

**Statement of Cynthia Threlkeld
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**Before the United States Senate
Committee on Foreign Relations**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before your Committee today. As the current Country Director in Guatemala and a former Peace Corps Volunteer in both Botswana and Costa Rica, I appreciate this opportunity to present an overview of our program in Guatemala, my role as the Country Director, and our efforts to prevent and respond to safety and security issues. Mr. Chairman, I would like to add that Minnesota has been my home for over 25 years. I was just in the Twin Cities for a visit at the end of May, and it was great to be back home at the height of spring.

Let me begin my remarks by highlighting Peace Corps' rich history of service in Guatemala and the current status of our program. The first Peace Corps Volunteers arrived in Guatemala in 1963. In recognition of 41 years of quality service, in March of this year, President Óscar Berger awarded Peace Corps with the Orden del Quetzal, the highest honor Guatemala bestows on an individual or organization that has rendered distinguished service. Peace Corps Director Gaddi Vasquez personally came to Guatemala to receive the honor on behalf of the more than 4,000 Volunteers who have served in Guatemala since 1963, and to issue a challenge to those of us who have the privilege to serve there today. Peace Corps has the respect and credibility that is needed to make a significant impact on grassroots development efforts, which strengthens the friendship and goodwill between our countries at a time when Guatemala is again under new, forward-looking leadership.

Today we have 185 volunteers working in agriculture, municipal development, the environment, health, small business and youth development. Volunteers work to diversify agricultural production and better manage harvests. They work with local government to increase citizen participation in the democratic process, and with schools to improve the health and hygiene of rural elementary students. Volunteers help develop eco-tourism projects and promote environmental education. With 50 percent of the Guatemalan population under the age of 24, our newest program is in youth development, and all of our programs include a component directed to youth as the basis for the future of the country.

By living and working in local communities, Volunteers learn firsthand about the challenges that face a developing country. Poverty is no longer a statistic; it translates into names and faces. Volunteers do not leave this community behind after they have completed their two years of service. They return to the U.S. and become their voice to the world, helping Americans better understand our role as world citizens.

Let me share with you my role and responsibilities as Country Director in Guatemala. Being a Country Director is much more than the challenge of representing the Peace Corps and implementing its goals in grassroots development and intercultural exchange. It is an immense responsibility that my colleagues and I take to heart. We are held accountable, and rightfully so, for everything that happens at our post - from financial management to program quality and, first and foremost, for the safety and security of Volunteers.

As the Director has noted, the message that safety and security is the number one priority of the Peace Corps is clearly conveyed to Country Directors as well as to all Volunteers throughout their term of service.

The primary components of our safety and security plan can be classified into two main categories: 1) prevention and training and 2) support and response.

1. Prevention and Training:

Prevention is the most critical part of our safety plan, and a component to which we devote a great deal of time and attention.

Pre-Service Training

Peace Corps/Guatemala has twelve weeks of Pre-Service Training for prospective Volunteers upon arrival in country. In addition to being fully integrated into the language, cross-cultural and technical training, the topic of safety and security is covered in seven separate sessions presented by the State Department's Regional Security Officer, the Peace Corps Medical Officer, and the Safety and Security Coordinator through a combination of lectures, videos, information on crime statistics, and a review of past security incidents.

Trainees are given the tools to understand the security risks unique to Guatemala, as well as general personal safety practices. By the end of training, the new Volunteers are expected to develop their own personal plan and participate actively and fully in assuring their own safety and security.

Role of Peace Corps/Guatemala Safety and Security Coordinator

In August of 2003, Peace Corps/Guatemala added the position of Safety and Security Coordinator, which now plays a central role at post. The Safety and Security Coordinator reports directly to the Country Director and concentrates on safety and security issues related to the prevention, training and support of Volunteers. Our coordinator is a former Volunteer who served in Guatemala, and has lived in the country for over seven years. He has earned the trust of Volunteers and thus helps us achieve the essential, but somewhat elusive goal of encouraging Volunteers to act upon the safety and security information we provide to them. He also coordinates the information needed for our Emergency Action Plan, ensures our documentation for compliance with Manual Section 270 related to safety and security, developed and presented some of the sessions in Pre-Service Training, organizes the Regional Safety and Security meetings, manages the new EZone Coordinator system. The Safety and Security Coordinator also keeps fully informed on any political or social disturbances through contact with the State Department's Regional Security Office and by staying informed through local news sources. He is a resource to both Volunteers and staff, and I will elaborate on some of the safety tools that he has helped put in place.

Bi-annual Regional Safety and Security Meetings

Peace Corps/Guatemala holds safety and security meetings for all Volunteers every six months within each region of the country to reinforce safety and security training, review any new security issues, and discuss any concerns Volunteers may have about their personal safety. Topics of discussion include preparation plans for natural disasters and review of the Peace Corps Emergency Action Plan.

Volunteer Safety Manual

To augment our safety information, our Safety and Security Coordinator just completed a draft of a Volunteer Safety Manual that will reinforce and expand upon topics covered in Pre-Service Training and includes sections on safety while at site, including housing and work related risks; during travel, including off-limits areas and travel to the capital; and other general concerns specific to Guatemala.

