

Testimony of Ronald A. Tschetter
Director of the Peace Corps



**Before the U.S Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee
on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps and Narcotics Affairs**

Wednesday, July 25, 2007

9:30 a.m.

Good morning. I am pleased to join you today, and I would like to thank Chairman Dodd and Senator Corker, as well as the other members of the Subcommittee, for giving me the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. Senator Dodd, it is wonderful to have a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer such as yourself serving in the U.S. Senate and chairing this important Subcommittee. Thank you for your continued commitment to the Volunteers and the growth of this agency. I know that many RPCVs and current Volunteers in the Dominican Republic appreciated the videotaped message that you prepared earlier this year in honor of that nation's 45th anniversary of its Peace Corps program. It was very well received.

I would also like to thank all the members of the Subcommittee for the bipartisan support they provided me during my nomination proceedings last September. As a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer who served in India with my wife in the 1960s, it is an honor to be the Director of the agency.

We also appreciate, Senator Dodd, your focus on strategically expanding the agency with the desire to maintain a quality Volunteer experience and increasing the number of Volunteers in predominantly Muslim countries. I can verify during my recent travels that a vast majority of the 20 countries, which I visited, would welcome additional Volunteers.

Before I comment on S. 732, the "Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act," I am pleased to report that the Peace Corps is in great shape, and I wish to share with the Subcommittee some recent agency highlights and accomplishments. I would also like to note that as Director, my goal is to ensure that the Peace Corps remains an effective agency as it continues into the 21st century.

Today, there are currently 7,749 Volunteers serving around the globe in 73 countries. And, as of September 30, 2007, we anticipate that this number could reach 8,000. Mr. Chairman, our Volunteers are doing amazing work – *critical work* – and in the 20 countries I have visited thus far as Director – I can see that they are happy and are fulfilled by the constructive work they are accomplishing. In fact, this year alone we have had 250 Volunteers extend into a third year so that they continue working on their projects—the highest number of

extensions in four years— which reflects the satisfaction that many Volunteers have found in their service.

In 2006, a new country program was opened in Cambodia and the first group of Cambodian Volunteers were sworn-in in April 2007. A program in Ethiopia will be reopened in September, with a focus on HIV/AIDS, bringing the Peace Corps' involvement with the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) countries up to 10. Additionally, country assessments were performed in Sierra Leone and Liberia last month, an assessment team departed for Rwanda last week, and over 20 countries are interested in having a Peace Corps program. Volunteers continue to excel in such project areas as Education, Health and HIV/AIDS, the Environment, Youth, and Business Development, and over 20 percent of Volunteers are working in 15 predominately Muslim countries such as Morocco, Jordan, and Kazakhstan – presenting the face of America abroad. The Peace Corps and the unique programs we offer are in just as great of demand today as they were in the 1960s.

There are also several new initiatives underway at the agency, unveiled in February of this year, that I am passionate about and would like to share with you briefly. The three initiatives are: Strategic Recruitment and Outreach, Measuring Success and Impact, and Promoting Volunteerism.

To enhance our current recruitment and outreach efforts, there are three areas I believe the agency should focus on: 50+ Outreach, Organizational Outreach, and returned Peace Corps Volunteer (RPCV) Outreach.

As I noted in my nomination hearing last year, the 50+ population represents a tremendous opportunity for the Peace Corps. I meet with older Volunteers every opportunity I have during my travels, and I am always extremely impressed with the work they are doing and the lifetime of experience they offer to our host countries. In fact, during a recent trip to South Africa, I was able to meet with 18 of them. They are an energetic and passionate group and are always eager to share their views and thoughts with me.

The Europe, Mediterranean and Asia (EMA), Inter-America and Pacific (IAP), and Africa regions have each identified pilot posts, for a total of 10 pilots, to make recommendations to better support the needs of potential 50+ Volunteers. Assessments have also been conducted at headquarters of our recruiting process, medical care, and language training to better accommodate prospective 50+ Volunteers. As a result of these internal evaluations, many recommendations are now in the process of implementation, such as the hiring of two additional screening nurses dedicated to 50+ applicants. Currently, five percent of all Volunteers are 50+, and I am committed to increase this percentage over the next few years.

