responsibilities for staff and volunteers, explains

¹⁷ *Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams’ Response to ABC World News*, January 27, 2011.

¹⁸ *Peace Corps Fact Sheet: Sexual Assault Prevention and Response*, January 2011.

¹⁹ Government Accountability Office, *Peace Corps: Initiatives for Addressing Safety and Security Challenges Hold Promise, but Progress Should be Assessed*, GAO-02-818, July 2002, p. 2.

²⁰ Testimony of Jess T. Ford, Director, International Affairs and Trade, General Accounting Office, before the Committee on International Relations, *Peace Corps: Status of Initiatives to Improve Volunteer Safety and Security*, GAO-04-600T, March 24, 2004.

²¹ Peace Corps, Office of Safety and Security, *Guidelines for Responding to Rape and Major Sexual Assault*, February 2011, p.12.

standard policies and procedures, and lists emergency contact information for every volunteer in country. 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).

In a possibly related development, however, the Peace Corps suspended its 117 volunteer program in Kazakhstan in mid-November 2011 “based on a number of operational considerations,” according to an agency press release. Volunteer reports suggest that recent rapes and terrorist attacks may be the specific cause.²² Due to concerns regarding the prevalence of drug and organized crime-related violence in Central America, the Peace Corps announced in December 2011 that it would send no new volunteers to Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador while it conducted a review of its operations and the security environment in those locations. In the case of Honduras, currently serving volunteers were withdrawn on administrative leave and completed service while the review was ongoing. The review was completed in February 2012, and a decision on the future of the Honduras program is pending. Volunteers in Guatemala and El Salvador are continuing to serve, and the Peace Corps will resume sending new volunteers to those countries in 2013. To address safety concerns in Guatemala and El Salvador, volunteer operations are being consolidated in safer geographical areas, alternative volunteer transportation is being devised, and training and support is being enhanced.

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 responded to the safety and security issue by holding a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on May 11, 2011; a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on October 6, 2011; and by introducing several pieces of legislation amending the Peace Corps Act, most notably S. 1280, the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of 2011, reported on September 21, 2011, by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, approved by the Senate on September 26, 2011, and by the House on November 1, 2011, and signed into law on November 21, 2011, as P.L. 112-57.

In addition, Congress considered a companion bill to S. 1280, H.R. 2337, ordered reported by the House Foreign Affairs Committee on September 21, 2011; 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, reported by the House Foreign Affairs Committee on September 21, 2011.

²² See Peace Corps OnLine, November 18, 2011, at <http://peacecorpsonline.org/>.

S. 1280, as approved by Congress and signed into law, pulls together most of the language on safety and security issues as is contained in these other bills. It specifies 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 are to be provided with a historical analysis of crimes and risks in the proposed country of service. Trainees will 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 bill 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 can request removal from a site, which would then be evaluated for its safety. Sexual response teams are established to respond to reports of sexual assault by volunteers. Alternative reporting systems are established that allow volunteer anonymity. A victims advocate position is established to assist sexually assaulted volunteers and facilitate access to available services. A Sexual Assault Advisory Council is 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 is to be conducted regarding the effectiveness of Peace Corps programs and safety. A process is established to allow reports of incidents while protecting the confidentiality of volunteers. It is required 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. And, a report on safety and security is to be submitted annually to Congress.

Author Contact Information

Curt Tarnoff
Specialist in Foreign Affairs
ctarnoff@crs.loc.gov, 7-7656