

**Statement of Gaddi H. Vasquez
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**Before the United States Senate
Committee on Foreign Relations**

June 22, 2004

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to appear before your Committee today. I appreciate the opportunity to present an overview of the current state of the Peace Corps and the many accomplishments, which we, as an agency, have achieved since my arrival in February 2002. Mr. Chairman, I also want to thank you for the on-going support that you and many Members of this Committee have shown for the Peace Corps, and I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to encourage Members of the Committee to visit Peace Corps Volunteers should you travel to any of the 71 countries in which we operate. Seeing the Volunteers firsthand can give you a heightened appreciation for the remarkable service our American men and women perform overseas. Whether teaching schoolchildren in the Dominican Republic how to use the Internet, or assisting a community in Namibia to build a solar-powered oven, seeing the Volunteers in action makes you proud of these Americans who are serving their country in nations around the world. If you are traveling to a country in which the Peace Corps has a program, please let us know and we will make every effort to connect you with a Volunteer. After meeting them, I know you will share in our enthusiasm to ensure the Peace Corps continues as a world-class organization, promoting world peace and friendship abroad.

While I understand the purpose of today's hearing is to discuss the safety and security framework that has been designed to protect Peace Corps Volunteers, let me begin with some general comments about the Peace Corps and our goals. In March, we celebrated the Peace Corps' 43rd anniversary. We have learned valuable lessons during the last four decades. More than 171,000 Americans have served as Peace Corps Volunteers. The Volunteers have helped dispel misconceptions about Americans, assisted in fostering positive relationships with host country nationals, promoted sustainable development, and returned back home with messages about life overseas, the people they have served, and the cultures they have experienced. The core values of the Peace Corps and the grassroots work that President John F. Kennedy envisioned when he signed the Executive Order establishing the Peace Corps on March 1, 1961, remain relevant, vital, and strong.

These are the Peace Corps goals that we continue to promote:

- to help the people of interested countries and areas in meeting their need for trained men and women;
- to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served; and
- to bring that information back home to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

This past year has brought many accomplishments. It has been an exciting time at the agency as we continue to carry out President Bush's call to public service and his goal to increase the number of Peace Corps Volunteers serving in the field. Mr. Chairman, the Peace Corps is pleased to be on a pathway for growth. However, since the amounts provided in the appropriations process for the past two years have fallen significantly

short of that needed to meet the goal of doubling the number of Volunteers, we are pursuing the strongest growth possible within the constraints of our resources. However, I am happy to report that in September 2003, the Peace Corps achieved a 28-year high with 7,533 Volunteers working in 71 countries in the areas of agriculture, business development, education, the environment, health and HIV/AIDS education and prevention, and youth development.

By knowing local cultures and communicating in local languages, the Peace Corps continues to be actively engaged in activities addressing HIV/AIDS, at the grassroots level, providing over two million service hours a year. Fighting the ravages of this disease is paramount to the survival of people across the globe, and important to this agency. All Volunteers who serve in our 26 African nations—regardless of their program sector—are trained to provide HIV/AIDS prevention and education. In fiscal year 2003, for example, we re-entered the countries of Botswana and Swaziland exclusively to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We are also collaborating with the Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator to continue our work in this arena and seeking to assist in meeting the President's challenge to provide treatment to 2 million HIV-infected people; prevent 7 million new infections; and, offer care to 10 million people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, including orphans and vulnerable children. The Peace Corps is projected to receive \$1.13 million from the Global HIV/AIDS Initiative for work in 6 of the 14 focus countries in the President's Emergency Plan. We continue to be involved in the efforts of the other nine focus countries, as well.

Additionally, Peace Corps Volunteers remain committed to serving in countries with predominantly Muslim populations. This has been true since the Peace Corps' inception in 1961. Currently, almost 20 percent of our Volunteers are serving in nations with predominantly Muslim populations in West and North Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Central Asia. Three out of four of our new country entries in 2003 were in predominately Muslim countries -- Albania, Azerbaijan, and Chad -- bringing our total program involvement in Muslim nations from 14 nations in 2002 to 17 in 2004. The Peace Corps' mission in these regions matches our efforts worldwide and continues to be important. Host communities are exposed to positive and personal images of Americans, and returning Volunteers share their new understanding of these different cultures with friends and family in the United States.