We are also becoming more creative in how we work and partner with organizations. We have developed strategic partnerships throughout our history with organizations to expand our recruitment efforts—particularly among minorities—and, we are going to do more of this. We already have collaborated with many groups including AARP, Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities, among others. From relationships like this we have already seen results such as our Peace Corps Baccalaureate program, which allows those with a degree from a community college to obtain a bachelor's degree in conjunction with their Peace Corps service, and the Peace Corps Prep program that enables college students to take a specialized curriculum promoting international volunteerism.

We are continuing, as well, with our efforts to increase diversity in the Peace Corps. Since last year, we have expanded our recruiting brochures to include American Indian and Asian Americans, launched a new Spanish radio PSA, and enhanced our level of participation at conferences attended by diverse populations. New print PSAs geared toward Hispanic and African American audiences will be released shortly and we are always seeking ways to reduce barriers for service and to increase the number of diverse applications received.

Additionally, we need to ensure that the RPCV community is engaged and ready to assist us in recruitment as active alumni. I was chairman of the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA) in the 1990s, and I see many opportunities for increased involvement, like the mentoring program between returned Volunteers and recently returning Volunteers.

With regard to the second initiative, while all of us have an intrinsic understanding of the great value the Peace Corps brings to the world, we need to better measure our success and impact in quantifiable ways. Congress is always asking for greater accountability, and we at the Peace Corps have heard that call. To add to our current performance measures and the abundant stories of transformation – such as individuals influenced by the work and lives of Peace Corps Volunteers going on to become Presidents, Ministers, and business and cultural leaders in their countries – the agency is looking to bolster its ability to capture our impact in more measurable terms.

To this end, I recently established the Office of Strategic Information, Research and Planning to focus on the agency’s performance planning and reporting, evaluation and measurement, and data management needs. Technology will be a key tool and our new interactive database, called Magellan, will provide the Peace Corps with a global infrastructure, greater information access, and create a seamless system for the entire agency (resulting in greater connectivity between posts, recruiting offices, and headquarters). I look forward to the consistency of information that Magellan will bring the agency, and I am pleased with the progress, the attention, and the energy this new office is bringing to this important endeavor.

Finally, regarding my third initiative, I believe the Peace Corps is the gold standard for volunteerism, and we can assist our host country partners around the world in promoting volunteerism among their own people. I created a Volunteerism Task Force to carry forward the vision of promoting volunteerism at the community and national levels in countries in which we serve. It is actually part of our mandate in the Peace Corps Act “to encourage less developed countries or areas to establish programs under which their citizens and nationals would volunteer to serve in order to meet their needs for trained manpower.” I am enthusiastic about this renewed effort to support countries, such as Benin, and Jordan, which have recently asked for our assistance in exploring the creation of their own national service corps.

Additionally, at the community level, I want to encourage Volunteers to multiply their ongoing efforts to promote volunteerism, and leave a legacy of communities organizing themselves to address local needs. Volunteerism can be an especially powerful agent of change

amongst youth, and in most of the countries where we serve; over 50 percent of the population is under 25. What better legacy for the Peace Corps to leave behind than helping countries and communities work to address their own challenges?

With regard to S.732, I would like to thank the Chairman for his clear and continued interest in the Peace Corps and for his desire, one I also share, to keep the Peace Corps relevant in the 21st century. The bill would authorize the Peace Corps for fiscal years 2008 through 2011 and provide a variety of new initiatives, reports, and modifications to the Peace Corps Act. And, while I appreciate efforts to evaluate and improve the agency, something I am always striving to do as the Director, I am also committed to maintaining the agency's flexibility to adjust to changing dynamics in the world without losing the passion President Kennedy envisioned when he founded the Peace Corps 46 years ago.

I have not been in Washington that long. But, I have been here long enough to know that when this Committee asks for testimony on legislation you would like to get straight answers. I am here to provide you with my frank assessment of this bill.

