



The Peace Corps: Current Issues

Curt Tarnoff

Specialist in Foreign Affairs

July 21, 2010

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RS21168

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

| | | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. REPORT DATE 21 JUL 2010 | | 2. REPORT TYPE | | 3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2010 to 00-00-2010 | |
| 4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Peace Corps: Current Issues | | | | 5a. CONTRACT NUMBER | |
| | | | | 5b. GRANT NUMBER | |
| | | | | 5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER | |
| 6. AUTHOR(S) | | | | 5d. PROJECT NUMBER | |
| | | | | 5e. TASK NUMBER | |
| | | | | 5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER | |
| 7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 101 Independence Ave., SE, Washington, DC, 20540-7500 | | | | 8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER | |
| 9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) | | | | 10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) | |
| | | | | 11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) | |
| 12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited | | | | | |
| 13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES | | | | | |
| 14. ABSTRACT | | | | | |
| 15. SUBJECT TERMS | | | | | |
| 16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: | | | 17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT | 18. NUMBER OF PAGES | 19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON |
| a. REPORT unclassified | b. ABSTRACT unclassified | c. THIS PAGE unclassified | | | |

Summary

Founded in 1961, the Peace Corps has sought to meet its legislative mandate of promoting world peace and friendship by sending American volunteers to serve at the grassroots level in villages and towns in all corners of the globe. About 7,671 volunteers currently serve in 77 nations.

In 2010, the 111th Congress is considering the President's annual funding request for the Peace Corps, efforts to reauthorize the Peace Corps, and related issues. On February 1, the Obama Administration issued its FY2011 budget request, proposing \$446.2 million for the Peace Corps, a 12% increase over the FY2010-appropriated level of \$400 million (H.R. 3288, P.L. 111-117). On June 30, 2010, the House State, Foreign Operations Subcommittee marked up a draft FY2011 State, Foreign Operations Appropriations bill, providing \$446.2 million for the Peace Corps, matching the Administration request and \$46.2 million above the previous year's level.

The last Peace Corps authorization (P.L. 106-30), approved in 1999, covered the years FY2000 to FY2003. On June 10, 2009, the House approved H.R. 2410, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for 2010 and 2011 (H.Rept. 111-136). Title VI of the act contains several Peace Corps provisions, including authorization of an appropriation level of in FY2011. The Senate has not addressed this legislation. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported S. 1382, which would authorize funding for the Peace Corps at "such sums as may be necessary."

A comprehensive assessment of Peace Corps operations was published in June 2010. It makes 64 recommendations supporting a six-point strategy to be implemented in the coming years.

Current issues include the extent to which there is available funding for Peace Corps expansion, whether the Peace Corps has the institutional capacity to expand, and whether volunteers are able to function in a safe and secure environment.

This report will be updated as events warrant.

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Recent Developments..... | 1 |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Background | 1 |
| Congressional Actions..... | 2 |
| FY2011 Appropriations | 2 |
| FY2010 Appropriations..... | 2 |
| Authorization..... | 3 |
| Peace Corps Comprehensive Assessment | 5 |
| Issues..... | 7 |
| Peace Corps Funding and Expansion..... | 7 |
| Volunteers, Programming, and Support | 8 |
| The Volunteer Force..... | 8 |
| Programming and Support..... | 9 |
| Security Issues | 10 |

Tables

| | |
|--|---|
| Table 1. Peace Corps Budget: FY2002-FY2011 | 7 |
|--|---|

Contacts

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Author Contact Information | 11 |
|----------------------------------|----|

Recent Developments

On June 30, 2010, the House State, Foreign Operations Subcommittee marked up a draft FY2011 State, Foreign Operations Appropriations bill, providing \$446.2 million for the Peace Corps, matching the Administration request and \$46.2 million above the previous year's level.

In June 2010, the Peace Corps issued an assessment report mandated by Congress in the FY2010 State, Foreign Operations Appropriations legislation (P.L. 111-117). It puts forth a strategic vision for the agency and addresses a wide range of operational issues.

On May 11, 2010, the Peace Corps entered into an agreement to establish a Peace Corps program in Colombia. The first group of 20 volunteers is expected to be deployed in the fall of 2010.

On April 27, 2010, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported S. 2971, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for FY2010-2011. It incorporates most of the language of the Peace Corps Improvement and Expansion Act of 2009, itself reported out of the committee on April 13, 2010 (S.Rept. 111-219). The bill authorizes appropriations for the Peace Corps and requires submission of an agency assessment and strategic plan.

