

CRS Report for Congress

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The Peace Corps: Background and Issues for Congress

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The Peace Corps: Background and Issues for Congress

Summary

Since the Peace Corps was established by President Kennedy on March 1, 1961, more than 151,000 volunteers have served in 132 countries. The Peace Corps Act sets out three goals for the Agency: to help people of other countries meet their needs for trained personnel; to help promote a better understanding of the American people by those served; and to help promote a better understanding of other people by Americans. Volunteers serve in a diverse range of sectors — in education, health, small business, the environment, and agriculture — working at the grassroots level, usually in small villages and towns, learning the local language, and serving in jobs that are community and people oriented. The Peace Corps is a unique organization that, while serving a foreign policy purpose, remains distinct from other foreign policy and public diplomacy agencies in its grassroots, people-to-people, character.

In January 1998, President Clinton called for a 10,000 volunteer force in the year 2000, up from the current, roughly 6,600 volunteer and trainee level. To meet this objective, the FY1999 budget request for the Peace Corps is \$48 million higher than the previous year. Some in Congress have questioned the Peace Corps' determination of what countries to work in and how many volunteers to place in those countries. The Peace Corps balances budgetary, security, program effectiveness, and country development factors in weighing such decisions.

Some, particularly those in the returned volunteer community, would like to see more resources devoted to the Peace Corps' third goal of expanding Americans' understanding of the world. Two programs — the World Wise Schools and the Peace Corps Fellows Program — are currently the main activities under the third goal. In 1996, the Peace Corps established a new "Crisis Corps," to provide short-term emergency and humanitarian assistance at the community level. Using current and former volunteers, it has undertaken five assignments to date.

In meeting the objectives of the Government Performance and Results Act, the Peace Corps would have difficulty demonstrating its contribution to the goal of promoting world peace and friendship, and shares with other government agencies the problem of measuring level of performance. Inadequate programming and support of volunteers has been a recurrent criticism over the years, which the Peace Corps is attempting to address through new strategic planning methods and efforts to see how volunteers can be better trained and prepared for their assignments.

The Peace Corps has made efforts in recent years to improve recruitment, including raising the number of minorities represented and recruiting volunteers with newly required skills, such as those with business backgrounds. It has also taken significant steps to meet health care concerns, including insuring that post-service volunteers were well-informed regarding workers compensation benefits.

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The Peace Corps: Background and Issues for Congress

For nearly 37 years, 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, foresters, farmers, small business advisors — to improving the lives of those they serve. To date, more than 151,000 volunteers have served in 132 countries.

Congressional interest in the Peace Corps will likely be more pronounced during the second session of the 105th Congress as a result of President Clinton's announcement, made on January 3, 1998, that he will seek a major expansion in the size of the program. The objective is to meet a 10,000 volunteer goal by the year 2000.

This report outlines Peace Corps operations both in the United States and abroad.¹ It also discusses a range of issues of possible interest to Congress.

Background

The Peace Corps Mandate

On March 1, 1961, President Kennedy established a temporary Peace Corps under Executive Order 10924. Six months later, Congress approved P.L. 87-293, The Peace Corps Act, authorizing the Peace Corps on a permanent basis. A direct annual appropriation is provided through the Foreign Operations bill.

The Peace Corps Act outlines the three goals that have guided the Agency since its birth. These are:

- to help people of other countries meet their needs for trained personnel, particularly in meeting basic needs of those living in the poorest areas;
- to help promote a better understanding of the American people by those served in these countries; and
- to help promote a better understanding of other peoples by Americans.

¹ This report is based largely on interviews with Peace Corps staff, volunteers, and former volunteers, as well as on documentation provided by the Peace Corps.

Peace Corps Volunteers: Where they Serve and What they Do

As of September 1997, there were 6,612 Peace Corps volunteers and trainees serving in 87 countries.² Of these, 37 percent were in sub-Saharan Africa, 33 percent in Latin America and the Pacific, and 30 percent in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, and Asia.

Volunteers serve in a diverse range of sectors. In FY1997, 37% worked in education; 18% in health; 18% in the environment; 13% in small business; 9% in agriculture; and 5% in other fields. Volunteers work at the grassroots level, usually living in small villages and towns, learning the local language, and serving in jobs that are community and people oriented.

Education volunteers usually teach English, science, and math to schoolchildren or provide teacher training. In addition, they often bring environmental, health, and women-in-development concerns into their classroom and community work. Community health workers participate in public education campaigns on AIDS prevention, maternal/child health, guinea worm disease eradication, and related concerns. They also help communities construct potable water systems. Environment volunteers might work on forestry programs, help communities manage natural resources, and seek to raise environmental awareness. Volunteers working in the small business sector help organize and run cooperatives and microenterprise credit organizations, provide business outreach services, and teach business practices. Agriculture sector volunteers work closely with farmers to promote environmentally sound agricultural practices and help build freshwater fish farms.

