

CRS Report for Congress

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The Peace Corps: Current Issues

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Summary

As it prepares authorization and Foreign Operations appropriations legislation in 2006, Congress will consider the FY2007 level of funding for the Peace Corps and related issues. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Generally viewed positively by the public and widely supported in Congress, the Peace Corps, the U.S. agency that provides volunteer skills internationally, has drawn congressional attention in recent years largely due to two issues — a Presidential initiative to significantly expand the size of the agency and reports raising concerns regarding the safety and security of volunteers. Both issues stimulated legislative action with bills being approved by House or Senate. However, these legislative efforts died with the 108th Congress, and the only issue of note to emerge in 2005 concerned the relationship between the Peace Corps and the U.S. military. In 2006, the 109th Congress will consider the President's annual funding request for the Peace Corps.

Background

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. Living and working with ordinary people, volunteers have contributed in a variety of capacities — such as teachers, foresters, health promoters, and small business advisers — to improving the lives of those they serve and helping others understand American culture. They also seek to share their understanding of other countries with Americans back home through efforts like the Paul D. Coverdell World Wise School program, which links serving volunteers with U.S. elementary school classrooms. To date, more than 182,000 Peace Corps volunteers have served in 138 countries. About 7,810 volunteers currently serve in 75 nations. On July 25, 2006, President Bush nominated Ronald A. Tschetter, a former volunteer, to succeed Gaddi Vasquez as the new Peace Director.

In addition to its basic two-year tour of duty, the Peace Corps introduced in 1996 a Crisis Corps, drawing on former volunteers to provide short-term (up to six months) emergency and humanitarian assistance at the community level with NGOs, relief, and other development organizations. Hundreds of Crisis Corps volunteers have served in 40

countries, including post-tsunami Thailand and Sri Lanka. In September 2005, Crisis Corps volunteers were deployed to assist Hurricane Katrina relief, the first time in Peace Corps history that volunteers were used domestically. To date, roughly 272 volunteers have begun assignments on the Gulf Coast.

Congressional Actions

Appropriations. The FY2006 Foreign Operations appropriations (P.L. 109-102, H.R. 3057), signed into law on November 14, 2005, provides \$322 million for the Peace Corps. Following a one percent across-the-board rescission, the actual Peace Corps appropriation is \$318.8 million. This final appropriation is about \$26.2 million less than the President's \$345 million request and \$1.4 million more than the FY2005 appropriation.

In early February, the Administration presented its FY2007 foreign operations budget request to Congress. It provides \$336.7 million for the Peace Corps, \$17.9 million more than the FY2006 appropriation — a 6% increase. On June 9, the House approved a FY2007 foreign operations bill, H.R. 5522 (H.Rept. 109-486), providing \$324.587 million for the Peace Corps, \$5.8 million more than the previous year but \$12.1 million less than the Administration request. On July 10, the Senate Appropriations Committee reported its version of the bill (S.Rept. 109-277), providing \$318.780 million, the same as in FY2006 and \$17.9 million below the request.

Authorization. Despite repeated efforts during the previous four years, Congress adjourned in December 2005 without enacting a new Peace Corps authorization. On April 6, 2005, the Senate began, but did not complete, consideration of S. 600 (S.Rept. 109-35), the State Department authorization, which contained language authorizing appropriations for the Peace Corps in FY2006 at \$345 million, the Administration request level for that year, and “such sums as may be necessary” for FY2007.

More comprehensive bills approved by the Senate in 2002 (both S. 2667 and S. 12) and by the House in 2003 (H.R. 1950) would have authorized appropriations that would double the size of the Peace Corps as well as institute a wide range of reforms and new programs.

Peace Corps and the U.S. Military. In 2005, a program approved by Congress several years ago raised serious concerns, particularly in the community of former volunteers, that the line traditionally drawn between U.S. defense and foreign policy and the work of the Peace Corps may be crossed. The National Call to Service Program, initiated in the FY2003 Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 107-314), allowed the Defense Department to offer recruits the opportunity to meet the latter part of their eight-year military obligation by serving in the Peace Corps or other national service program. Some argued that any perceived identification of the Peace Corps with the U.S. military might negatively impact acceptance of the program abroad and endanger the lives of volunteers. The Peace Corps responded by saying that nothing in the way the agency recruits or treats volunteers had changed as a result of the legislation. The Peace Corps said it was under no obligation to accept the new military applicants. It further noted that both retired military and Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) had joined the Peace Corps in the past, and the only unusual thing that had been, and would continue to be, required, was a commitment from DOD that the volunteer would not be called up for duty during his

volunteer service unless there is a national emergency. In FY2005, seven retired and IRR military personnel entered the Peace Corps, none under the new program which was not expected to see its first volunteer applicants until 2007, at the earliest.