On February 1, 2010, the Obama Administration issued its FY2011 budget request, proposing \$446.2 million for the Peace Corps, a 12% increase over the FY2010-appropriated level.

In December 2009, Congress approved the FY2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act (H.R. 3288, P.L. 111-117), providing \$400 million for the Peace Corps, \$26.4 million more than the Administration request and an 18% increase over the previous year's appropriation.

Introduction

Generally viewed positively by the public and widely supported in Congress, the Peace Corps, the U.S. agency that provides volunteer skills internationally, drew congressional attention in recent years largely due to a 2002 presidential initiative to double the size of the volunteer force and to a series of reauthorization measures in the 108th, 109th, and 110th Congresses, some of which were approved by the House or Senate, but none of which made it into law. In 2009, Congress addressed the size of the volunteer force by providing a significant increase from the previous year in its FY2010 budget. In 2010, the 111th Congress is considering the President's annual funding request for the Peace Corps, efforts to reauthorize the Peace Corps, and related issues. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Background

Founded in 1961, the Peace Corps has sought to meet its legislative mandate of promoting world peace and friendship by sending American volunteers to serve at the grassroots level in villages and towns in all corners of the globe. Living and working with ordinary people, volunteers have contributed in a variety of capacities—such as teachers, environmental specialists, health promoters, and small business advisers—to improving the lives of those they serve and helping others understand American culture. They also seek to share their understanding of other countries with Americans back home through efforts like the Paul D. Coverdell World Wise

School program, which links serving volunteers with U.S. elementary school classrooms. To date, nearly 200,000 Peace Corps volunteers have served in 139 countries. About 7,671 volunteers currently serve in 77 nations. The Peace Corps director is Aaron S. Williams, a former volunteer.¹

In addition to its basic two-year tour of duty, the Peace Corps introduced in 1996 an initiative called Peace Corps Response (formerly Crisis Corps), drawing on former volunteers to provide short-term (usually three to six months) emergency, humanitarian, and reconstruction assistance at the community level with NGOs and relief and development organizations. More than 1,000 Peace Corps Response volunteers have served in 45 countries, including post-tsunami Thailand and Sri Lanka. In September 2005, Peace Corps Response volunteers were deployed to assist Hurricane Katrina relief, the first time in Peace Corps history that volunteers were used domestically. More recently, they are serving in Haiti.

Congressional Actions

FY2011 Appropriations

On February 1, 2010, the Obama Administration issued its FY2011 budget request, proposing \$446.2 million for the Peace Corps, a 12% increase over the FY2010-appropriated level.

On June 30, 2010, the House State, Foreign Operations Subcommittee marked up a draft FY2011 State, Foreign Operations Appropriations bill, providing \$446.2 million for the Peace Corps, matching the Administration request and \$46.2 million above the previous year's level.

FY2010 Appropriations

On May 7, 2009, the Obama Administration issued its FY2010 State, Foreign Operations budget request, including \$373.4 million for the Peace Corps, a nearly 10% increase and \$33.4 million above the FY2009 level.

On June 26, 2009, the House Appropriations Committee reported H.R. 3081, the FY2010 State, Foreign Operations Appropriations, providing \$450 million for the Peace Corps, a more than 20% increase and \$76.6 million higher than the request. In its report on the bill (H.Rept. 111-187), the committee raised several issues:

- In view of congressional support for Peace Corps expansion—and the committee's FY2010 recommendation is a strong statement of such support—the agency was urged to review management procedures allowing for increased numbers. The committee directed GAO to assess recruitment, field placement, and the whole range of management practices needed to expand the agency while maintaining quality.
- The committee urged the Peace Corps to increase recruitment efforts to accommodate a volunteer increase and ensure quality in the volunteer force.

¹ Supporting Peace Corps operations are 853 U.S. direct hire staff, 190 of whom are overseas, and about 2,000 locally hired employees at overseas locations.

- In view of a pending expansion in volunteers, the committee recommended reopening domestic recruitment offices in Denver and Minneapolis-St. Paul.
- The committee urged the agency to integrate renewable energy assistance into its program.
- The committee directed that the Peace Corps report on its criteria for assigning volunteers geographically and encouraged it to consider expansion into Indonesia and Liberia in FY2010.²

The House approved H.R. 3081 on July 9, 2009. During floor debate, by a vote of 172-259, the House rejected an amendment offered by Representative Stearns that would have reduced appropriations for the Peace Corps to the level of the Administration request.