The above descriptions are generic and do not convey the full variety of activities or the degree to which volunteers put their own individual stamp on their assignments or have taken the initiative to develop a job or extracurricular activity that contributes to community development. Some recent examples of volunteer activity cited by the Peace Corps include the dozen volunteers in Chile who worked with local teachers to develop a 500-page textbook on the environment that is expected to be widely used in primary schools throughout the country. Working with the urban youth community in Asuncion, Paraguay, a volunteer, who herself uses a wheelchair, teaches swimming to disabled youth, and helps a "street kids" choir. In Cape Verde, two volunteers are implementing a pilot project to prevent cholera in 14 communities, through testing and monitoring of chlorine levels in local water tanks.

In Mauritania, volunteers trained in health education, water/sanitation, agro-forestry, and construction, have begun working with the U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees and the Red Crescent to assist the thousands of people returning to their country after years as refugees in Senegal. In the Slovak Republic, Slovak and Peace Corps volunteers are working together on historic preservation activities, including rehabilitation of a synagogue that will be turned into a museum. A volunteer in Mongolia has helped his school to begin manufacturing school uniforms, encouraging

² The Peace Corps counts volunteers several ways. Volunteer numbers in this report include the total of both volunteers and trainees preparing for service as of the end of the fiscal year. The *average* number of volunteers alone during all of FY1997 was 5,858.

greater attendance by making it less expensive, providing some practical sewing training to students, and generating income.

Through the Peace Corps, a number of Americans also participate in the United Nations Volunteers (UNV). UNV was created in 1971 as a way of providing an opportunity for people from all countries, especially developing countries, to serve as volunteers in development programs, usually in a specialized technical capacity. Currently, there are over 2,100 UNVs from over 100 nations serving in 130 countries. Countries with their own national volunteer programs provide volunteers to the UNV and pay their external costs. In 1997, 31 Peace Corps volunteers served under UNV. In addition, the U.S. monetary contribution to UNV is provided through the Peace Corps — \$100,000 in FY1997.

Peace Corps Volunteers: Profile

The profile of Peace Corps volunteers in terms of age and gender has changed considerably since the creation of the program. Currently, the average volunteer is 29 years of age. The percentage of older volunteers has grown since the 1970s when 12% were over 29; now about 24% fall into that category. Six percent are over 50 years. The percentage of female volunteers has increased more dramatically — from a third in the 1960s, to about half in 1982, and to 58% today. Single volunteers remain the vast majority at 92%, in part because only married couples who are jointly volunteering are permitted, and expenses of children are not covered. Nearly all volunteers have undergraduate degrees, 15% have graduate degrees, and 26% possess one or more years of work experience.

Peace Corps Volunteers: Terms of Service

Volunteers are expected to serve for 2 years, plus an additional 10 weeks intended for orientation and job and language training. While volunteers may extend their term or re-apply for service elsewhere, preference may be given those who have not served previously. About 30% of volunteers ask to stay on an additional year. Of those who entered service in FY1995, about 28% left early, including resignations, medical separations, and administrative separations. This termination rate is thought by staff to be the lowest in Peace Corps history.

Although “volunteers,” those who serve with the Peace Corps are provided a settling-in allowance to provide basic household requirements such as pots and pans and blankets and a living allowance to cover food, transport, and miscellaneous expenses to maintain them at a level similar to that of the local people in their area of assignment. These allowances differ according to the cost of living in a particular country, but the one-time settling-in allowance is roughly \$300 and the average monthly living allowance is about \$250.

Housing is, in most cases, provided by the host country. Health coverage is completely covered by the Peace Corps. A readjustment allowance of \$200 for each month of service is given the volunteers following their term in order to facilitate the transition back to civilian life. The allowance has not changed since 1988.

Agency Role

The Peace Corps administers and monitors the activities of volunteers to ensure they meet its three legislative objectives. To meet the above goals, the Peace Corps recruits and trains volunteers, programs positions for them, and supports the volunteers in their work abroad. Since 1995, the Director of the Peace Corps has been Mark Gearan.

There are about 619 staff at the Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C., and in recruitment offices around the country. In addition, the Peace Corps maintains about 461 full-time positions abroad (223 of whom are Americans). In each of the 75 country posts, there is a Country Director, an Administrative Officer, a medical contractor, a cashier, and roughly one Associate Director for every 30 volunteers.³ The latter often specialize in a particular sector and support the work of volunteers in that sector. Many are host country nationals.

