

Testimony by Mark L. Schneider, former Director of the Peace Corps, to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Enhancing the Peace Corps, Empowering Peace Corps Volunteers and Expanding to 15,000 by its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary

Washington, D.C.  
25 July 2007

I want to express my appreciation to the chairman, Senator Chris Dodd, a fellow returned Peace Corps Volunteer from my Volunteer era, for the invitation to appear before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps and Narcotics Affairs this morning in support of the Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act. Every one of the 187,000 Returned and serving Volunteers recognize your commitment, dedication and influence over the past four decades in support of the Peace Corps and its three goals. We all thank you for that legacy of leadership.

I also want to express my appreciation to the ranking member Senator Bob Corker and the members of the committee for the opportunity to appear here today. And although not a member of the Committee, I want to express the appreciation of the Peace Corps community for your original co-sponsor on this legislation, Senator Ted Kennedy, not only a friend of the Peace Corps, but my boss for nearly six years a long time ago.

My wife and I served as Peace Corps Volunteers in El Salvador 40 years ago, and those two years in a small barrio on the outskirts of San Salvador were the most demanding and the most rewarding of our lives. I also had the rare and enormously satisfying privilege of serving as Director of the Peace Corps for the last two years of the Clinton Administration. I have worked in USAID, the State Department, in international organizations, and now with the International Crisis Group, a field-based non-profit organization that analyzes and reports on the causes of conflict in some 60 countries.

I have been able to visit Volunteers in dozens of countries around the world, including on trips since 9/11. I can tell this Committee with absolute conviction that the Peace Corps is the single most cost effective investment this country makes in pursuit of its foreign policy goals—in helping other communities build their knowledge and their institutions, in conveying to the world around us who we really are as a people and a country—which is more essential today than ever, even more than it was during the Cold War, and in broadening this nation's awareness of the global community.

That is why I am convinced that this legislation contains three critical elements to enable the Peace Corps to double in size to 15,000 Volunteers by the time it celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 1 March 2011.

Those elements are first, authorizing the necessary funds; second, empowering Volunteers which will mean better management, improved programming and site selection, safer and more satisfied Volunteers and third, removal of financial, medical, and bureaucratic obstacles to recruiting senior Volunteers.

I also will suggest one other provision and that is to aggressively pursue additional people of color as Peace Corps Volunteers. We have been creeping up to 16 per cent of our Volunteers coming from ethnic and racial minority groups. We can do better and I simply would urge additional targeted steps to do so---including expanding Master's International and the Peace Corps fellows programs at historically black and Hispanic colleges and universities.

**Show me the money:** The first indispensable element in the bill is its authorization of the necessary growth in funding in FY2008, through FY2011 to permit the Peace Corps to reach that goal. It is a goal that President Clinton enunciated and that President Bush has supported. Simply stated, the resources have not matched the rhetoric. This bill provides the authorization. I hope that the committee also will act to see that the first year's appropriations of \$336 million, as passed by the House of Representatives in the FY2008 State-Foreign Operations Appropriations bill will be the final mark when the measure goes to the President for his signature.

As you know there are nearly 20 countries today that want the Peace Corps to establish programs. As we saw after 9/11 when there was jump in Peace Corps applications, if we communicate to potential Volunteer communities out across this nation that we have opportunities for them to serve, they will come.

**Empower Volunteers:** The second element enabling the Peace Corps to expand with better management, better programs, and greater Volunteer satisfaction which I want to endorse is the array of measures in Title II to empower Volunteers.

I would emphasize that we are not starting at zero. Just as an example---there is a mandate for Volunteer Advisory Committees (VACs) in each country in section 202 and then a requirement for staff to listen to them. I cannot think of a measure that makes more sense. Most but not all countries already have established VACs. Best practices reports of the Inspector General on safety issues have cited their importance. They should be required.

Empowering Volunteers is crucial because the Peace Corps is about Volunteers, not staff. The role of staff in Washington and in the field is to find ways to enable Volunteers to succeed. By the way, most staff---many of whom are returned Volunteers---would agree.