On July 9, 2009, the Senate Appropriations Committee reported S. 1434, its version of the FY2010 State, Foreign Operations Appropriations (S.Rept. 111-44), providing \$373.44 million for the Peace Corps, matching the Administration request. In its report, the committee expressed strong support for the Peace Corps, but with an equally strong caveat—that the agency reform itself to “adapt to the 21st century.” The committee noted that it would recommend additional increases in support of the goal of doubling the Peace Corps once it is clear that the agency is reforming.

In December 2009, Congress approved the FY2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act (H.R. 3288, P.L. 111-117), providing \$400 million for the Peace Corps, \$26.4 million more than the Administration request and an 18% increase over the previous year’s appropriation. The appropriation also contains language that requires the Peace Corps to submit a report within six months including a comprehensive assessment of the agency’s program model and a strategy for reforming and improving its operations (see below for more details).

Authorization

Despite repeated efforts during the past six years, Congress has not enacted a new Peace Corps authorization.³ The last Peace Corps authorization (P.L. 106-30), approved in 1999, covered the years FY2000 to FY2003. Annual State, Foreign Operations appropriations bills, however, routinely waive the requirement of authorization of foreign aid programs, as the FY2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-117, Division F, sec. 7023) did in the case of currently unauthorized foreign aid programs, including the Peace Corps.

² The Peace Corps returned to Liberia in FY2009 and has entered Indonesia in FY2010.

³ Comprehensive bills approved by the Senate in 2002 (both S. 2667 and S. 12) and by the House in 2003 (H.R. 1950) would have authorized appropriations that would double the size of the Peace Corps as well as institute a wide range of reforms and new programs. The Peace Corps Empowerment Act, S. 732 (Dodd), introduced on March 1, 2007, and the subject of hearings held by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 25, 2007, would have authorized appropriations for the Peace Corps and make substantive changes to the program. It contained provisions that sought to strengthen the effectiveness of volunteers in the field, provide a larger role for volunteers in the administration of Peace Corps, and address volunteer personnel and benefit concerns. H.R. 5535, the Peace Corps Reauthorization Act of 2008 (Farr), introduced in March 2008, contained two provisions—a funding authorization and an increase in the readjustment allowance provided to Peace Corps volunteers for use on their return home (from \$125 per month of service to \$225).

On June 10, 2009, the House approved H.R. 2410, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for 2010 and 2011 (H.Rept. 111-136). Title VI of the Act contains several Peace Corps provisions:

- The bill states that it is the policy of the United States to double the size of the Peace Corps, improve the coordination of agency programs with those of other development agencies, and to promote volunteerism by Americans in developing countries.
- The bill amends the Peace Corps Act to authorize the Peace Corps Response Program (discussed above).
- The bill requires that Peace Corps work with other government agencies to “identify synergies” and coordinate programs. In its report on the bill (H.Rept. 111-136), the House Foreign Affairs Committee asserted that USAID and others could benefit from the community-based programs that individual innovative volunteers have created.
- The bill increases the readjustment allowance provided to volunteers completing their term of service from “at least \$125 per month” of service to “at least \$225.” Until recently, volunteers were provided \$225 per month of service on their return to the United States, a level, the committee report notes, that is less than AmeriCorps volunteers. The committee suggests that, minimally, parity with AmeriCorps should be established and an even higher stipend should be considered, given that volunteers must resettle after living abroad.⁴
- The bill authorizes an appropriation level of \$450 million in FY2010 and “such sums as may be necessary” in FY2011.
- The bill requires two reports. One, within a year, on the accomplishments, challenges, and plans for the Peace Corps Response Program and another, annually, on progress made carrying out the legislation, including efforts to increase cooperation with other federal aid agencies.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee has not yet addressed H.R. 2410 and the Peace Corps provisions it contains.

On April 27, 2010, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported S. 2971, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for FY2010-2011. It incorporates most of the language of the Peace Corps Improvement and Expansion Act of 2009, introduced as S. 1382 on June 25, 2009, and reported out of the committee on April 13, 2010 (S.Rept. 111-219). Apart from authorizing appropriations indefinitely (“such sums as may be necessary”), the bill requires that the Peace Corps undertake an extensive assessment on how to strengthen management capabilities and program effectiveness, to expand opportunities for volunteers, and to increase the size of the Peace Corps. Based on that assessment, the Peace Corps is required to develop a strategic plan with one-year and five-year goals and benchmarks for these objectives as well as a strategy for country distribution of volunteers. The bill requires a report to Congress on the assessment and strategic plan.