From my perspective as an RPCV, the former chairman of the NPCA, and the current Director of the Peace Corps, it is evident to me, after a thorough analysis of this bill, that those consulted in its drafting believe that certain parts of the Peace Corps are broken. Well, I am here to tell you that the Peace Corps is actually thriving. In fact, in our recent Volunteer survey 74 percent of Volunteers reported that their service was personally rewarding, 84 percent would recommend Peace Corps service to others, and 95 percent said that they have been personally successful in meeting the second goal of the Peace Corps of helping people from other cultures better understand Americans. Moreover, the Peace Corps is a relevant and vital agency with a strong sense of purpose and one blessed with a dedicated and energetic staff, many of whom are RPCVs. With that being said, I also realize that we can do better, and the initiatives that I have just outlined for you are intended to provide for an improved and more vital Peace Corps. As I strive, along with my staff, to build upon the past successes of the agency, I welcome and embrace constructive efforts that would contribute to an improved Peace Corps.

Quite frankly, I do not believe that S. 732, with its constrictive provisions, would contribute to an improved Peace Corps, and let me explain to you why I believe that: While the legislation may have laudable intentions, many aspects of the bill would: 1) create unforeseen administrative burdens and consequences; 2) raise significant safety and security concerns; and 3) would be costly for the Peace Corps to implement.

By mandating certain programs and initiatives, such as the development of 20 new sectors in 20 countries, it will hamper the agility of the agency to respond to changing circumstances or events, and lock-in funds to programs that may prove unworkable. In effect, this legislation would likely force the agency to close programs, reduce the number of Volunteers, and be locked in to initiatives without a proven track record. The agency estimates that the Peace Corps would see **total Volunteers on board drop to approximately 6,000 in FY 2008, back to FY 1999 levels, and approximately 7,400 in FY 2009.** Volunteer numbers would only begin to increase again in FY 2010, *provided that full funding was received.*

Take for example, our work in HIV/AIDS. In the late 1980s, the pandemic of HIV/AIDS was just beginning to surface. Because of the flexibility in programming that presently exists within the Peace Corps Act, the agency was able to adjust its focus, work with host countries, and meet the challenge of the pandemic head on. Now 90 percent of all Peace Corps posts are involved in HIV/AIDS activities and in FY 2006, Volunteers provided assistance to one million individuals, over 84,000 HIV/AIDS service providers, and 3,800 organizations. Had the Peace Corps been locked into statutory mandates, the likelihood of the agency achieving this impact, at this magnitude, would have been lost.

This bill also raises safety and security concerns. The agency's number one priority is maintaining the safety of our Volunteers, and we have undergone a tremendous number of changes in this post 9/11 world to ensure that they are as safe as they can possibly be. As such, I do not believe the bill, as currently written, is in the best interests of the Peace Corps and its Volunteers, particularly in pushing Volunteers to become fundraisers or grant makers.

With regard to costs, initial budget estimates find that the legislation could cost the Peace

Corps between \$20 and \$30 million to implement. As the Committee may be aware, since FY 2003, the Peace Corps has not received the President's full budget request for the agency. And, increases for the past two years have been relatively flat. While the FY 2008 House mark has met the President's request, the Senate Appropriations Committee mark is **\$10 million below the President's request.** Therefore, even if the agency were to be authorized at the levels provided in S. 732, there is no guarantee that it would be appropriated such amounts in future years.

Additionally, the President's FY08 request of \$333.5 million would simply allow the Peace Corps to maintain its current number of Volunteers in the field and perhaps open one new program. It would not enable the agency to accommodate any projects or programs of the legislation's magnitude.

I would now like to make the Committee aware that there are many elements of the "Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act," that are already underway at the agency.

1) The first point I would like to raise is that this legislation would mandate that each post have a Volunteer Advisory Committee (VAC). As envisioned by the legislation, these VACs would make recommendations regarding post staff, which post would be required to take into consideration. At this time, Volunteers unhappy with the support they receive from post staff may contact the Regional Director, or even the Director of the Peace Corps, to share their concerns. On numerous occasions, VAC recommendations-- along the results of the biennial Volunteer survey-- have resulted in changes at post pertaining to personnel matters or communications issues. The current VAC system is working and a vast majority of Volunteers are satisfied with the process.