Role of Peace Corps Program Manager, Site Selection, and Field Visits

The role of the Peace Corps Program Manager is perhaps the most critical to volunteer safety. Our Program Managers are responsible to develop project plans and Volunteer Activity Descriptions, select sites and counterpart agencies, provide technical assistance and personal support, and visit Volunteers in the field. Peace Corps/Guatemala has specific criteria and a checklist for site selection that includes a security assessment, availability of appropriate housing, access to transportation and communication and other key factors.

Site visits are made a minimum of twice during the first year, including once during the first three months, and once during the second year of service, with additional visits as needed due to either program issues or security concerns. Volunteers select their own housing within a clear set of security guidelines, often with assistance from either their counterpart agency or a volunteer site mate. The Program Manager reviews and approves housing during the initial site visit, and also assesses the neighborhood. In addition to site visits from the Program Manager, Volunteers also receive visits from the Program and Training Officer, Program Assistants, and the Safety and Security Coordinator. These visits are on an as-needed basis, and supplement the visits mentioned above.

As Country Director, I also make site visits. I make one extended visit of several days to a specific region of the county each month, supplemented with day trips to Volunteers closer to the capital. It is important for me to see how Volunteers live and work, and to listen to their comments and concerns about their projects, as well as their general sense of well being. In addition, I have an 'open door' policy for Volunteers that stop by the office, respond to phone calls and emails that I receive on a continuous basis, meet with Volunteers during in-service trainings, and personally interview each Volunteer at the completion of his or her service. Safety and security is a topic during each of these contacts.

Expectations for Volunteer Behavior and Peer Support Network

Peace Corps/Guatemala expects Volunteers to adjust their lifestyle to adhere to recommended safety and security standards and policies. Some policies can result in administrative separation if not followed, especially the Peace Corps “zero tolerance” policy on the use of illegal drugs.

Peace Corps staff recognize that the personal and emotional challenges of serving as a Volunteer can at times contribute to adjustment problems or excessive alcohol use, which in turn compromises personal security. Peace Corps/Guatemala Volunteers have taken an active role by developing a peer support network as a way to assist one another with these challenges, especially during the initial months of service.

Communication, Emergency Action Plan, and Cell Phones

A majority of Volunteers in Guatemala own their own cell phones, which they purchase through their monthly stipend or personal resources. The number has increased substantially over the past several years, as access to the technology in Guatemala has improved. It has made a substantial difference in the ability of Peace Corps to maintain close contact with Volunteers and is now a key component of the Emergency Action Plan. There are still Volunteers who depend on telegrams, beepers, community phones, or counterpart agencies as their primary connection to the office because cell phone coverage is not yet universal, and the Peace Corps maintains at least three methods of contacting Volunteers at all times. Volunteers are aware of the need to maintain discretion in the use of cell phones, especially in order to avoid theft, by keeping the phone on silent ring and not using it while in public view. Additionally, the Peace Corps office in Guatemala City also has a satellite phone for use in case of major emergencies.

Peace Corps/Guatemala tested its Emergency Action Plan on May 26th by sending out text messages by cell phone, beeper, telegrams, email, and phone depending on the communication plan for each Volunteer. As part of the test, Volunteers received a message instructing them to personally contact the Peace Corps office immediately. We had excellent results that far exceeded any previous tests, with confirmed location of Volunteers according to the following timeline: 83% within 8 hours; 92% within 16 hours; and 100% within 32 hours.

Out of Site Policy and Emergency Zone System (EZone)

An improved out of site policy for Peace Corps Guatemala went into effect July 5, 2003. The policy provides specific instructions to Volunteers on how to report their location to Peace Corps every time they travel out of their site. Concurrent with the new policy, a modified warden system called the “Ezone System” was put in place. This system creates a nationwide network of Volunteers with good access to communication that have agreed to assist with relaying security information to Volunteers within their region and to serve as a standard point of contact for updates during an emergency. Their

role supplements rather than replaces staff responsibilities for these tasks. EZone Coordinators receive training and a small stipend for cell phone minutes and Internet use.

Restrictions on Travel to Capital and Dedicated Security Phone Line

Guatemala City is one of the more high-risk areas of the country. Volunteers are advised to avoid travel to the capital except when necessary for official business. Peace Corps/Guatemala has a dedicated security phone line with a message that is updated daily advising Volunteers on any protests, roadblocks, or disturbances in the capital and whether it is clear to travel to the Peace Corps office. Volunteers are instructed to call the number before any travel to the capital, and to take a taxi from the edge of town to the Peace Corps office rather than using public transportation. Also, U.S. embassy families open their home to Volunteers through a 'bed and breakfast' program to offer a safe alternative to a hotel, as well as moral support for Volunteers while they are in the capital.