⁴ Effective April 1, 2010, the readjustment allowance was increased to \$275 per month of service.

Peace Corps Comprehensive Assessment

In June 2010, the Peace Corps submitted to Congress a “comprehensive agency assessment” in response to a directive included in the FY2010 State, Foreign Operations appropriations (P.L. 111-117, Division F).⁵ As requested by the conferees (H.Rept. 111-366), the 204-page document specifically addresses the improvement of a range of Peace Corps operations and procedures, including those involving recruitment of a diverse and skilled volunteer force; training and medical care for volunteers and staff; placement of volunteers based on U.S. interests, country needs, and volunteer skills; coordination with international and host country organizations; early termination rates; management practices and independent evaluation; and other steps that might ensure an effective use of volunteers and resources. The other step that the assessment team chose to include is a discussion of third goal activities.

While the report is thorough in its treatment of these issues, it should be noted that some points that would be required for study in the above-mentioned proposed authorization bills are not substantively addressed here. These include deferment of student loans, utilization of information technology, mechanisms for soliciting volunteer views, the adequacy and impact of post-service benefits, and the accomplishments and plans for the Peace Corps Response Program.

The assessment report doesn’t just discuss a wide range of issues—it is a blueprint for change in the agency. The assessment team’s 64 recommendations have been approved in principle by the Peace Corps director. All recommendations have been placed in an implementation matrix with lead offices and proposed timing for implementation identified. Only a few of the recommendations would require legislative action and, therefore, most can be launched immediately.

As a result of the assessment team’s findings, the Peace Corps is adopting a six-point strategy to guide its operations in the coming years. First, it will move to rationalize its selection of host countries by establishing clear criteria for entry. In part, this move seeks to address congressional concerns that the selection of Peace Corps host countries may not sufficiently reflect U.S. interests. Since 2002, the Peace Corps has received letters of request or inquiry from 27 countries where there is no current program. How the agency determines whether to establish a program has not been a transparent and well-documented process, leading some to conclude that it was not a rational process. The assessment team found that certain essential conditions have always been applied to the question of country entry—the extent of host country commitment, the safety and security of volunteers, and the level of resources available to the Peace Corps. Other key considerations have included compatibility of country objectives with those of Peace Corps, presence of potential projects, cost effectiveness, and congruence with U.S. national interests.

The assessment team has recommended that the Peace Corps conduct a formal annual portfolio review that will look not just at applicant countries but at all existing programs and apply specific criteria to judge where the agency should operate. In addition to existing criteria, the team has recommended that two new criteria be introduced into deliberations on country entry and termination—a measure of the level of development, such as the U.N. Development Program’s Human Development Index, and a measure of potential volunteer impact.

⁵ The report can be found at http://multimedia.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/opengov/PC_Comprehensive_Agency_Assessment.pdf.

The second point in the new Peace Corp strategy is to recognize and make the best use of one of its most notable characteristics—a volunteer force composed largely of generalists. Today, as has largely been the case throughout its history, 85% of volunteers are recent college graduates and 84% are under the age of 30. While some have argued that the Peace Corps should alter its composition to meet the increasing needs of developing countries for educated specialists, the assessment team appears to have determined, with some exceptions noted below under point four, to accept demographic reality and the constraints of career paths in the United States that would likely limit the number of older specialists available to it. Instead, the team recommends steps be taken to strengthen the quality of the volunteer force available by improving its technical, language, and cultural training. It calls for hiring full-time training staff at country posts and providing more training time to volunteers.

The third point in the new strategy suggests that, in order to maximize the effectiveness of the large pool of generalists recruited by the Peace Corps, it would be best to focus on a more limited range of project areas. Currently, volunteers are assigned to one of six broad technical sectors—education, health, agriculture, environment, youth development, and business/IT. Within those sectors, volunteers work in 50 different technical programs, from which 211 different project plans have been developed, perhaps meeting specific needs in a developing country, but for each of which volunteers in that project must be trained. The assessment team argues that by focusing more on what volunteers do best, what communities most want, and what volunteers can best be trained to do, the agency can maximize the capacity of volunteers and the impact they may have. The recommendation, therefore, is that Peace Corps management assess and determine a more narrow framework of work assignments and strengthen technical training in those areas. However, the assessment did not suggest which technical sectors or program areas should be eliminated or maintained.