If you look over the years at the Peace Corps Volunteer Surveys, which now are conducted every two years, and ask Volunteers about every aspect of their pre-service, training, program, satisfaction, and concerns, the strongest link exists between two elements of a Volunteer's experience, an adequate site where they live and work and an adequate program for them to contribute their energies and skills.

I have personal experience on selecting sites, since my wife and I extended for several months specifically to survey all of the existing communities in a public health program to check with Volunteers on potential living quarters and work conditions. As Director, I

urged that Volunteers be part of the process of evaluating which existing sites and programs should be expanded or replaced. The legislation would mandate that requirement.

The other provisions of the Title II relating to training curriculum and staff performance also deserve support.

Let me just add again, that these provisions build on the lessons already learned from Volunteer statements in every Volunteer survey over the past several years, as well as from the thoughtful individual Volunteer experiences that you are going to hear about from my good friend Chuck Ludlum and his wife, Paula Hirschhoff. They should be commended for their strong commitment to the Peace Corps, displayed during their current second Volunteer tour in Senegal, their research on parts of this bill and their dedication to continued improvement of the Peace Corps.

Let me note there is good news with respect to some of these issues in the current 2006 Volunteer Survey, and in the last Volunteer Survey when I was director. Both show a continuing worldwide global satisfaction rate on the part of Volunteers that I suspect would be hard to match in any organization.

There were more than 80 individual questions with about a dozen choices and then open-ended questions and nearly 75% of all currently serving Volunteers responded, which is pretty amazing. In 1998, it was the same, slightly lower in 1999. A quick listing of some of the results may be particularly relevant.

Of all Volunteers who responded:

- 92% said they definitely intended to complete their 2 year term. In 1999, it was 93%.
- 80% said the host country would benefit if the Peace Corps program were maintained or expanded.
- 94% found it rewarding personally.
- 85% would probably or definitely join again; in 1999, it was 88%, with the same percentages saying they would recommend to friends.
- 95% said they had been moderately, considerably or exceptionally successful in terms of the Peace Corps second goal of helping people from other cultures better understand America.

However, the surveys also provide additional support for the empowerment provisions of the legislation because the views of Volunteers on staff support continue to be somewhat discouraging. A strong majority were adequately, considerably or exceptionally satisfied

with staff support, but somewhere between 16% and 28% were dissatisfied with regard to site selection, job assignment, and administrative support, and even greater unhappiness with respect to technical support and project feedback. That is too high a negative review. In each of these areas, bringing greater Volunteer input into decision-making will strengthen Peace Corps management and programming.

On the positive side, the most satisfaction with staff is in relation to safety and health which demonstrates not only that the Peace Corps is committing additional resources but also that there is more Volunteer input.

I also would add that I believe that the digital Peace Corps will enable Volunteers to get more of that support from each other by tapping into the best practices in their country and region and the Peace Corps now and in the past.

Finally, I would view the provisions of the bill (Section 101, 102) that seek to expand Volunteer access to seed funding for their projects through a Peace Corps fund or by obtaining donations or grants from various sources as part of the empowerment process.

Again, these provisions build on existing programs such as the Small Project Assistance Fund at USAID—but in the current survey, 41 per cent of Volunteers had not used it; the Peace Corps Partnership fund, but 44% had not used it; and on “other” resources, including family friends, service clubs, churches, etc. Here I believe it is important to note that Peace Corps Volunteers have been soliciting anyone they can wherever they can for a long time if they thought it would help implement community projects. I can recall wandering around San Salvador with the community council members from Colonia San Juan Bosco to solicit funds for the community newspaper we were starting.

In some individual instances, Volunteers may not have been encouraged to seek outside resources—although I believe that is relatively rare--and there also is a constraint that Volunteers do not want to be seen as “daddy warbucks”. These provisions encourage the use of project funding but do not make it mandatory, which would be a mistake.

The provisions with respect to protecting the rights of Peace Corps Volunteers also are positive and worthy of support.