Host Government Role

Prior to the opening of a Peace Corps program in a country, the Peace Corps negotiates and signs an agreement with the government of the host country, establishing the program and setting forth mutual obligations. In many cases, the host country makes cash or in-kind contributions to support the presence of volunteers. There is, however, no specific amount or requirement for contribution — each country decides this on its own. In FY1997, host countries contributed \$1.2 million in cash. In addition, they furnished in-kind contributions, including housing, furniture, training centers, fuel, travel assistance, and discounts on office leases.

Issues for Congress

From time to time, the Peace Corps has been the subject of controversy and criticism. In its early years, its young, idealistic volunteers serving in the developing world were associated in the minds of some Americans with “leftist causes,” such as opposition to the Vietnam War. Meanwhile, some in the developing countries, ironically, criticized the volunteers as tools of the CIA and “cultural imperialists.” Volunteers themselves have often criticized the rather uneven management style of its field staff.

Today, some believe the organization suffers more from anonymity than conspicuousness. While the Peace Corps does not receive much attention in Washington and the national media, it appears to be well-publicized in the American communities where volunteers originate. Local newspapers often carry accounts of volunteer experiences, and, when volunteers return, they speak to schools and other groups. Perhaps as a result, Congress appears consistently supportive of the Peace Corps. When Central Europe and the former Soviet Union entered their post-Communist transitions, introducing a Peace Corps program was an early suggestion of Members. Currently, six serving Members of Congress are former volunteers and one is a former Peace Corps Director.

³ Some posts serve multiple countries.

The following section highlights facets of the Peace Corps that might contribute to a more complete understanding of the organization and its operations as well as issues that Congress might wish to explore as it exercises its oversight and funding responsibilities.

The Peace Corps' Unique Mission and Organization

The Peace Corps is a unique organization in regard to its mandate and structure. It has multiple objectives, not all of which would seem entirely compatible. And it is organized like no other part of the U.S. government with its own rules and culture.

Two of its three goals — helping people to meet basic needs and promoting understanding of the American people — suggest that it is both a foreign aid and a public diplomacy organization. These two functions are conducted elsewhere in the U.S. government by separate agencies — the Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) — in part because the two objectives are sometimes thought to conflict. While Peace Corps staff put equal weight on the two goals, it is unlikely that the organization would want to be judged in the same way as its sister agencies. The Peace Corps is not a foreign aid agency in the way that USAID is — it seeks to affect a very small aspect of a country's development: that at the grassroots community level.⁴ The Peace Corps is also not a public diplomacy agency in the way that USIA is — in a sense, it could be said that it promotes Americans rather than America.

While it does serve a foreign policy purpose, the Peace Corps works hard to avoid any perception that it is an instrument of U.S. foreign policy in the way both foreign aid and public diplomacy are traditionally perceived and employed. The Peace Corps director in a country is part of the ambassador's "country team," but the Peace Corps takes great pains to remain removed from policy, and the Peace Corps office is always separate from the U.S. embassy. Volunteers are considered private citizens, not diplomats. For security reasons, among others, the Peace Corps does not want volunteers to be mistaken for CIA operatives. Contacts between the two agencies are not permitted, even though volunteers may be in a good position to know what is happening at the local level.

The Peace Corps and USAID, however, often share a common development objective and have worked together on an ad hoc basis since the Peace Corps began. In the early 1980s, more formal cooperation was established, including a Small Projects Assistance Program through which USAID funds small-scale projects proposed and implemented by volunteers. In FY1997, the Peace Corps received approximately \$6.8 million from USAID for such activities.

Executive and legislative branch recognition of the distinction between the Peace Corps and foreign policy has long existed. Secretary of State Dean Rusk noted in 1965, that "to make the Peace Corps an instrument of foreign policy would be to rob

⁴ And what it offers, in the view of some, is not as much technical expertise as it is an attitude — the can-do, problem solving approach that is typically American.

it of its contribution to foreign policy.”⁵ Section 638 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (added in 1963) prevented prohibitions on foreign aid contained in the Act — usually among the strongest expressions of U.S. foreign policy concerns — to be applied to Peace Corps activities in affected countries. This issue was raised more recently, in 1991, when the Peace Corps remained in Thailand after other assistance was cut off following a military coup. The Peace Corps did not consider itself affected by appropriations language that prohibited aid under such circumstances. Although the House Foreign Operations subcommittee criticized the Peace Corps for this view, since FY1993 Congress has added specific language to appropriations bills excepting Peace Corps from any aid prohibitions. The Senate Foreign Operations subcommittee noted when this language was introduced that the stoppage or interruption of volunteer work — “using them as political leverage” — was not appropriate given the Peace Corps’ “longstanding separation from foreign policy objectives.”⁶