The assessment’s fourth key point addresses the exception to the rule of use of generalists. Both to meet needs of countries that might require greater expertise and experience and to best attract and utilize those volunteer applicants that possess a higher level of skills than the norm, the assessment team recommends that some innovations be made in Peace Corps programs. In particular, it suggests that the Peace Corps Response Program be expanded in size and be open to highly qualified individuals without previous Peace Corps experience. The Response Program should also maintain its current flexible time commitments (i.e., less than the usual 27 months for regular volunteers) and be used in both regular Peace Corps countries as well as in countries where there is no standard Peace Corps presence.

The fifth point in the strategy calls for efforts to more fully and effectively address the so-called “third goal,” the legislative mandate that Peace Corps volunteers “help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.” This objective has always received less attention and funding (\$1.9 million of its \$400 million FY2010 budget) than the other two goals of assisting development and promoting understanding of Americans to the people served, both aspects which focus on the agency’s work abroad. The “third goal” was singled out recently as an area of emphasis by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in its report on the Peace Corps Improvement and Expansion Act (S. 1382, and incorporated into S. 2971), the committee arguing that the “third goal” had not received enough priority. “Third goal” activities include efforts by volunteers and former volunteers, sometimes forming country member groups, to convey their experiences through blogs, public talks, community service in the United States, and charitable fundraising. Most prominent among Peace Corps-sponsored activities is the Coverdell Worldwide Schools program, which connects volunteers with school classrooms throughout the United States. The assessment report recommendations include increasing funding for these purposes;

establishing an intern program that would place exceptional volunteers in international NGOs, business, and U.S. agencies; and developing an agency-wide strategy to achieve “third goal” objectives.

The sixth point of the strategy is to strengthen Peace Corps management and operations. It recommends an updating of the agency’s strategic plan to include the new strategies encompassed in the assessment report, and a wide range of improvements to the planning and budgeting process, staffing, evaluation and oversight, recruitment procedures, training, and provision of health care to volunteers.

Issues

Peace Corps Funding and Expansion

Despite its apparent popularity in Congress and a 2002 expansion initiative by President Bush to double its size within five years, the Peace Corps has seen only a 16% increase in end of fiscal year volunteer numbers since 2002. Meant to raise the number of volunteers from below 7,000 in 2002 to 14,000 in 2007, the initiative would have required an appropriation of at least \$485 million by FY2007—more than \$200 million greater than FY2002. In the end, however, Congress had to weigh whether sufficient funds were available vis-à-vis other foreign aid priorities (e.g., HIV/AIDS, terrorism, and Afghanistan) to warrant appropriating the amounts sought by the Administration, and annual expansion funding requests were rejected. The end of FY2009 volunteer level is currently at 7,671, a slight decline from the previous year.

Table I. Peace Corps Budget: FY2002-FY2011

| Fiscal Year | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Request (\$ mil) | 275.0 | 317.0 | 359.0 | 401.0 | 345.0 | 336.7 | 333.5 | 343.5 | 373.4 | 446.2 |
| Appropriation (\$ mil) | 278.7 | 295.1 | 309.3 | 317.4 | 319.9 | 319.6 | 330.8 | 340.0 | 400.0 | |
| Total Volunteers | 6,636 | 7,533 | 7,733 | 7,810 | 7,749 | 8,079 | 7,876 | 7,671 | — | |

Source: Peace Corps and CRS.

Note: FY2002-FY2008 figures reflect across-the-board rescissions and supplemental appropriations. Total volunteers are number at end of the fiscal year.

The Obama Administration’s stated objective is a 9,400-volunteer force by 2012 and 11,000 by 2016.⁶ However, in 2009, the House approved an appropriations level for FY2010 (20% higher) that would support expansion plans at a significantly higher level than the Administration, but the Senate Appropriations Committee (S.Rept. 111-44) supported the Administration level and was looking to the agency to reform before providing funding for a doubling of the Peace Corps. The Senate committee was also sensitive to the demands of other priorities, comparing the \$50,000 required for one volunteer a year to the few dollars needed for a dose of measles vaccine. In the end, Congress approved an FY2010 appropriation of \$400 million, an 18% increase over the

⁶ Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification Foreign Operations Fiscal Year 2011*, p. 84.

previous year's budget. The House State, Foreign Operations Subcommittees' mark for FY2011, matching the request, if enacted, would be a 12% increase over the previous year's appropriation.

