

**Combined Oral Testimony
Chuck Ludlam and Paula Hirschhoff
Peace Corps Volunteers, Guinguinéo, Sénégal
Hearing Regarding the Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act, S. 732
Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps and
Narcotics Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
July 25, 2007**

Paula: My name is Paula Hirschhoff and I'm serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Senegal. I was a Volunteer in Kenya 40 years ago.

Chuck: My name is Chuck Ludlam and I'm serving as a Volunteer with my wife Paula in Senegal. I was a Volunteer in Nepal 40 years ago.

Paula: Chuck and I will testify together, alternating turns.

With this joint presentation, we continue the partnership that characterizes our work in Senegal.

We'll observe the five-minute rule, times two.

Chuck: Paula and I are testifying here today because we are loyal to the Peace Corps and its founding ideals, and we admire the Volunteers' work throughout the world.

We're among the few Volunteers to serve again after a long gap in time, so we're among the first who can report from the Volunteer perspective how the Peace Corps has changed over the last four decades.

We wish we could report that all is well with the Peace Corps, but we regret to say this is not our view.

We see the Peace Corps as a middle-aged bureaucracy where hierarchy and rigid controls prevail. Volunteers sit at the bottom of the pyramid where their needs are often ignored.

What we need is an upside down hierarchy, an inverted pyramid, in which support of the Volunteers takes precedence.

Paula: The Volunteers with whom we serve are much the same as the Volunteers with whom we served in the 60s – idealistic, resourceful, and hardworking. One difference is that they're more mature and wise to the world.

You've been proud of the Volunteers who've served in the past and you can be proud of those in the field today.

The Volunteers can and should be trusted. And they deserve more supportive management.

Chuck: We have also compared the Peace Corps bureaucracy to the one we knew in the 1960s.

In many ways it has become more risk-averse and less responsive. It often fails to listen to, respect or empower the Volunteers.

We hear from Volunteers in the field who believe that they succeed despite the bureaucracy, not because of the support that it provides. They succeed by ignoring or resisting it.

The bureaucratic command and control approach stifles creativity and collaboration.

This management approach works poorly with younger Volunteers and it's anathema to older, more experienced Volunteers.

These problems undermine the Peace Corps in various ways. Volunteers become demoralized or cynical. Their potential as agents of development is not realized. Drop-out or Early Termination rates are too high.

We believe that many RPCVs from our era would be dismayed to hear how much the bureaucracy of today adversely affects the Volunteer experience.

Paula: Of course, these are generalizations. We know there are many Peace Corps managers throughout the world who provide outstanding service and support to Volunteers. But we believe the problems are prevalent enough to justify enacting this legislation.

Chuck: The legislation is well crafted to address these problems. We endorse it enthusiastically. We believe that our fellow Volunteers join in this endorsement.

The National Peace Corps Association recently conducted an online survey of PCVs and RPCVs on the legislation.

The respondents overwhelmingly favored all of its various provisions.

Paula: Turning now to the specifics of the bill, the key provisions give Volunteers a substantial voice in personnel and program reviews, training curricula, and site choice and preparation.

The legislation is premised on the notion that the expertise needed to strengthen and renew the Peace Corps lies at the grassroots, with Volunteers in the field.

Volunteers know best who is supportive among staff.

They know what programs are working well at the village level.

They know what they need in terms of training and seed funding.

They know what village sites are best suited to Volunteers.

The legislation would have the Peace Corps rely on their expertise in these crucial areas.

Chuck: We'd like to comment primarily on two of the bill's most important provisions: Section 201 (a) and 201 (b).

Section 201(a) mandates that the Peace Corps consult with Volunteers confidentially before renewing or extending the contract of any manager.

In substance, it mandates that Peace Corps institute "360 degree" or "upward feedback" personnel reviews, like those now common in the private sector where employees assess their managers' performance.

In collaborative organizations, these reviews are standard operating procedure. They can be a powerful tool for sensitizing management to the employees' viewpoint and encouraging collaboration toward common goals.