The institutional aspects of the Peace Corps are as unique as the programmatic side. To keep the agency as innovative, young, and energetic as in its early years, a “five-year rule” was adopted in 1965 affecting all American professional and clerical staff. None could stay longer than five years, with some exceptions that allowed a further two and a half-year extension. In practice, this has helped to attract staff dedicated to getting something accomplished in the short time span they are present in the organization, forcing the agency to, in a sense, always re-invent itself. It has also, however, meant that the Peace Corps has little institutional memory, and that staff with useful expertise are always departing.

One unique aspect of Peace Corps “culture” has begun to change in recent years. Until 1990, Peace Corps volunteers were predominantly located in small, rural villages in third world countries. The Peace Corps experience was, and still is in many cases, one of “suffering,” putting up with insects, isolation from modern forms of entertainment, and lack of such conveniences as electricity and plumbing. For many, this was part of the challenge and allure of the Peace Corps. The opening of programs in Central Europe and the former Soviet Union may have permanently altered this image. In these places, amenities, although spartan by U.S. standards, are luxurious compared to the usual developing country volunteer sites. Some have suggested that the move into “transition” countries and the consequent increased emphasis on urban problems and business skills have created a two-tier volunteer system and threatened the grassroots-oriented idealism that gave the Peace Corps its cohesiveness and identity. Others would point out that the Peace Corps is simply meeting the broad objectives of its original charter and adapting to modern needs.⁷

⁵ Quoted in telegram from Secretary of State and Director of Peace Corps to diplomatic and consular posts, June 25, 1983.

⁶ U.S. Senate. Committee on Appropriations. Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriation Bill, 1993. Report 102-419. p.137.

⁷ For example, see “In the Peace Corps Today, an M.B.A. Helps”, *Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 1994; “The Peace Corps Hasn’t Gone Soft”, Letters to the Editor, *Wall Street Journal*, January 18, 1995; “The Peace Corps in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Republics: A Return to the Original Charter”, Center for Naval Analyses, July 1992.

The Budget and the 10,000 Volunteer Force

In 1985, Congress made it the policy of the United States and a purpose of the Peace Corps to maintain, “consistent with programmatic and fiscal considerations,” a volunteer corps of at least 10,000 individuals (P.L. 99-83). The 1997 count of volunteers and trainees of 6,612, only 6% higher than the 6,264 level of 12 years ago, remains well below the objective. And far below the estimated 15,556 peak level attained by the Peace Corps in 1966.

On January 3, 1998, President Clinton announced that he would request a budget increase of \$48.3 million for FY1999, to put the Peace Corps “on the path” to a 10,000-volunteer force by 2000. Although the Peace Corps has usually received more funding from Congress since 1985 than Administrations have requested, no Administration had ever asked for sufficient funding to meet the 10,000-volunteer objective, and no Congress had sought to offer it.

Despite its favorable views of the agency, Congress will likely consider several funding and policy factors in dealing with the President’s request. To support an estimated volunteer and trainee level of 6,500, Congress appropriated \$222 million for FY1998. To get to a 10,200-volunteer and trainee force by the year 2000, the Peace Corps estimates that it would take \$322 million in FY2000, based on FY1997 funding assumptions, i.e., \$100 million more than the FY1998 budget. It is expected that the FY1999 request would allow a roughly 8,500 volunteer and trainee force, and an additional increase in the \$52 million range for FY2000 would be necessary to bring the Peace Corps to the 10,000 objective.

As with the rest of the Peace Corps budget, these additional funds would have to come out of the budget function 150 international affairs account, an account which, under the 1997 budget agreement, is expected to rise only slightly in FY1999 and fall significantly thereafter. Under this scenario, for the Peace Corps to achieve its 10,000-volunteer goal, it will have to vye for priority among all the competing foreign policy interests that the account supports, all of which have their own constituencies and congressional champions.

Until now, faced with a likely future of fiscal constraints, the Peace Corps has taken measures to do more with less. Staff at headquarters and abroad have been cut by 13% since FY1993. Orientation training previously conducted in the United States is now conducted more inexpensively abroad. Administrative support services — largely financial management processing — previously carried out by the State Department at Peace Corps expense are now being gradually undertaken by Peace Corps at less cost (\$1-1.5 million savings each year) and allegedly with greater operational efficiency. Emergency and medevac health services have been contracted out to one HMO-type carrier instead of using multiple providers, creating savings of more than \$1 million each year. Such efficiencies are allowing the Peace Corps to provide more volunteers for less money. The costs per volunteer (taking into account the budget for all agency operations, i.e., overhead and program management) is currently about \$37,000 per volunteer, down from \$40,000 per volunteer in FY1993, a 19% decrease in real terms.