In May, I visited Azerbaijan—one of our newest country entries. Azerbaijan has a Muslim population of over 90 percent. It was truly heartwarming to see after four short months the rapport of the Volunteers among the elementary school children and the eagerness of these young students to learn English. The President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, also expressed his profound appreciation for the Peace Corps Volunteers and mentioned his desire to see Peace Corps programs in Azerbaijan expand in the future beyond English education.

New Initiatives and Accomplishments

Last fall, we launched a new national recruiting campaign to attract new Volunteers and increase diversity. The campaign theme -- "Life is calling. How far will you go?" -- was designed to touch the hearts, enlighten the minds, and inspire the spirits of the next wave of Peace Corps Volunteers. It included new recruiting materials, a re-designed website, updated recruitment videos, and new public service announcements. The response has been tremendous. Over the past year, Volunteer applications have increased by nearly 12 percent and, since the launch of the re-designed website, online inquiries are up 44 percent. Applications now completed on-line have jumped to 81 percent of all applications submitted; this is an increase from 42 percent in 2001. Applications from Latinos, African-Americans, Native Americans, and Asian-Americans are also up by 10 percent. The bottom line is that Americans want to serve and there are developing countries that want and need not only the skills of our citizens, but also want to build relationships that help further world peace and friendship.

In February of 2004, the Peace Corps and the American Association of Community Colleges unveiled a new, groundbreaking recruitment initiative that will increase awareness of opportunities for specially trained Americans to share their skills internationally. It will allow those with the experience and occupational and technical skills -- such as licensed nurses and trained information technology experts -- to respond to the critical needs of countries where Peace Corps Volunteers serve. The rollout was launched in four different regions of the United States -- Washington D.C., Colorado, California, and Minnesota -- and has been met with an overwhelming positive response. In fact, many community colleges nationwide are expanding their international programs and view Peace Corps service as an opportunity to enhance their graduates' professional careers.

On November 12, 2003, I signed an historic agreement that will lead to Peace Corps Volunteers serving in Mexico for the first time. This innovative partnership will allow Volunteers to join along side the National Council on Science and Technology (CONACYT) of Mexico and work in the areas of information technology, small business development, and science and technology. The Peace Corps country director has been selected and the first group of Volunteers will arrive in Mexico this fall.

Travel to Peace Corps Countries

Over the past year, I have also had the privilege to travel to 17 different Peace Corps countries from Central and South America, to Africa, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Pacific. During each visit, I met with Volunteers, host government officials, and representatives of our U.S. missions abroad. The support and enthusiasm I have received from each of these groups remains very high. In Fiji, for example, I was approached by a man in his mid-thirties, asking if I was the Peace Corps Director. The man stated that he had recognized me from the news the night before and was very excited that Peace Corps had returned to Fiji. He went on to explain that as a young boy he was taught by Peace Corps Volunteers and has never forgotten them. This type of

story is repeated to me over and over throughout my travels. The Peace Corps continues to leave a lasting legacy across the globe, which I experience each time I travel abroad.

While the world today is very different from 1961 when Peace Corps began, and even more so since September 11th – the American spirit of sharing with others remains a fundamental part of our democratic society.

Just two weeks ago, I returned from Peru where President Toledo thanked the Peace Corps again for returning to his country. In expressing his deep appreciation for the Volunteers, President Toledo said, “I can’t be objective about the Peace Corps because the Peace Corps changed my life when I was just a young man.” President Toledo, a strong advocate of the Peace Corps, first encountered Volunteers as a youth. They lived with his family, taught him English and later helped him gain admission to a college in the United States. After being elected president in 2001, he invited the Peace Corps to return to Peru after a 27-year absence. A third group of 13 Volunteers was sworn-in at the Presidential Palace during my visit.

Volunteer Safety and Security: Our Overarching Priority

I will now move to the important issue of Volunteer safety. I will start by reaffirming that the safety and security of each Volunteer is the agency’s top priority. All 16 Peace Corps directors, beginning with Sargent Shriver, the agency’s first director, have placed a high priority on Volunteer safety and security. While the Peace Corps will never be able to issue an absolute guarantee, we remain committed to developing optimum conditions for a safe and fulfilling experience for every Peace Corps Volunteer.

