

Statement of Aaron S. Williams
Nominee
Director of the Peace Corps
July 29, 2009

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Committee,

Thank you for considering my nomination. Senator Wofford, thank you for your kind introduction. I am honored to be introduced to this committee by this great American, who was a leading architect of the Peace Corps. He is a visionary leader with a distinguished national service career. Senator, the people-to-people approach you created and valued is the standard for everything the agency does today. I am grateful for your friendship and support.

Mr. Chairman, since your own Peace Corps experience in the Dominican Republic you've been a leading champion for the agency. Your commitment to those Volunteers that are willing to spend 27 months of service abroad has been unparalleled. If confirmed, I look forward to working with you to strengthen, reform, and grow this agency that has been so meaningful to both of us.

I would also like to thank Ranking Member Barrasso.

I would like to thank President Obama for nominating me to be the 18th Director of the Peace Corps. President Obama has said that ultimately the strength of America comes from the grassroots. In 2007, then-Senator Obama issued a "Call to Serve" at Cornell College in Iowa. That inspirational speech, introduced by Senator Wofford, detailed his commitment to making national service a priority of his presidency; in the same way that President Kennedy first issued a call to serve at the University of Michigan in 1960. I look forward to working with President Obama and his administration on creating new opportunities for Americans to serve.

I would like to acknowledge and thank my family for supporting me and joining me on this journey that has taken us to so many different communities around the world. The love of my life and rock of our family is my wife Rosa, whom I was very fortunate to have met in the Dominican Republic and who has been my partner in serving our country during our many years in the Foreign Service with USAID.

I am very pleased that my sons Michael and Steven are here. They are joined by my sister, Hilda Jones, and her daughter Ellen, and my brother Philip Williams. I am thankful they could join us today from our hometown of Chicago. My only regret is that my dear mother, Blanche, did not

live to see this day, but I know she is smiling down on me. She was the first person in my life who saw the value and importance of serving in the Peace Corps.

Finally, I wish to thank my friends, mentors, and colleagues, many of whom are here today. Many of these individuals are part of this vast Peace Corps family and who have been a source of inspiration for me.

I grew up in a modest home on the south side of Chicago never dreaming that one day I would have a career in international development. I served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Dominican Republic from 1967-1970, in a teacher training program for rural school teachers, and then at one of the finest universities in the country, Catholica Universidad Madre y Maestra in Santiago.

I learned to speak Spanish, and I was able to work side by side with Dominican teachers and students, in their classrooms, in their language. I tried to make a difference in their lives each and every day, and they imparted life lessons I have never forgotten. I finished my Peace Corps service with a new appreciation for the world and embarked on a career in public service firmly rooted in all that I learned in the small town of Monte Plata.

The Peace Corps opened the door to another world for me, and what an extraordinary opportunity it was. I returned from the Dominican Republic to my hometown where I became a recruiter and coordinator of minority recruitment for the Peace Corps in the Chicago regional office. If confirmed to be Director of the Peace Corps, it will indeed be a homecoming. I firmly believe in the strength of grassroots organizing and the impact of creating sustainable health, education, and environmental practices one community at a time.

As this committee well knows, the individuals who share the experience of Peace Corps service are united by a similar belief in people-to-people exchanges. If confirmed, I am proud that I will represent the nearly 200,000 returned Peace Corps Volunteers.

Originally conceived in 1961, the Peace Corps' mission is to promote world peace and friendship. Today, nearly 50 years later, the mission and the three goals of Peace Corps remain the same. These three goals are an invaluable guiding light to those that serve:

1. Help the people of interested countries in meeting their needs for trained men and women
2. Help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served
3. Help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans

There are old and new challenges. Poverty, disease, famine, and illiteracy are issues that continue to challenge developing countries, and in some cases are exacerbated by current problems like climate change, government instability, and terrorism. The work of Peace Corps Volunteers is not easy, but it is substantial. Living and working in communities around the world for twenty seven months creates hope and a cross-cultural understanding that is incomparable to any other life experience.

The issue of Volunteer health, safety, and security must remain an agency priority. There are inherent dangers in serving overseas, but with quality training, a committed staff, and clear systems in place, the health, safety, and security of Peace Corps Volunteers will be assured in a manner that allows enough openness for Volunteers to truly become a part of the community in which they serve.

It is important that we always remember the Peace Corps Volunteers who lost their lives while serving this nation and strive to ensure the health and safety of all present and future Volunteers. It is a fundamental responsibility I understand, and I am prepared to take on.

It is an honor and a privilege to be considered for a position first held by the legendary Sargent Shriver. If confirmed, I will face many of the challenges that he so ably negotiated to build this agency to its peak of 15,000 volunteers in 1966.

Today nearly 7,500 optimistic, dedicated, and courageous Volunteers are serving around the world. The agency runs a global operation that never quits. The staff, both here in the U.S. and those at posts around the world, is dedicated to one thing: supporting the Volunteers.

Peace Corps continues to capture the imagination of Americans in record numbers. During the first half of this fiscal year, applications for Peace Corps service have increased by 12 percent over the same period last year. Americans are inspired by President Obama's call to service. Now is an ideal time to look for ways to expand the Peace Corps in a sustainable way.

If confirmed to be the next Director of the Peace Corps, I know the relationship the agency has with the Volunteers does not end with their arrival home. This commitment is a fundamental part of advancing the Third Goal in helping to promote the better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. The returned Peace Corps Volunteer brings his or her experience into American classrooms and community centers. The returned Peace Corps Volunteer serves in health clinics, leads small businesses and large corporations, and diligently works in development and humanitarian organizations around the world. The Third Goal is a vital commitment for the Peace Corps family. If confirmed, I will foster the united strengths of returned Peace Corps Volunteers to continue contributing their time and energy on projects that benefit communities in the United States.

Before concluding my remarks, I would like to acknowledge Peace Corps' return to Rwanda this year. President Paul Kagame has welcomed the program and has graciously referred to Peace Corps Volunteers as his nation's "sons and daughters". This has been an emotionally charged reentry for the agency, but it is also a shining example of what Volunteers do to represent America abroad. And it isn't just the 32 Volunteers that are on the ground; it is their families, friends and the generosity of America they are representing. That is a true vote of confidence in the renewal of Rwanda.

If confirmed I want to work closely with this committee and the agency's supporters on Capitol Hill to inspire the next generation of Americans to serve. Peace Corps is a cost effective way for the United States to expand its humanitarian presence. I envision a Peace Corps that remains strong for another fifty years, one that grows, adapts, and continues to carry the torch of President Kennedy's dream -- and responds to President Obama's call to service both at home and abroad.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of this Committee, thank you for your time and consideration of my nomination. If I am confirmed, I look forward to working with you to make sure that future Peace Corps Volunteers are afforded the same quality experience I had and that communities in this great nation continue to benefit from their service. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

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