

**Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National and Public Service
March 28, 2019 | College Station, TX**

National Service Hearing: Improving Current National Service Policies and Processes

Michelle K. Brooks, Chief of Staff, Peace Corps

Peace Corps: An International and National Service Opportunity

I would first like to thank Chairman Heck, Vice Chairs Gearan and Wada, and the other members of the Commission for the invitation to speak with you today. We commend the work in which the Commission is engaged: to consider and develop recommendations to encourage and inspire more Americans—particularly young people—to serve their country and communities. At Peace Corps we believe that the federal government investment in programs such as Peace Corps and the various programs of the Corporation for National and Community Service ultimately results in the development of passionate and informed global citizens.

When the agency was established in 1961, the Peace Corps was an innovative, bold idea. Today, more than 230,000 Returned Peace Corps Volunteers demonstrate the enduring strength of that idea. Peace Corps Volunteers have represented the United States in 140 countries and have left behind a legacy of shared values, improved relations, and sustainable community development. As of September 30, 2018, 7,367 Volunteers were currently serving in 63 countries.

The mission and three goals upon which Peace Corps was built continue to be those which each new Volunteer today accepts as their North Star:

The Peace Corps Mission being: To promote world peace and friendship by fulfilling three goals:

To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.

To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.

To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

The Peace Corps is dedicated to maintaining a strong presence around the world, while preserving and strengthening long-standing relationships with existing partners and host countries. The Peace Corps has a long history of assisting other development organizations extend their reach by virtue of working in many remote areas...the “last mile” as some call it.

The agency has become an active partner in a number of whole-of-government initiatives, including the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), Feed the Future, Stomp Out Malaria, Let Girls Learn, Women’s Global Development and Prosperity Initiative and others. Through these and other means, Volunteers have worked with local partners to contribute to reducing incidence of disease, increasing local livelihoods and providing equal opportunity for education and economic growth to women and girls around the world.

To provide a snapshot of some of the contributions Peace Corps Volunteers are making around the world in 2018:

- Education volunteers reached 272,371 students in 48 countries;
- Volunteers collaborated with their host country partners to create more than 1,000 libraries;
- Peace Corps volunteers reached nearly 160,000 people through comprehensive HIV prevention interventions, including referrals for HIV testing;
- 20,000 smallholder farmers were assisted by agriculture Volunteers to diversify crops and expand and improve yields.

Peace Corps Volunteers have gone on to play key leadership roles on the front lines of international development and domestic and foreign policy, serving in Congress and as Ambassadors, as well as leading public health and development initiatives at the CDC, USAID, and other organizations. In addition, the perspectives, problem-solving skills and compassion of tens of thousands of former Volunteers—now lawyers, doctors, artists, and teachers throughout the United States—were shaped in great part by their Peace Corps service.

Often the domestic dividend is not considered by many who look at the Peace Corps service model. The conversation stops after the Peace Corps Volunteer packs his or her bags to return to the United States. As an institution we are currently focusing closely at documenting the contributions that the over 230,000 and growing Returned Peace Corps Volunteers are making.

The Third Goal states *To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans*. We realize that each returning Peace Corps Volunteer will return with a deep understanding of a new culture, its rich history and customs. They will achieve a professional level of language acquisition which they can use in their future work and community engagement.

Perhaps more fundamentally they will return to the United States with a proven track record of working in a cross cultural setting and appreciating and respecting the richness of working across socio economic barriers, linguistic challenges, to get something done and done well. These are skills which they can offer to future employers and communities in the United States. In short, this is an investment of taxpayer dollars with an incredible return on that investment in the United States.

Peace Corps, the once service opportunity of choice, especially an international opportunity, is now one of a myriad of programs. We are committed to remaining the international service opportunity of choice of US citizens.

We must, just as any successful business or institution must, constantly assess why people gravitate or not to service opportunities. We are committed to ensure that we continue to provide the most quality experience for each Volunteer and a quality contribution to the communities and countries which have invited to join them in their development strategies. We must remain relevant and the “Bold” idea the founders envisioned.

Listening to potential and currently serving Volunteers over the last few years we have made modifications in programming and operations:

- We have streamlined our application process so that it is manageable and clear;
- We have allowed the applicant to indicate which country and which country program they would want to serve in;
- We have frontloaded questions related to medical clearance to make sure interested parties can determine early in the process if they will be able to serve overseas;
- We are exploring alternative service models which will strengthen our institutional ability to provide quality service opportunities service for more Americans which might include various service time commitments, a pilot of a virtual Volunteer model and tapping into the great private sector interest in deploying staff overseas.

We also believe there are additional steps which can be taken which would strengthen not only Peace Corps’ model, but those of other service organizations, and for which we ask the Commission’s consideration going forward.

We would like to recommend:

- Extending Noncompetitive Eligibility (NCE) status to 3 years for RPCVs, bringing it in line with most other authorities granting NCE status: either thru legislation or executive order. Peace Corps has drafted an Executive Order to extend NCE for RPCVs to 3 years which can also be the basis for any proposed legislation. We believe that this is a critical need given the fact that RPCV's often need time to re-acclimate upon returning to their home environment and one (1) year of NCE status just isn't enough to find a meaningful federal job. The details related to the implementation of the NCE status should be clear and consistently implemented across federal agencies. We would propose OPM informed training and guidance be provided. Once this is done there would need to be a significant effort to promote the use of NCE for service members on the part of Peace Corps and other agencies which would clearly benefit.
- Peace Corps is piloting with two federal agencies the idea of a NCE Service Registry. Based on the skills and talents Peace Corps understands are desired by these agencies together employment promotion is done and PCVs finishing service can submit resumes and NCE documentation and the hiring official can mine that registry for suitable candidates.
- Peace Corps supports any expansion of loan forgiveness for Peace Corps Volunteers and other service members. Funding for this effort would be a challenge for many institutions so consideration should be given to centralize funding perhaps through OPM.
- For a number of those interested in service medical clearances can require resources which are not readily available. During the first two decades of Peace Corps a partnership

with VA facilities around the country was established to allow for medical exams to take place there at no cost to the service member. This should be considered for the future.

- Federal government employees from across agencies have indicated to provide short term technical support to Peace Corps programs around the world. This is incredibly beneficial to the Peace Corps, but also allows for a reenergized public sector. We would like to recommend that there be either through legislation or regulation authority to grant reemployment rights to federal employees who separate from federal service can serve as a Peace Corps short term volunteer. Additionally, make adjustments either through legislation or regulation which cover federal employee Peace Corps volunteer service while on extended Leave Without Pay (LWOP). We would request OPM guidance on having federal government employees do service deployments which would result in no loss of benefits nor out of pocket expenses and allow for rehiring rights.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that Peace Corps stands committed to continuing to provide quality service opportunities around the world and insure that the message around the domestic dividend of the investment in Peace Corps and all national streams of service is elevated coast to coast.

We look forward to supporting the Commission going forward in whatever ways felt of benefit.

I thank you for your time and attention today.