Safety and security issues are fully integrated in all aspects of Volunteer recruitment, training, and service, with an emphasis on Volunteers taking personal responsibility for their safety at all times and assimilating into communities. Information provided throughout the recruitment and application process -- to recruiters, on the recruitment website, in printed application materials, informational booklets and educational videos, during the two days of staging, and the 10 to 12 weeks of in-country pre-service training - - all includes the key messages that being a Volunteer involves risk, that Volunteers can and are expected to adopt safe lifestyles, and that the Peace Corps has an effective safety support system in place.

Since taking office in February 2002, I have made the safety and security of Volunteers my number one priority, and I am always mindful of the new security environment that September 11th placed on overseas organizations like the Peace Corps.

Based on my personal experience as a former public safety official, and aided by suggestions of others in the agency, the recommendations and findings from the General Accounting Office’s July 2002 report on Volunteer safety, and Volunteers in the field,

the Peace Corps has taken the initiative to create and implement a number of safety enhancements. In 2002, I approved a reorganization that created a new Office of Safety and Security and increased by 80 people the number of full-time safety and security staff, ninety-five percent of whom are deployed overseas.

This staff, which includes a new associate director of safety and security, a chief compliance officer, a research psychologist, nine regionally-based safety and security officers, and a safety and security desk officer for each Peace Corps region, was restructured to better communicate, supervise, monitor and help set safety and security policy. In addition, all 71 Peace Corps posts have established a safety and security coordinator in country to oversee Volunteer safety issues in the field.

Other new initiatives in safety and security include:

- The creation of new standard operating procedures and a new standard template for posts in developing their Emergency Action Plans;
- The implementation and compliance of new procedures for Volunteer/Trainee Safety and Security (Manual Section 270) to measure and monitor posts' compliance with important safety and security requirements;
- The addition of the equivalent of one full day of safety and security training during a two-day pre-departure orientation (staging) for new trainees;
- The establishment of regular safety and security staff training on a two-year cycle;
- An updated Volunteer site locator form identifying multiple methods of contact;
- Revised site development guidance to assist in the selection of safe and secure Volunteer sites;
- An enhancement of the safety and security information message that a potential applicant receives from his or her first contact with Peace Corps -- during recruitment and throughout the application process; and,
- The availability of safety and security information on the Peace Corps' website

The Peace Corps safety and security officers (PCSSOs) play a vital new role in conducting country specific safety and security risk assessments. At the request of a Country Director, a PCSSO will enter the host country and consult with embassy personnel, local NGOs, government ministries, police officials, and Peace Corps staff to review the current safety and security environment and offer suggested enhancements when necessary. In Panama, for example, the Country Director was trying to ascertain if Volunteers could be placed in new sections of one of the poorest regions in the country. A review of this province was part the PSCCO's overall safety and security assessment.

Overall, the new staff, the new compliance tools, the additional documentation, and the restructured Office of Safety and Security have all been designed to bring greater standardization, continuity, and accountability to the safety and security function.

It is important to note that the Peace Corps' core safety and security philosophy is one of Volunteer acceptance and integration into the local community. This necessitates the thoughtful design of viable projects, the adaptation of Volunteers into their new sites and

cultures, and the development of the Volunteers network of support. A safe and secure Volunteer is one who is working in the community on a well-designed project. In all programming, the Peace Corps works to ensure Volunteers have clearly defined job assignments. The technical training component of pre-service training prepares Volunteers with the essential competencies to successfully perform their work in their program sector. Eighty percent of pre-service training involves some community based training in order to simulate real-life experiences in the workplace, home, and community. Solid training and jobs enable Volunteers to become more quickly involved in their work, build a support network that includes their new colleagues, and produce measurable project outcomes. These factors lead to higher rates of Volunteer job satisfaction, which is important to Volunteer safety.