Embassy Support and Role of Regional Security Office

Peace Corps/Guatemala has an excellent relationship with the U.S. Embassy. The Ambassador places a high priority on collaboration with Peace Corps, and communicates that to the Country Team. The Ambassador briefs Peace Corps trainees on the political situation in Guatemala, hosts our swearing-in ceremonies, makes site visits to Volunteers when he is in the field, personally calls Volunteers who have been injured during service, and participates in the 'bed and breakfast' program that I just mentioned. As Country Director, I attend weekly Country Team and Emergency Action Committee meetings, and I receive briefings from the appropriate embassy staff as needed on political, social, or economic issues that may have an impact on the Peace Corps.

The primary safety and security contact for the Peace Corps within the embassy is with the Regional Security Office. The Regional Security Office plays an integral role in all aspects of our safety and security plan: they present Pre-Service Training sessions on crime prevention; provide information on security concerns in specific geographic regions or during civil disturbances; participate in debriefings or meetings to discuss specific incidents; and respond immediately to major security incidents involving Volunteers, including traveling to site to assist local police with crime investigations and follow-up.

Maintaining a strong relationship between Peace Corps/Guatemala and the Regional Security Office is considered one of our highest priorities.

II. Response and Support

We have a comprehensive program for the prevention of safety and security incidents, but we can never fully eliminate them because of the realities of the environment in which we operate. Peace Corps/Guatemala is prepared to respond with a full range of support to Volunteers who are victims of crime or accidents.

Role of the Peace Corps Medical Office

The Peace Corps Medical Office is the first line of response to Volunteers who have been injured in either an accident or assault. Our medical staff includes a consulting medical doctor and qualified nurses who are on call 24 hours a day. These medical professionals are highly experienced in responding to both the physical and emotional needs of Volunteers, collecting the proper forensic evidence when necessary, and serving as a triage for further medical or counseling services either in Guatemala, or through medical evacuation to the United States. The Medical Office works in close collaboration with the Office of Medical Services in Peace Corps/Washington, which provides excellent care to Volunteers who need to go to Washington for post-trauma counseling or medical follow-up after a safety or security incident occurs.

The Medical Officers are also fully involved in pre-service training, in-service training, and provide input on criteria for housing, site selection and all other aspects of Peace Corps life.

Assaults and Major Security Incidents

In the event of a major security incident or assault, the key to the response is the close coordination and collaboration from the full team, including Peace Corps/Guatemala, the Regional Security Office, and Peace Corps/Washington. One excellent resource developed by Peace Corps is the "*Rape Response Handbook*," which clearly outlines roles and responsibilities. This handbook covers not only the immediate steps that need to be taken to ensure the physical and emotional well-being of the Volunteer, but also steps for successful prosecution of the case, and tips for managing the difficult emotional response of the victim, as well as other Volunteers and staff.

Debriefing and Monitoring of Security Incidents

Peace Corps/Guatemala carefully reviews security incidents, both with Volunteers and staff, including the Regional Security Office when appropriate. The goal is to cover the following points: could the incident have been prevented; what was the quality and depth of the Peace Corps/Guatemala staff response; were there any steps the Volunteer could have taken to reduce the risk; what are the lessons learned for site development or Volunteer training; and what are the recommendations for monitoring or further action steps. Volunteers are directly involved in the development of any action plans, especially those involving possible site changes or the need for close monitoring of the security situation in their community or region.

Peace Corps Office of Inspector General

The Peace Corps Office of Inspector General coordinates the investigation and prosecution of violent crimes against Volunteers, including providing guidance on the management of forensic evidence. Each case has to be managed according to the laws and court procedures in Guatemala, and the Country Director consults with the Office of

Inspector General and the Regional Security Officer about the retention of a local lawyer to advise the post on the criminal procedures. An agent from the Inspector General's Office will interview crime victims to help clarify the facts of the case, and will accompany those victims willing to return to Guatemala for court proceedings.

Conclusion

I served two terms as a Peace Corps Volunteer, in the 1980s and again in the mid-1990s. The goals of the Peace Corps have not changed, but -- believe me -- the level of accountability and the extent of the regulations related to safety and security certainly have. Responsibility is placed on all parties from the Country Director and staff to the Volunteers themselves.

I doubt you would find many Volunteers who currently serve in any of the 71 Peace Corps programs around the world who would complain that the Peace Corps does not provide enough information, training or support on safety and security. It is more likely they would complain that too many measures are in place, and it restricts their personal liberties.

Service in the Peace Corps requires a willingness to sacrifice some of your personal liberties. Volunteers are expected to represent the image of the Peace Corps at all times, live within the rules and norms for safety and security, and be held accountable for their time and their actions. You would be impressed by the way Volunteers in Guatemala step up to that responsibility, and the contributions they make representing the United States.

In return for their commitment, the Volunteer has the right to expect the Peace Corps to provide a well-defined job, a carefully selected site and the proper technical, medical and personal support to help facilitate their success. The primary role of the Country Director is to ensure that all parties live up to their end of the bargain.

Does it always work the way we hope it will, and thus is everyone content and satisfied? No, we're not perfect, but we do our best and we set high standards and continually strive to improve.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I am grateful to you and members of the Committee for your continued support of the Peace Corps mission. If your travels ever bring you to Guatemala, I would be delighted to show you the work of our Volunteers— wonderful American citizens who truly exemplify a spirit of service. I now look forward to answering any questions you may have.