**Recruiting senior Volunteers:** Removal of obstacles to recruiting experienced Volunteers is the third element in the bill which will help move us toward the goal of doubling the size of the Peace Corps. The current Peace Corps Director, returned PCV Ronald Tschetter, has undertaken an initiative in this area and the legislation hopefully will be seen as a way to advance the common objective of increasing experienced Volunteers,

On the health side, while reforms to the medical screening process are important to every incoming applicant, they are critical with respect to senior Volunteers. I think the specific provisions provide for greater transparency, greater due process, and greater fairness. By publishing the medical screening guidelines and process with full disclosure,

enabling changes to be proposed, permitting appeals, and reimbursing for medical tests required by the Peace Corps, the system will improve.

The non-discriminatory treatment of retirees who serve as Peace Corps Volunteers in terms of their ability to resume medical coverage from institutions in addition to the federal government should be pursued. And the study of the costs of extending continuing coverage to Volunteers following completion of service from one to six months also is desirable.

On the financial side, the proposals again would go far to encouraging seniors to join the Peace Corps.

Finally, I would simply support the effort to enhance the third goal through expanding funding for programs like World Wise Schools, for supporting efforts to enable non-profit organizations with returned Volunteers to conduct programs that link their home communities with their former communities and with the global community. I would urge, however, that the funding for this grant program be in addition to the funds needed each year to meet the target for doubling the size of the Peace Corps. I also think that NPCA president Kevin Quigley, also an RPCV, will have valuable insights in this area.

Mr. Chairman, I was the Peace Corps director on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the speech that then Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy made at the University of Michigan on October 13, 1960. I traveled to the steps of the Michigan Union. Although his speech began at 2 a.m., I was convinced to start mine at midnight to an audience gathered to commemorate that event, including some of the students who had been there 40 years earlier.

President Kennedy challenged young people, and increasingly older people as well, to serve our country and the cause of peace in a new way. His idea for a new type of service appealed to Americans who wanted to lift the hopes of people in developing countries and to strengthen international understanding in a world divided by the Cold War. Our world today is at least as divided in this age of extremism and terrorism. That is why the Peace Corps remains important.

The Peace Corps has grown to symbolize our country's enduring commitment to helping people in developing countries help themselves. Some 7800 Volunteers serve in 73 countries, and in virtually every sector of development.

Because millions of individuals awaken each day to poverty, hunger, and ill health, Peace Corps Volunteers still are needed at the core of our work—teaching in classrooms, carrying health and nutrition messages to distant villages, and working with farmers to find more sustainable ways of growing food.

Today's Peace Corps Volunteers also are responding to new challenges. They are working with communities of Africa to prevent the spread of AIDS, a disease that has inflicted a tragic toll on the people of Africa. As director I imposed a requirement that all Volunteers then serving in Africa and all new Volunteers would be trained to be

HIV/AIDS prevention educators to help their communities confront this pandemic. It marked the first time that the Peace Corps mobilized every Volunteer to join in a continent-wide campaign against a specific disease. I am pleased that this Administration has built on that foundation and actually expanded the number of Volunteers working on HIV/AIDS as a primary assignment. Volunteers have achieved innovative and countrywide impact on expanding prevention education —some with public health training were working as health educators but others, whose primary assignment was in education and agriculture and small business, also used their ideas, know-how and determination in ways I am convinced have saved lives.

Today's Peace Corps Volunteers also are helping people in developing countries take part in the information technology revolution that all of us now take for granted. They are bridging the digital divide by helping local entrepreneurs create web sites to market their goods over the Internet, helping extend health data bases and training teachers to develop computer literacy programs. That is why the provisions of this legislation to promote the digital Peace Corps internally are so essential. I am convinced that there can be a vast expansion of public/private partnerships with AOL, Hewlett Packard, Google, and others in the dot.com community. We had initial grants of technical support and equipment worth more than a million dollars to use information technology when I was director. That program clearly can be expanded.

What has not changed about the Peace Corps over the last 45 years, and what unites Volunteers of the Kennedy era with Volunteers of the new millennium, is the spirit of service and the same goal of contributing to world peace and international understanding by fulfilling the three goals of the Peace Corps:

- helping people in developing countries address social and economic needs;
- promoting a better understanding of Americans among the people they serve and;
- “bringing the world back home” to promote greater understanding by Americans of the world, of the people who share that world with us, what they face each day and how their lives intersect with our own.