A rapid increase in the size of the volunteer force, resulting from adoption of the President's initiative, might be expected to present some serious challenges to Peace Corps management. Although additional funds would provide new staff to back-up an expanded volunteer force, continuing problems related to programming and support, such as those noted below, may likely be exacerbated. Increased efforts to recruit appropriate skilled and educated volunteers would also have to be undertaken. And the Peace Corps would face new options regarding the number and choice of countries in which it seeks to operate.

Country Presence and U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities

Since the mid-1990s, budgetary pressures have led to a modest net reduction in the Peace Corps' global representation, following a period of rapid expansion. As the Cold War ended, the Peace Corps grew from 66 countries in 1989 to 94 by 1993. However, between FY1995 and 1998, the Peace Corps will have closed programs in 16 countries — Nigeria, the Cook Islands, the Seychelles, Comoros, the Marshall Islands, Sao Tome and Principe, Tunisia, Swaziland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Botswana, Chile, Fiji, and Tuvalu — and evacuated three — Albania, Congo (Brazzaville), and Central African Republic — due to civil unrest. During the same period, it will have opened new programs in 8 countries — Eritrea, Suriname, South Africa, Jordan, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Bangladesh, Mozambique, and Georgia. Concentration of volunteers has also been significantly altered in some countries in recent years, including reductions of volunteer strength in Thailand and the Eastern Caribbean and an increase in Haiti.

The decision of where and in what quantities to allocate Peace Corps volunteers has been a continuing interest of Congress. For example, Congress placed particular priority on entry of the Peace Corps into Central Europe and, in the case, of the former Soviet Union, earmarked funds from the NIS (New Independent States) account of the foreign operations bill for transfer from USAID to Peace Corps for the specific purpose of establishing a program in the region. In recent years, report language from the Senate Foreign Operations subcommittee, in particular, has encouraged a reevaluation of the location and levels of volunteers "to reflect the shifts in U.S. priorities and interests in the post-cold-war environment."⁸ In the most recent instance, the subcommittee suggested that levels in the Dominican Republic were inappropriately high in contrast to those in Central Europe where U.S. strategic interests, in its view, are greater. It faulted the Peace Corps for not being able to provide justification for its presence in parts of the world. If, by saying this, it meant that the Peace Corps did not justify its presence in strategic terms, the subcommittee is unlikely to be satisfied. For its part, the Peace Corps does not believe that strategic interests should be a criterion for its country or volunteer presence.

The Peace Corps considers multiple factors in deciding where to locate, but budget considerations now tend to drive the basic decision on the number of countries in which it operates and the number of volunteers that it places. Requests for Peace Corps programs continue to grow, but the budget has not kept up — in real terms, the FY1998 budget is the same as it was in FY1991. This has left the Peace Corps

⁸ Senate. Foreign Operations subcommittee, Foreign Operations Appropriations bill, 1998, Senate Report 105-35, June 24, 1997.

with a choice: it can either spread volunteers more thinly and incur the higher overhead costs associated with maintaining posts and professional staff to run the programs — thereby having to cut volunteer levels even more — or it can have more volunteers in fewer countries, supported in a more effective fashion. In recent years, the Peace Corps appears to have favored the latter option, as evidenced in the recent net decline in programs.⁹

Along with the inclination to emphasize reductions in overhead costs rather than expanding country representation, the Peace Corps has had to weigh other interests, most importantly the safety and security of volunteers and the potential for the program to be effective — level of development, support of host country, and proposed projects. In addition, it must be responsive to meeting the various and competing views of the Peace Corps mission, including those of Congress.

Meeting all these demands simultaneously has not always been feasible. To the extent that its mission is perceived as public diplomacy, it has been expected to favor as large a force as possible in as many countries as possible, and, historically, the Peace Corps has tried to respond to all mission-compatible requests for assistance and maintain a global presence. To meet its development mission, it has been inclined to leave the same countries which have “graduated” from USAID’s economic aid program in recent years and some it considers to have been poor “partners.” Reflecting U.S. foreign policy interests, it has sought a presence in countries of special interest, such as the former Soviet Union. One outcome of adoption of the President’s new initiative and an increase in Peace Corps funding might be that these competing priorities will all be better satisfied.