The issue was viewed by many in the context of the long-standing policy and practice barring the Peace Corps and volunteers from any relationship with the intelligence community. Since the 1960s, a clear separation was felt to be necessary to insure the safety of volunteers who might otherwise be targets of suspicion in developing countries. In fact, leading up to the January 2003 termination of its Russia program, some Russian officials periodically insinuated that volunteers were spies. Opponents of the National Call to Service Program, while acknowledging its good intentions, feared the “formal linkage” of the military with the Peace Corps that the legislation appeared to establish would create similar incidents. Language removing the Peace Corps from the program was adopted in the Department of Defense Authorization for FY2006 (H.R. 1815), approved by Congress in December 2005.

Safety and Security Legislation. Because they live and work at the grassroots level in developing countries, Peace Corps volunteers appear to many Americans to be especially vulnerable to crime. Even before September 11, their safety and security had been a prime concern of the Peace Corps. The threat of anti-American terrorism has increased those concerns. In late 2003, the *Dayton (Ohio) Daily News* ran a series of reports highlighting — many former volunteers say exaggerating — the dangers potentially faced by volunteers, and suggested that the agency was failing in its obligation to provide adequate security.

Following hearings held by the House International Relations Committee, the House approved H.R. 4060 on June 1, 2004. The Health, Safety, and Security of Peace Corps Volunteers Act of 2004 (H.Rept. 108-481) sought to address some security concerns by statutorily establishing the already-existing Office of Safety and Security in the Peace Corps and creating an Ombudsman position to handle volunteer complaints. The bill also required reports on screening procedures used to determine the psychological fitness of those seeking to serve as volunteers, and a report on the “five year rule” that limits the length of Peace Corps staff employment and which is regarded as one reason for high staff turnover and loss of institutional memory on safety and security issues. Although the Senate Foreign Relations Committee also held hearings on the issue, no safety and security legislation was approved in the Senate in 2004.

In its report on H.R. 3057 (H.Rept. 109-152), the FY2006 Foreign Operations bill, the House Appropriations Committee recognized an improvement in safety and security efforts of the Peace Corps in recent years. It also called for the agency to create a global volunteer mapping system tracking volunteer locations in its emergency response system.

Issues for Congress

Expansion Initiative. In his State of the Union speech to Congress on January 29, 2002, President Bush announced a proposal to double the size of the Peace Corps within five years from its January 2002 level of about 7,000, bringing it closer than it has been in decades to its 1966 peak of 15,556.

However, by 2005, with three years of insufficient appropriations, it had become clear that the original Administration plan to double the size of the Peace Corps over five years would not be met. Meeting that goal would have meant a significant increase in its budget over the same period, presumably to be maintained for years thereafter. By FY2007, the Peace Corps appropriation was expected to be \$485 million — more than \$200 million greater than FY2002. While the various House- and Senate-approved authorization bills would have met or slightly surpassed the Administration proposal, Congress has had to weigh whether sufficient funds were available *vis-a-vis* other foreign aid priorities — such as HIV/AIDS, terrorism, and child survival — to warrant *appropriating* the amounts requested by the Administration. Despite the apparent popularity of the Peace Corps, constraints on spending combined with the pull of other priorities undermined the rapid expansion plan. In early 2005, with an FY2006 request \$98 million below its own original expansion budget plan and a newly stated goal in its budget justification document of 8,000 volunteers by the end of FY2008, the Administration appeared to have abandoned the initiative.

Table 1. Peace Corps Budget: FY2002-FY2007

Fiscal Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Request (\$ mil)	275	317	359	401	345	336.7 (485)
Appropriation (\$ mil)	278.7	295.1	308.2	317.4	318.8	—
Total Volunteers	6,636	7,533	7,733	7,810	(13,600)	(14,000)

Source: Peace Corps and CRS. FY2002 figure includes \$3.9 million Emergency Response Fund transfer. FY2002-FY2006 figures reflect across-the-board rescissions. Figures in parentheses are original expansion request. Total volunteers are number at end of the fiscal year and, for FY2006 forward, anticipated number if expansion appropriation had been met. Under original expansion initiative, FY2003 volunteer number target was 8,200; FY2004 target was 10,000; FY2005 target was 12,000.

From the beginning, the expansion initiative ran into resistance. In providing only \$285 million for the Peace Corps in its FY2003 appropriations legislation, Senate appropriators noted in report language (S.Rept. 107-219) that the expansion plan was “overly-ambitious,” suggesting it may have to be drawn out over more than five years. In each year from FY2003 to FY2006, Congress appropriated funds \$22 million, \$51 million, \$84 million, and \$26.2 million, respectively, below the Administration request. Despite these shortfalls in funding, Congress has appeared supportive of continued expansion. The FY2005 foreign operations statement of managers called for the establishment of new Peace Corps programs in Cambodia and other locations in Asia.