Whether congressional efforts lead to consistent annual growth of the agency rather than a repetition of the course of the previous expansion initiative will likely hinge on the same two concerns that were repeatedly expressed by appropriators during past years—the overall availability of foreign aid funding and the managerial capacity of the agency to implement an expansion while maintaining an effective volunteer force.

Volunteers, Programming, and Support

A continual concern for Congress over the years has been how the Peace Corps addresses the make-up of the volunteer force, programming of volunteer projects assignments, and support of volunteers in implementing those projects. This concern is particularly acute in the context of the current expansion initiative as it was used as an argument for not meeting the previous Administration's funding requests that would enable doubling the size of the agency. With this concern in mind, the House Appropriations Committee report on the FY2010 State, Foreign Operations appropriations (H.Rept. 111-187) asked the Peace Corps to review its management practices in order to accommodate larger numbers of volunteers, and the Senate's Peace Corps Improvement and Expansion Act (S. 1382) similarly aims to ensure that the Peace Corps is prepared to deal with the whole range of management issues. As noted above, the FY2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-117, Division F) required the Peace Corps to submit a report assessing its operational model and proposing a strategy for reform. How the report submitted in June 2010 is received by Congress will likely influence further steps toward agency expansion.

The Volunteer Force

The volunteer force *is* the Peace Corps. Aspects of its composition have been a focus of interest in Congress over the years. Currently, 60% of volunteers are women, 17% are minorities, 93% are single, and 84% are in their twenties.

In the past several years, Peace Corps made an objective of increasing the number of volunteers aged 50 and older, which, some would argue, might lead to a more specialized work-experienced volunteer force. However, the proportion of volunteers aged 50 or over appears to have changed in a positive direction only slightly. In FY2009, only 6% of volunteers were 50 or older, compared with 5% in FY2008 (on the other hand, the number of older *applicants* increased by 44% between FY2007 and FY2008 and represents 9.2% of applicants).⁷

Volunteers work in a range of sectors—35% in education, 22% in health and HIV/AIDS, 15% in business development, 14% in the environment, 5% in youth, 5% in agriculture, and 4% in other activities. According to the assessment report, 85% of volunteers are recent college graduates with little professional experience. The Peace Corps, while adept at recruiting generalists and providing them with sufficient training to carry out useful assignments in these fields, has not emphasized the provision of highly skilled professionals, such as doctors, agronomists, or engineers, which, many argue, more accurately reflects the current needs of developing countries

⁷ *Peace Corps 2010 Congressional Budget Justification*, p. 38 and 85.

and which the agency may be under greater pressure to supply if it intends to expand volunteer numbers.⁸ Weighed against this view is the belief that the Peace Corps is an agency of public diplomacy as much as it is a development organization, and personal interaction and demonstration of U.S. values is as important as providing specialized technical expertise.

As noted earlier, the assessment team has recommended that the Peace Corps accept the demographic features that have long characterized the volunteer force and, while embracing the use of generalists, seek to strengthen their capabilities through better training and more focused sector activities. At the same time, the team has recommended continued efforts to utilize experienced and skilled volunteers through innovative approaches. In particular, it suggests that the Peace Corps Response Program be used as a platform for new, more flexible, programs that may accommodate different types of volunteers.

Whatever the skill sets and demographic characteristics sought by the agency, it is the recruitment of volunteers with appropriate skills and willingness to live in unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable conditions that is essential to the overall mission of the Peace Corps. A substantial spike in applicants and those expressing interest in applying since September 11, 2001, has made it easier for the Peace Corps to meet its recruitment goals. In FY2009, 15,386 applied to be volunteers (compared to 8,897 in FY2001), an 18% increase from FY2008; 4,367 were invited to join, and 3,694 became trainees (3,191 in FY2001).