Third Goal

Of the three goals in the Peace Corps’ legislative mandate, the third — expanding Americans’ understanding about the world — was until the late 1980s somewhat neglected. Many credit the leadership of then Director Paul Coverdell with giving the goal a serious emphasis in Peace Corps operations. Nevertheless, in FY1997, only five tenths of one percent of the Peace Corps budget was dedicated to third-goal programs. This figure somewhat distorts the agency’s dedication to the objective as all three of its goals rest on the provision of volunteers. Without spending funds to support volunteers and insure that they have a successful experience, the third goal would be inconsequential. Still, some, particularly those in the returned volunteer community, suggest more funds could be made available to meet this goal.

Third-goal activities are composed mostly of two programs. The World Wise School program, introduced in 1989, links serving volunteers with U.S. schools. At this time, roughly 3,500 volunteers are maintaining a correspondence with individual classrooms. The Peace Corps has produced country videos and study guides (11 so

⁹ According to the GAO, in 1990, the Peace Corps had plans to begin operations in 60 new countries between 1991 and 1996. This would have brought them to about 134 countries today. GAO, *Peace Corps: Meeting the Challenges of the 1990s*, May 1990, NSIAD-90-122, p. 18.

far) to support their educational impact. Returned volunteers also participate and share their experience through personal presentations.

The Peace Corps Fellows Program, begun in 1985, is an effort to utilize the experience and skills of *former* volunteers in a way that will benefit Americans. Twenty-six colleges and universities currently offer private sector-financed scholarships or reduced tuition to former volunteers who obtain master's degrees. In return, the former volunteers commit to two years of work in local communities, teaching in schools or working in public health, community development and other programs. At this time, there are 284 returned volunteers in the program.

In addition to the formal programs under the third-goal umbrella, other efforts have been taken by former volunteers themselves to meet third-goal objectives. Individuals often speak to their local community groups and schools. Returned volunteers have formed themselves into groups of country alumni — Friends of the Philippines, Friends of Kenya, and the like — most seeking to both raise awareness regarding their countries of service as well as to maintain their own ties and seek ways to help the poor in those countries through charitable donations and other programs.

Returned volunteers have also formed a National Peace Corps Association, with local chapters throughout the country, a highly regarded development-focused publication entitled *Worldview*, and an emergency response network that links humanitarian and other organizations requiring assistance with a pool of former volunteers (predating the Crisis Corps, discussed below). In support of a third-goal emphasis, the Association successfully lobbied for a change in the name of the Peace Corps' traditional "Close of Service" conference held for each graduating volunteer group to "Continuation of Service" conference.

Crisis Corps

In 1996, the Peace Corps announced a new "Crisis Corps," drawing on current and former volunteers to provide short-term emergency and humanitarian assistance at the community level. In addition to the assistance provided, the Peace Corps expects that significant goodwill will be generated by serving people under devastating circumstances. Assignments up to six months-long are made with NGOs, relief, and other development organizations. Peace Corps officials say that the advantage provided by using these volunteers is that many already possess relevant technical skills, experience of living rough, and local language capabilities that would make them particularly effective in emergency situations. From the time the Peace Corps agrees to provide help, volunteers can be put in the field in about three and a half to six and a half weeks.

The Crisis Corps has undertaken five assignments to date. In both Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea, they have worked in refugee relief. In Antigua, Madagascar, and the Czech Republic, the Corps has assisted with reconstruction following natural disasters. In September, 1997, for example, seven volunteers, all of whom had done their service previously in the Czech Republic, were sent there to help with flood relief. They stayed three months in Moravia, working with Bohemia Corps, the Czech-based volunteer organization, helping local municipalities organize reconstruction efforts.

The Crisis Corps idea raises several concerns. The first is safety, always an issue regarding Peace Corps volunteers, but more so when it comes to assignments that are inherently risky — the aftermath of natural disasters and refugee work. The environment in both cases is uncertain and changing, and, in the latter case, has frequently been politically charged. At times, relief organization workers have been targeted by groups connected to the refugee's place of origin. Peace Corps officials say that assuring safety and security of the volunteers is a major criteria in determining assignments.

A second and related consideration is whether Crisis Corps volunteers would be placed in political situations some might consider inappropriate to the organization's nonpartisan role. For example, the Peace Corps would oppose the presence of volunteers as poll watchers monitoring a country's move toward democracy as giving it too prominent a political profile. Work in refugee camps, as noted above, or in efforts to relieve famine associated with war or other political turmoil might also put an unwelcome spotlight on the Peace Corps. Yet, Congress or the State Department might want to utilize the Crisis Corps in such situations as a signal of American concern.