To mandate a VAC each post would also trigger the application of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) and could reduce the effectiveness of post staff in implementing rules that, for example, may not be liked by Volunteers *but are necessary for their safety and security.* Furthermore, the VACs established by Volunteers at posts are already working, and are extremely active and vocal with their views. I always make an effort to meet with the country VACs during my travels and carefully listen to their perspectives. To date, I have met with at

least a half dozen VACs and each time I have appreciated their insights and suggestions. Headquarters staff also speak with VAC members, and often listen to them before making decisions on whether or not to extend Country Directors or other host country staff.

2) The bill would also mandate that the agency provide full reimbursement for all medical tests it requires of an applicant. The reimbursement of all medical tests could cost the agency **upwards of \$10 million, vs. under \$1 million the agency is currently spending.** In addition to the standardized tests required of all applicants based on gender and age, **if an applicant indicates that they have had medical problems in a particular area then this can often lead to additional tests.** Such tests are required to ensure an applicant's suitability to the often extreme conditions a Volunteer may incur, and for their own safety should they be chosen to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

While we certainly want to help cut down the cost of medical tests for applicants, and do provide a reimbursement based on age and gender, (*the agency now pays between \$125 to \$290 for physical exams and lab work and up to \$72 for dental and eye examinations*) the focus of our limited budget dollars needs to be designated to the support of our Volunteers in the field.

With regard to the publication of the Peace Corps' medical screening guidelines on its website, and a listing of countries available to accept Volunteers with certain medical conditions, among other medical process details, this would unfortunately lead to confusion for applicants as the countries that can accommodate different Volunteer health situations frequently change. Additionally, each applicant's health is assessed *individually as diseases and ailments can have varying affects on different people*. One person with asthma, for example, might be capable of serving but another may not due to the severity of their case. We do, however, post on the Peace Corps website a list of typical ailments that are difficult to accommodate as a reference for applicants.

A comprehensive review by the Peace Corps' Inspector General is currently underway to evaluate the **a)** medical screening aspects of the Volunteer Delivery System - the agency's mechanism for bringing Volunteers in the door, **b)** the transparency, information and

communication, efficiency, timeliness, and the cost of the medical screening process - particularly as they relate to older applicants, and c) to review impediments in the process - including those relating to medical and health care costs. I look forward to reviewing the final report, as I am serious about addressing these issues. However, it may be premature to mandate any legislative changes until the Office of the Inspector General has had the opportunity to finish its research and issue its findings.

3) The legislation mandates that the Director shall set a goal of doubling by December 31, 2009, the number of Volunteers with at least five years of relevant work experience serving in the Peace Corps. As I mentioned earlier, I have already launched an initiative to recruit older Volunteers that would presumably have such work experience, and those efforts are currently being implemented.

However, with that being said, it should be noted that younger Volunteers with presumably “less work experience” are the agency’s main staple, and it is through their eagerness to serve their communities, that the Peace Corps is what it is today. Many of us were those inexperienced Volunteers many years ago, and are proud of our Volunteer service and contribution. I want to make sure that having the opportunity to be a Peace Corps Volunteer is available to everyone interested and eligible to serve.

4) The legislation would mandate better promotion of electronic communication among Volunteers, such as password protected websites & e-mail links that they can use to discuss development strategies, funding sources, etc. The agency is already in the process of making the Peace Corps digitally streamlined for the 21st century. There are several projects underway. These include a pilot program to enable each post to have its own website and an online program called “PeaceWiki,” which will allow Volunteers to share their best practices with other Volunteers around the world.

5) This legislation would allow Volunteers to either raise funds or use seed funding for demonstration projects. This component of the bill really shifts one of the main tenants of Volunteer service from coming along side a community and providing the impetus for

developing their own funding sources to being viewed as a source of cash. According to one, seasoned country director, “I have never worked in a country where a Volunteer couldn’t help a local community come up with money if the Volunteer and local community were sufficiently enterprising. Once a Volunteer and local community or organizations come up with local funding, two fundamental lessons are learned: that money could be found and that the process whereby money can be found becomes known.” In other words, sustainable development skills are transferred and something is left behind when the Volunteer is no longer there.