Program and Management Issues. In considering the expansion initiative, Members of Congress appear to have been concerned that even an increase in size of the Peace Corps more modest than that originally envisioned might exacerbate existing weaknesses or create strains in its operations. Both House and Senate legislation in the 108th Congress stressed the importance to Peace Corps’ effectiveness of improved strategic planning and H.R. 4060, the House bill that addressed security issues, called for a report on the extent to which work assignments are well-developed and volunteers are suitable for them. No matter the outcome of the expansion effort, Congress is likely to continue to pay particular attention to how the agency addresses recruitment, programming, and support of volunteers.

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. A substantial spike in applicants and those expressing interest in applying since September 11 has made it easier for the Peace Corps to meet its recruitment goals. In FY2004, 148,216 people expressed an interest in the Peace Corps (up from 94,463 in FY2001), 13,249 actually applied (8,897 in FY2001), and 3,811 became trainees (3,191 in FY2001). The agency, however, while adept at recruiting generalists and providing them with sufficient training to carry out useful assignments, 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. 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 technical expertise. To accommodate more highly skilled personnel, the Peace Corps might have to change many existing practices, including methods of recruitment, training, programming, and perhaps even terms of service.

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 (*Peace Corps: Meeting the Challenges of the 1990s*, May 1990, NSIAD-90-122). It noted that some volunteers had little or nothing to do or had spent six or more months developing their own assignments, without benefit of site visits by Peace Corps staff. The GAO attributed the programming problem to a failure of planning, evaluation, and monitoring systems. Since then, the Peace Corps maintains that it has addressed these weaknesses with systematic approaches to project development, annual project reviews, and increased opportunities for site visits and volunteer feedback. However, incidents suggesting poor programming and staff support still occur, although their frequency and depth is not known, and, one sign of volunteer dissatisfaction — the attrition rate — remains arguably high at 30.5% (2002).

Security Issues. Among the concerns raised regarding Peace Corps security are that crimes against volunteers have increased. The *Dayton Daily News* articles that ran in the fall of 2003 assert that the Peace Corps is sending volunteers to places “far more dangerous” than it admits publicly, does not warn volunteers about criminal incidents, and does not supply adequate security training or supervision. It suggests that Peace Corps staff ignore volunteer concerns and provide insufficient support to volunteers who have experienced crime. The GAO has issued two reports since 2002 addressing security issues. While noting improvements by Peace Corps in its more recent report, the GAO has suggested that “some unevenness” in compliance with safety procedures mandated by Peace Corps headquarters likely remains.¹

Statistics kept by the Peace Corps, varying from year to year and by type of assault, may be selectively interpreted. Both in absolute terms and when viewed in the context of incidents per 1,000 volunteer years to account for the rise in number of volunteers in

¹ Government Accountability Office, *Peace Corps: Initiatives for Addressing Safety and Security Challenges Hold Promise, but Progress Should be Assessed*, GAO-02-818, July 2002, and *Peace Corps: Status of Initiatives to Improve Volunteer Safety and Security*, GAO-04-600T, March 24, 2004.

this period, they show a large increase in the number of aggravated assaults from 57 in 1993 (9 per 1,000 volunteer years) to 102 in 1999 (16 per 1,000 volunteer years) and then a leveling-off to 87 cases (14 per 1,000 volunteer years) in 2002. Reports of rape rose from 10 incidents in 1993 (3.1 per 1,000 female volunteer years) to a peak of 20 (5.3 per 1,000 female volunteer years) in 1997. Rape events in absolute terms decreased by 40% between 1997 and 2002 to 12 (3.2 per 1,000 female volunteer years). However the numbers are viewed, the GAO points out that, since the number of events is small, there may be some question as to whether the apparent trends are significant.

These statistics also reflect volunteer reporting rates, which likely produce undercounting, and they do not demonstrate whether volunteers are any more or less susceptible to assault than Americans living in New York or Des Moines. When surveyed in 2003, 86% of volunteers reported that they felt safe where they lived.²

In general, the Peace Corps says that it gives the safety and security of its volunteers the highest priority. It has been particularly concerned in recent years with threats of terrorism, crime, and civil strife, and has responded by upgrading communications, testing emergency action plans, and other security measures. Before establishing a new country program, the Peace Corps considers a number of criteria, including the presence of a stable government and effective law enforcement and the absence of anti-American acts of terror in the operational area. 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 ten 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).

Under the Administration's expansion proposal, the Peace Corps was expected to enter Afghanistan and other Islamic countries where they do not currently serve. At this time, 20% of all volunteers are serving in countries with Muslim populations of over 40%. 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. However, 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. Conferees on the FY2002 foreign operations bill, while supporting the concept of Peace Corps entry into Muslim countries, noted their key concern was volunteer safety. Although the Administration announced in 2002 that the goal "will be to deploy ... volunteers to Afghanistan as quickly as possible," it also noted that all decisions regarding new country entry "will be made in a manner consistent with the safety and security of volunteers." The Peace Corps has not yet entered Afghanistan.

² Peace Corps 2006 Congressional Budget Justification, p. 223.