Finally, some might be concerned that the cost of this activity would be a drain on traditional Peace Corps activities. Currently, however, the Crisis Corps is expected to cost under \$1 million each year (or less than half of one percent of the total budget). The Peace Corps pays the transportation, and living and readjustment allowances under the same terms as regular volunteers. Other costs of volunteers are borne by the organizations that utilize their services.

Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993

Members of Congress have paid close attention to the progress of government agencies in meeting the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (P.L. 103-62). The Act requires that most U.S. government agencies develop strategic plans establishing long-term goals and setting specific annual performance targets for achieving those goals. The intention is to make agencies more results-oriented. The Peace Corps submitted its plan in September 1997.

The Peace Corps may have more difficulty than most agencies in demonstrating that its mission has been met. Its contribution to its principal mission — the promotion of world peace and friendship — is not easily measurable. The Peace Corps plan, therefore, appears to start from the assumption that its mission is accomplished as long as it is continuing to do and even improving on what it has been doing since its creation, stated in the plan in the form of seven general objectives:

- providing as many Americans as possible the opportunity to become volunteers;
- insuring their health and safety;
- responding within available resources to requests for assistance from developing countries;
- working to provide humanitarian assistance and relief to those in need;
- providing training and support for volunteers and strengthening its programming;

- increasing understanding of other peoples by Americans; and
- pursuing efforts to cut costs and improve agency productivity.

The plan attempts to lay out some targets indicative of its progress in meeting these objectives. For the Peace Corps, this is not an entirely new exercise. For some years, the Peace Corps has had an Integrated Planning and Budget System to keep it focused on these objectives and which is, in intent and implementation, not unlike the GPRA strategic process. But, while the agency might list steps taken to meet short-term objectives, the challenge for the Peace Corps, as for all other government agencies, may be to devise quantitative measurements to demonstrate its level of performance. A GPRA process that meets the expectations of its congressional authors is expected to be a work developed over time in consultation with OMB and Congress.

Programming and Support

One of the most common criticisms of the Peace Corps made by volunteers themselves has been inadequate programming of useful work for volunteers to accomplish. This view was reflected by GAO in its 1990 investigation. They noted that some volunteers had little or nothing to do or had spent six or more months developing their own assignments. Some received insufficient support from their host government, including failure to designate a counterpart to carry on the work after the volunteer was gone.¹⁰ Other volunteers were rarely, if ever, visited by Peace Corps staff.

The GAO attributed the programming problem to a failure of planning, evaluation, and monitoring systems. The Peace Corps maintains that it has addressed these weaknesses with systematic approaches to project development, annual project reviews, increased opportunities for site visits and volunteer feedback, and required counterparts. Today, most volunteers work within the context of sectoral “projects” that might have some clear objectives and timelines.

As a result of these new procedures, Peace Corps officials claim that programming is much improved and the incidence of problems described by volunteers in the past is much lower. However, there have been no formal outside evaluations to support this view, and one sign of volunteer dissatisfaction — the attrition rate — remains high at 18.7% (excluding trainee, medical, and administrative separations). The proposed rapid expansion in the size of the Peace Corps, as a result of the new Clinton initiative, might exacerbate programming and support problems. Further steps are being taken to address the retention issue. The Peace Corps is planning an annual survey of volunteers to identify problems, and a staff group is studying issues related to retention, including how volunteers could be better trained or prepared so that they will be happy with assignments.

Some former volunteers as well as Peace Corps staff would argue that while too little programming is bad, too much is bad as well. They suggest that a Peace Corps in which assignments are overly structured might have the disadvantage of ending the flexibility that has often been a strength of the organization. They believe that the best

¹⁰ GAO, *Peace Corps: Meeting the Challenges of the 1990s*, p. 31.

volunteers have often been those who break free from organizational constraints and create their own post, using their ingenuity and responding to problems they identify at the grassroots level. For many, the Peace Corps is doing its job well if it can provide structured jobs for those who require them and still provide scope for those who wish to devise their own ways to contribute to the communities in which they work.

Recruitment

The recruitment of volunteers with appropriate skills and willingness to live in unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable conditions is essential to the overall mission of the Peace Corps. In addition, many have asserted that the Peace Corps' second goal is best served by a corps of volunteers who represent America, i.e., come from all locations and all ethnic backgrounds.