Additionally, the Peace Corps already has a proven vehicle to allow Volunteers to accept funds for specific projects through the Office of Private Sector Initiatives (OPSI) and its Peace Corps Partnership Program (PCPP).

In FY 2006, the PCPP received over \$1.4 million worth of donations supporting 435 Volunteer projects and representing 50 different countries. The projects in FY 2006 ranged in size from \$62 to over \$24,000. A new Director of OPSI has been hired, and is in the process of streamlining the PCPP process reflecting recent recommendations from the field. The agency has taken these recommendations seriously, and consequently, has taken action to reorganize. We are looking forward to increasing the value of this resource to our Volunteers.

Additionally, raising funds outside of PCPP increases legal problems, accountability concerns, safety and security issues for Volunteers, and is opposed by nearly every Peace Corps Country Director we have spoken to. One of a Peace Corps Volunteer’s main objectives is to integrate into a community and work among its host country citizens at the grassroots level. They are not encouraged to give out money or be seen as a constant source of funds; nor are they allowed to sell personal items for cash. Allowing Volunteers to either raise funds or use seed funding for demonstration projects diminishes their primary objectives.

This provision goes against the agency’s basic philosophy of helping others to help themselves. The Peace Corps has never been a funding institution and plays a unique role in the world of development that should be maintained. Volunteers should not be requested by host countries or placed in a particular community for their ability to bring money to the table.

6) This bill would allow Volunteers to write articles for publication without their Country Director's approval (unless it pertained to the Peace Corps program or the country, specifically). At this time, Volunteers/Trainees may write articles for publication; however these should be discussed in advance with the Country Director. Publication of material contrary to the advice of the Country Director that subsequently results in adverse consequences for the Volunteer/Trainee or the Peace Corps program may be grounds for administrative separation. Often seemingly benign comments made about the society, food, customs, or local community in which a Volunteer might serve could have an adverse reaction and affect the reputation of the Peace Corps in the country, or could even impact the safety and security of Volunteers.

I would doubt that many Senators would allow members of their staff to publish material without prior approval. For even though that staff member may not be writing on policy issues, staff members are always a reflection on the Senator – whether on the clock or not. The same applies for a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Finally, a Volunteer should not be placed in a position where they are forced to make a decision on whether or not a matter may have an effect on Peace Corps programs or policies, and therefore, whether it requires prior approval.

I would now like to discuss a few of the bill's components which could cause unforeseen consequences for the Peace Corps.

Section 104 calls for the creation of at least 20 new sector-specific programs in 20 different countries for those of "substantial work experience." Such a mandate would be a heavy burden for programming and management staff. It would also dilute the effectiveness of existing programs within host countries and may force post staff to spend an inordinate amount of time on creating new sectors that may or may not be effective. It is also very unclear what would connote "substantial work experience" and how the agency would define it without creating legal challenges in the recruitment process.

As President Kennedy declared, we will continue to only send abroad Americans who are wanted by the host country, who have a real job to do, and who are qualified to do that job. Programs have been, and should continue to be, developed with care and after full negotiation with the host government to ensure that the Peace Corps' efforts are assisting those in need. We should not arbitrarily develop 20 new project-area programs and insist that a host country work with us to accept additional projects if these programs are not something they want or need. We can't be effective without host country "buy-in."

Furthermore, the Peace Corps' six main program sectors (*Education, Health and HIV/AIDS, Business Development, Environment, Youth, and Agriculture*) are not narrowly defined. There are currently already many opportunities for Volunteers to work on projects that are requested by the host country that may loosely fall into one of the above categories. Some examples include, but are not limited to, deaf education in Kenya and ecotourism in the Dominican Republic.

Under Section 306 of the bill, Volunteers can only be administratively separated for specific conduct violations found in Peace Corps Manual Section 204. By mandating this section in statute, this eliminates the possibility of administrative separation for, among other things, lying on the application, poor performance, and other factors, which could hinder the ability of post to manage a program or cause safety and security issues. An example of a safety and security issue, not covered in MS 204, is that Volunteers can currently be administratively separated for leaving their site without first notifying the Country Director. For example, a Country Director must know where Volunteers are in case of evacuation, civil strife, or natural disasters.