Peace Corps personnel should be judged primarily by how well they support Volunteers because Volunteers are the most valuable asset that the Peace Corps has.

Only by supporting Volunteers can the Peace Corps achieve its goal to serve as an effective agent of development.

Accordingly, we believe that the Volunteer's views should be given "substantial weight" in the personnel review process.

All of the bill's provisions mandate that the Peace Corps bureaucracy listen to, respect, and empower Volunteers. But only Section 201 (a) tells managers that their tenure depends on how well they do so.

Because these reviews might seem to threaten their tenures, Peace Corps managers might not welcome Volunteer participation. Indeed, we believe that Section 201(a) is the provision that the

Peace Corps is least likely to implement effectively on its own. That's why enacting this provision into law is so important.

Paula: Section 201(b) is also critical. It mandates confidential consultations with Volunteers on the design and continuation of the country-specific programs in which they serve, such as health, education or agriculture.

Some Peace Corps programs are better designed than others. Some need to be redesigned. Some simply are not working and should be abandoned, thus freeing resources for more effective programs.

Volunteers know first-hand which programs are working. Every day, they see the results in their villages.

Because they are donating two years of their lives, Volunteers deserve to be placed in programs that give them a reasonable opportunity to achieve sustainable results. And of course our host countries deserve sustainable results as well.

We view the First Goal of Peace Corps – to serve as an agent of development – to be its highest priority, and for that, program design is crucial.

Taken together, Sections 201(a) and (b) institutionalize a process for continual renewal of the Peace Corps led from the grassroots.

Chuck: Our written testimony comments in depth on each provision of the bill.

The legislation will strengthen the development role of the Volunteers by providing seed funding for Volunteer projects and overhauling the rules regarding Volunteer fundraising.

The legislation will help the Peace Corps reach its goal of recruiting additional older, experienced Volunteers by removing troublesome disincentives. These include problems with retiree health insurance and the medical screening process.

And, the legislation will confirm and clarify certain Volunteer rights.

The legislation is comprehensive and ambitious. However, this is a good opportunity, so we have proposed that it be amended to address several additional subjects. The most important are recruitment and retention of able staff and reform of the leave policies for Volunteers.

Paula: We are pleased that you do not assume that the Peace Corps management always speaks for Volunteers. In the private sector, management and labor often have different perspectives on the workplace; the same is true of the Peace Corps managers and the Volunteers.

Representatives of management are posted here in Washington so you will hear from them.

It's more difficult for Volunteers to make themselves heard.

Yet this legislation and hearing demonstrate that you are listening to Volunteers. For that we are grateful.

Chuck: Given the problems we'd discussed, you may wonder if we recommend that older persons and RPCVs serve as Volunteers. Our answer is, "Yes, absolutely."

Older and second-time Volunteers often have special insights into how to launch and sustain development projects.

Also, older Volunteers tend to speak up about the quality of staff support, program design, training curricula and site placements.

In our view, the more older Volunteers the Peace Corps recruits, the better—both for development and Peace Corps reform.

To be clear, you will substantially strengthen the hand of the Volunteers, the young and not-so-young, and the cause of Peace Corps reform if you enact this legislation into law.

Paula: In conclusion, the Peace Corps has had a powerful and positive influence on our lives. In the four decades since we first served, we have never stopped thinking of ourselves as Peace Corps Volunteers.

And we love serving again, despite the difficulties discussed here. Serving together is a special joy.

It's been very difficult for us to go public with these criticisms. But because we still believe in the Peace Corps, we had no choice.

The legislation gives us great hope.

With enactment of these reforms, we believe that Volunteers will work more effectively with their local partners, promoting development and cultural exchange in a spirit of peace and generosity, and ensuring that the Peace Corps will thrive for decades to come.

Thank you for supporting Peace Corps Volunteers, past, present and future.

We are happy to answer your questions.

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