Volunteers do come from every state — for example, California, New York, North Dakota, and Tennessee currently are represented by 921, 463, 14, and 56 volunteers, respectively. However, recruiting a proportional ethnic makeup has been more problematic. A 1990 GAO report found that only seven percent of volunteers were minorities in 1989. At the time, GAO attributed this to a lack of a national recruitment strategy, incentives for recruiters, and commitment of resources. The Peace Corps, itself, suggested that minorities were likely to have considerable debt following college and greater opportunities elsewhere. Since the GAO study, the percentage of minorities has nearly doubled. In FY1997, 13.6 percent of volunteers were minorities — 2.8% African American; 4.3% Asian American; 2.8% Hispanic, and 3.4% of mixed ethnicity — with African Americans and Hispanics under-represented compared to their proportion of the total U.S. population.¹¹

In the last twenty years, developing countries have increasingly sought to obtain more specialized technical expertise from international volunteer agencies. While the Peace Corps has been particularly adept at recruiting generalists and providing them with sufficient training to carry out useful assignments, it has also become more adept at attracting volunteers with technical skills. When the former Communist countries sought volunteers with business backgrounds, the Peace Corps began to recruit them in large numbers, targeting business schools and placing ads in the Wall Street Journal. Business volunteers currently represent 13% of volunteers. Nevertheless, the organization is not currently designed to emphasize the provision of highly skilled professionals, such as doctors, demographers, or engineers. It sends large “classes” of volunteers to developing countries at one time while requirements for specialists are discrete and unpredictable. Further, recruitment, orientation, and other procedures may be more costly, if handled on an individual basis.

The Peace Corps recruits volunteers through a network of recruiters in 11 sites throughout the country, placement of ads, including public service announcements, and campus recruitment campaigns. Since 1992, roughly 12,300 people have applied each year (in FY1997, 150,000 people contacted the Peace Corps to express an interest in serving). Of that 12,300, about 3,500 accept invitations to join and arrive for pre-service training.

¹¹ Based on self-reporting.

One continuing problem that may discourage people from applying is confusion over whether they qualify for deferment of college loans while in service. In fact, the principal on loans has traditionally been deferred for Peace Corps volunteers, but a revision of the law in 1992 led to consolidation of affected categories of borrowers that eliminated specific reference to Peace Corps volunteers as a deferment category. Although the Department of Education says volunteers would be covered under the “economic hardship” category, the absence of a specific deferment category has created confusion among lenders and borrowers alike. The Peace Corps has asked the Department of Education to see if a way can be found to make the position of volunteers clearer to insure that all volunteers are covered rather than just those considered economic hardship cases.

Health Care

Peace Corps volunteers serve in locales with poor sanitation, rampant disease, and inadequate health facilities. Roughly 6-7% of volunteers become sufficiently ill to be evacuated, while about 20% develop illnesses following service that are attributable to their period of service.¹² In the past, Members of Congress, some seeking to help constituents with post-service medical problems, have raised concerns regarding the health care provided volunteers and especially that for returned volunteers. Responding to a congressional request, a GAO investigation in 1991 found that, while quality of care may have been good, the Peace Corps had no system to evaluate its adequacy, that medical personnel received insufficient training from the Peace Corps, and that post-service FECA (Federal Employees Compensation Act) assistance was not adequately managed and volunteers were not well-informed of their entitlements.¹³

As a result of these findings, Congress required (PL102-565) that three outside evaluations of health care services provided to volunteers be conducted (one in 1993, 1994, and 1996). The final report of these evaluations was issued on February 28, 1997, by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations. It summarizes the problems originally found and describes efforts by the Peace Corps to deal with the issues raised. Noting that the Peace Corps was committed to insuring quality health care for its volunteers, the Joint Commission determined that it had taken steps to meet and even exceed the Commission’s performance standards.

Perhaps the health issue of greatest congressional concern was the accessibility of workers compensation under the FECA program for post-service volunteers. FECA benefits are determined by the Department of Labor. While the tendency has been for volunteers to blame Peace Corps if there were problems, the agency says that its purpose is to try to help volunteers to get benefits. In 1989, they hired a benefits manager to act as an ombudsperson for volunteers dealing with the Department of Labor. The Joint Commission has commended the Peace Corps’ practices with regard to the FECA issue.

¹² Of those evacuated for medical reasons, more than half eventually return to their posts.

¹³ GAO, *Peace Corps: Long Needed Improvements to Volunteers’ Health Care System*, July 1991, NSIAD-91-213.

One outstanding health issue that may be of legislative interest is the lack of any health plan options for volunteers from the time they complete service to the time they begin new employment. Except for those illnesses that can be directly attributed to the period of service, volunteers do not have health coverage when they complete their service. Although they serve the U.S. government as volunteers, they are not government employees and therefore are not treated like civil servants, with the option of carrying over their government health plan into “retirement.” Some suggest that an option, allowing access to government plans, be made available to them.

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