This bill would also authorize the agency to distribute up to \$10 million in grants per year for RPCVs to carry out third goal activities. The agency supports third goal activities and is open to discussing with the Subcommittee ways to enhance RPCV engagement. In FY 2007, the Peace Corps expects to spend just over \$2 million on third goal activities, such as the Paul D. Coverdell World Wise Schools Program, University Programs, Returned Volunteer Services, and Peace Corps Week activities. New projects include the launch of a Web-based pilot program in

2006 with audio and visual pod casts by Peace Corps Volunteers and narrated slide shows. The response has been tremendous. The agency's ability, however, to administer a grant program comes with a great deal of regulation and oversight. Additionally, a whole new division would have to be created within the agency which would require additional resources and staff. The agency is not a grant making organization and is not, nor should be, in the grant making business.

Finally, I would like to note that the Peace Corps takes Volunteer feedback very seriously. Every two years, the Peace Corps conducts a survey of its Volunteers to obtain a comprehensive picture of the agency's operations and performance and a better understanding of Volunteers' personal experiences. The survey covers such topics as training, work assignments, safety and security, life at post, third goal activities, and overall Peace Corps service. It is a very effective and valuable rating tool.

In 2006, 75 percent of Volunteers currently in service completed the survey representing 4,482 participants. Volunteers are not shy and offer valuable insights in the surveys. It is through these surveys that the Peace Corps measures its effectiveness and makes adjustments to its operations. In addition, Volunteers are also given a Close of Service survey when they leave post, which provides another opportunity for direct feedback. Volunteers are welcome to provide their thoughts and concerns to Country Directors and other staff at any time. A 50+ survey was also recently conducted, and the agency continues to study its results to see how older Volunteers currently rate their time in the Peace Corps and what can be done to improve their experience.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate and re-emphasize that many aspects of S. 732 would be costly for the Peace Corps to implement; create unforeseen administrative burdens and consequences; and raise significant safety and security concerns. Moreover, other aspects of the legislation are unnecessary because they are already being implemented, and still others could be accomplished administratively—without legislation.

Furthermore, as stated earlier, it will hamper the agility of the agency to respond to

changing circumstances or events, such as we saw with the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s or the growing HIV/AIDS pandemic, and lock-in funds to programs that may prove unworkable and could force the agency to close programs and reduce the number of Volunteers. In fact, the agency estimates that the Peace Corps would see the total Volunteers drop to approximately 6,000 in FY 2008, way back to FY 1999 levels, and approximately 7,400 in FY 2009, under the proposed authorization levels in the legislation. Volunteer numbers would only begin to increase again in FY 2010, ***provided that full funding was received.*** As Director, I want to see the number of Volunteers serving overseas increase, not decrease. I believe the Committee wants that also.

The Peace Corps is a resourceful federal agency and whenever Members of Congress travel overseas, we receive nothing but praise for the great work our Volunteers are doing in the field. They see the return on their investment and that the agency is truly the “best bang for the buck.” Majority Leader Harry Reid recently noted after returning from a CODEL that instead of the current 7,000 Volunteers we have in the field, that there should be 70,000.

Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to testify on behalf of the agency. Let me close by saying that the two years my wife Nancy and I spent in India as health Volunteers had a tremendously positive impact on our lives and, for that, I am forever indebted to the Peace Corps. Those two years changed our lives and values significantly. Now, as Director of the agency, I wake up every day committed to the goal of ensuring that future generations of Americans will have the opportunity to experience what Nancy and I experienced.

My promise to you is to work as hard as I possibly can to support our Volunteers, to strengthen the systems and programs of the agency, and to ensure that the agency’s presence remains a benefit to the United States and to countries around the world—all while protecting its original mission and goals. I know that there are many returned Peace Corps Volunteers who share my passion for the agency, and I ask you to join with me in guiding the Peace Corps forward. There is much to be accomplished, and I am confident we can be successful if we work together in constructive engagement.

As we strive to ensure a better future for the Peace Corps, while continuing to adapt to the 21st century, we must remain true to the principles that President Kennedy and Sargent Shriver established more than four decades ago.

I am pleased to answer any questions and address any issues or concerns the Committee may have.