

**TESTIMONY
Nicole Fiol
Peace Corps Nominee
Nominated to Africa
Anticipated Departure: June 2008**

**Regarding
The Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act
S. 732 (Dodd/Kennedy, March 1, 2007)**

**Before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and
Narcotics Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
July 25, 2007**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee; It is an honor to appear today, as a Peace Corps Nominee to testify in support of the "Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act".

I'm here today to share with you my experience with the Peace Corps Application Process, my thoughts on effective ways the Peace Corps could utilize in recruiting minorities as volunteers, and how this bill could benefit future Peace Corps Applicants.

My name is Nicole Fiol. Currently, I work as an intern in the United States Department of Commerce, Census Bureau. Earlier this year, I received a Bachelors Degree in Political Science from the University of Puerto Rico and now I intend to pursue my ambition of becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer with the anticipated departure of June 2008. One of my professional goals is to obtain a master's degree in International Political Economy and Development, and embark on a career of public service. Peace Corps service enables us to develop skills and expertise many government agencies need. This includes learning foreign languages, cultural awareness, and professional skills honed in an international environment while making a distinguished contribution to the community.

• SHARE MY EXPERIENCE IN THE PC APPLICATION PROCESS

As a former intern in the United States House of Representatives, I had the opportunity to work closely with the Foreign Relations LA, and participated in briefings that involved discussions on International Issues. These briefings helped me learn about a variety of bills that were involved with International Economic Development.

Fortunately, I had the opportunity to attend a briefing about the Peace Corps Congressional Budget Justification for fiscal year 2008. It was where I had the opportunity to meet the Director of the Peace Corps, Mr. Ronald A. Tschetter, and other returned Volunteers who reinforced my decision to pursue placement in the Peace Corps. I was overwhelmed with the passion and commitment the returned volunteers have for this organization. It was in that moment when I decided to start my application that night on April 12, 2007. It took me four days to complete and submit my application to the Agency.

During that same week I had the opportunity to meet my wonderful Recruiter, Chris Wagner who has given me immense help and support through my application process. After revising all the documents and passing the interview, my recruiter nominated me on June 29, 2007 to volunteer in the Africa Region with the anticipated departure date of June 2008. If all the medical screening process goes well and with no unforeseen delays, my time in the application process is estimated to be nearly 14 months.

That's why this bill will be beneficial for future Peace Corps Applicants; Even if you fully commit to this process to volunteer for 27 months, it's a big sacrifice to add a year or more with the application process.

- **REFORMS TO MEDICAL SCREENING PROCESS**

On the medical screening process, applicants like myself, who come from low-income families and are Full-time students and workers, have more challenges ahead. My personal experience with the medical screening process presents serious difficulties due my economic status. My Health Insurance (Preferred Health) does not include coverage in the United States. This means that I will have to travel back home to finish my medical screening process between my summer and fall internships in the United States Census Bureau. While discussing this issue with my recruiter, I was informed that the maximum of reimbursement fees the Agency gives to Females under 40 years of age is \$165. The most cost-effective way for me to fly back to Puerto Rico would be to travel to New York by bus (that would be \$35) and fly roundtrip from JFK to LMM Airport for \$322. The travel costs I accrue to meet the guidelines could be just the beginning, as the reimbursement fees may not cover the costs I incur during the

Physical Examination, the Dental Examination, the Eyeglass Prescriptions and Measurements (plus the second pair of glasses required by the Agency)

This means that I anticipate spending more on the medical screening process of the application than what the Agency will currently be able to reimburse. This is a huge economic sacrifice for a person like myself, and makes it more of an impediment for young people that are already struggling to get the basic needs for their lives. I support sections of this bill that will guarantee full reimbursement for medical tests required by the Peace Corps of applicants and establishment of a process for applicants and other interested parties to propose changes to the Medical Screening Guidelines.

- **MORE DEMAND FROM MINORITIES**

On the other hand, Peace Corps have been working with Colleges and Universities in the States to expand recruiting activities. An effort to expand the applicant pool also includes reaching out to those of diverse age group with different ethnic backgrounds who were previously under-represented in the Peace Corps.

The reality is that out of the 187,000 Peace Corps Volunteer that have served, 16 percent are minorities and 85 percent are from age 20-29. Even worse, Puerto Rico has only had 366 Peace Corps Volunteers since the beginning of the organization, and only 7 are currently active in service.

My experience as a student of the University of Puerto Rico is that the average young adult thinks that Peace Corps was only a program that ran during the Kennedy Administration. Others don't recognize the existence of the organization.

Unfortunately, a staff member from the Atlanta Regional Office comes to the University for only one day of the year to recruit. Had I not happened to walk by the Peace Corps table on that day, I would not have learned about the opportunity to serve and would not be before you today.

I can't emphasize enough of the fact that there is a great pool of motivated, hard working students that would make great volunteers. We desperately need to increase the minority pool in the order to maintain a diverse ethnic background and provide a clear representation of the US Population while strengthening the Peace Corps Agency.

By reaching this goal, we would need to integrate more time and energy to create awareness in the local universities with larger groups of minorities.

- **CONCLUSION**

Thank you your time and consideration, it's an honor to be part of this hearing today. I truly hope that my experience will help you in any way understand the need to fully support this bill. This bill will ensure that all volunteers and applicants like myself get the resources they require to help those who are in great need of our services; which is the foundation of freedom and condition of Peace.

I'll be happy to answer your questions.