Programming and Support

The Peace Corps has been criticized in the past for providing inadequate programming and support of volunteers. This view was reflected in a 1990 Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigation.⁹ It noted that some volunteers had little or nothing to do or had spent six or more months developing their own assignments, without benefit of site visits by Peace Corps staff. The GAO attributed the programming problem to a failure of planning, evaluation, and monitoring systems. Since then, the Peace Corps maintains that it has addressed these weaknesses with systematic approaches to project development, annual project reviews, and increased opportunities for site visits and volunteer feedback. While most volunteers do rate their overall experience highly, volunteer anecdotal accounts suggesting poor programming and staff support still occur, and the 2008 volunteer survey found that between 19% and 24% of volunteers were dissatisfied with regard to support received from Peace Corps staff in site selection and job assignment.¹⁰ One sign of volunteer dissatisfaction—the resignation rate—has improved in recent years, with 7.3% resigning in FY2009 versus 9.8% in FY2001.¹¹

The assessment report discusses but does not thoroughly explore causes of volunteer dissatisfaction and resignation, noting that 97 recommendations to reduce it have been made in previous studies since 1969, many of which have been adopted. It also does not address questions regarding the quality of volunteer assignments. However, the report does offer possible avenues that might help correct these concerns, such as improving volunteer and staff training, developing

⁸ In its Mexico program, launched in 2004, the Peace Corps has been able to provide more specialized technical volunteers offering skills in water and environmental engineering.

⁹ *Peace Corps: Meeting the Challenges of the 1990s*, May 1990, NSIAD-90-122

¹⁰ *Peace Corps 2008 Volunteer Survey Global Report*, June 2009, p. 52.

¹¹ “A resignation is a decision made by the volunteer and trainee who no longer wish to continue in the Peace Corps.” Assessment Report, p. 171-172.

initiatives to better utilize skilled and experienced volunteers, encouraging third-year extensions, and strengthening program evaluation and oversight.

Security Issues

One issue the assessment report was not asked to and does not address is the safety and security of volunteers, possibly because it has long been a prime concern of the Peace Corps, even before September 11, 2001. Because they live and work at the grassroots level in developing countries, Peace Corps volunteers appear to many Americans to be especially vulnerable to crime. The threat of anti-American terrorism has increased that perception.

These fears were further raised in 2003 when the *Dayton (Ohio) Daily News* ran a series of reports highlighting—many former volunteers say exaggerating—the dangers potentially faced by volunteers, and suggested that the agency was failing in its obligation to provide adequate security. As a result, congressional hearings were held and legislation was approved by the House (H.R. 4060, June 2004) that sought to address some security concerns.

Safety statistics kept by the Peace Corps, both in absolute terms and when viewed in the context of incidents per 1,000 volunteer years to account for the rise in number of volunteers in this period, vary from year to year. Aggravated assaults went from 1.35 per 100 volunteer years in 1998 to .49 per 100 volunteer years in 2007 (36 incidents). Reports of rape rose from 10 incidents in 1993 (.31 per 100 female volunteer years) to a peak of 20 (.53 per 100 female volunteer years) in 1997, and decreased to 12 in 2002 (.32 per 100 female volunteer years). There were 17 reported rapes in 2007 (.39 per 100). However the numbers are viewed, since the number of events is small, there may be some question as to whether apparent trends are significant. These statistics also reflect volunteer reporting rates, which likely produce undercounting, and they do not demonstrate whether volunteers are any more or less susceptible to assault than Americans living in New York or Des Moines. When surveyed in 2008, 85% of volunteers reported that they felt usually or very safe where they lived.¹²

In general, the Peace Corps says that it gives the safety and security of its volunteers the highest priority. It has been particularly concerned in recent years with threats of terrorism, crime, and civil strife, and has responded by upgrading communications, testing emergency action plans, and other security measures. Evacuations and closure of missions to insure the well-being of volunteers in cases of political instability and civil unrest have constrained the growth of the Peace Corps. In the past 10 years, volunteers have been evacuated from at least 27 countries for these reasons, including three attributed to the events of September 11—Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic (they have since returned to the latter two countries). Despite the appeal of using Peace Corps volunteers to convey U.S. culture and values directly to the grassroots of Islamic countries, many of these countries of U.S. foreign policy interest might be considered unsafe for Americans over the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, according to the Peace Corps, about 25% of all volunteers, at this time, are serving in 16 countries with Muslim populations of over 40%. In FY2010, the Peace Corps launched a program in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world. In general, the Peace Corps has argued that the close interpersonal relationship between volunteers and members of their host country community helps to make them safe.

¹² Peace Corps, *FY2010 Congressional Budget Justification*, p. 87.

Author Contact Information

Curt Tarnoff
Specialist in Foreign Affairs
ctarnoff@crs.loc.gov, 7-7656