While the pre-service training contains many important technical components, language, cultural nuances, and safety and security training are key factors in preparing a Volunteer for integration into the host community and laying the groundwork for a safe and fulfilling Volunteer experience. High quality, practical cross-cultural training is also a cornerstone of Volunteer training. At the conclusion of pre-service training, “trainees” must pass a series of 10 core safety and security competencies before being sworn in as full-fledged Peace Corps Volunteers, which were recently revised this year. These core competencies require trainees to demonstrate an understanding of issues such as personal safety strategies, dealing with unwanted attention, identifying risk factors and strategies for avoiding risk, and the importance of incident reporting. They must also be able to communicate basic messages in the local language, exhibit an understanding of Peace Corps policies, as well as know their roles and responsibilities in the Emergency Action Plan.

Earlier this year, the Peace Corps formalized its worldwide guidance that recommends a minimum of two site visits during the first year (including one visit within the first three months) and one visit during the second year. In addition to these minimum guidelines, each post develops country-specific standards on the timing and frequency of site visits that reflects the location and placement of each Volunteer in-country. While the APCDs -- who oversee individual Volunteer programming -- may have the most regular contact, Volunteers may also be visited by Peace Corps Medical Officers, Safety and Security Coordinators, or the Country Director. Where applicable, Volunteer Leaders also make site visits, and act as mentors to integrate new Volunteers as they adapt to their sites. Aside from visiting Volunteers at their sites, in-country staff interact with Volunteers when they come to the Peace Corps Office to conduct business, gather for their in-service training programs or attend other events over the two-year period. Overall, the Peace Corps has guidance in place to promote frequent visits and contact with Volunteers, recognizing that each country must establish its own schedule, reflecting the geography and infrastructure of the country.

It is vital that Volunteers know how to handle emergency situations, whether it is one Volunteer in an accident or all Volunteers in one country who need to be evacuated. As you may know, we recently suspended our program in Haiti, due to the civil unrest, and brought our 76 Volunteers home. This has been the sixth successful evacuation during

my tenure as Director -- the 10th since the fall of 2001 -- impacting 908 Volunteers. Whether it is civil unrest, war, or the outbreak of SARS, the Peace Corps is diligent in monitoring the safety and security at each post and will not hesitate to take action should the need arise to move our Volunteers out of harm's way.

In the activation of an Emergency Action Plan, as well as in more isolated emergencies -- such as notification of a serious illness of a family member at home -- the Peace Corps needs to be able to reach Volunteers at their sites. The Peace Corps makes use of all available and appropriate technology to communicate with Volunteers. As technology evolves, so does the Volunteers' use of technology. In some countries, where cell phones are readily available, reliable, and widely used, almost all Peace Corps Volunteers will have one. For example, almost 100 percent of the Volunteers in South Africa have cell phones. In others, where cell phone coverage is non-existent or sporadic at best, Volunteers make use of the best parts of the communications infrastructure of that country. For instance, in the South Pacific Islands, cell phone systems are not available. Instead, solar-powered landlines are available to be used by Volunteers with Iridium phones as back up with the Volunteer Leaders. Overall, posts use a combination of cell phones, landlines, solar-powered landlines, email, beepers, radios, and message relay systems to reach Volunteers on a regular basis and in emergency situations. Regardless of the availability of cell phones, the Peace Corps always has alternative methods of communication in place and Volunteers are required to provide at least three modes of communication on their site locator forms. Furthermore, when Peace Corps Volunteers are placed in communities around the world, they have a circle of support around them that includes local host country nationals as well as Peace Corps staff. As would be the case here in the United States, if a person were in distress, friends, neighbors, colleagues, host country counterparts, and local police are available to assist with the situation and to send and receive emergency messages.

The Peace Corps uses four key elements in establishing and maintaining its safety and security framework for Volunteers and staff: research, planning, training, and compliance. Safety and security information is tracked and analyzed on an on-going basis. The data analysis, conducted now by our new safety and security research psychologist, is used to enhance existing policies or develop new policies and procedures, as needed. Our new research psychologist is currently revising our data collection process and intake forms and periodically corroborates statistical data on crimes against Volunteers with the Department of State's Crime Division, the only division solely dedicated as an official repository of crime statistics.

After careful analysis and planning, changes are being integrated throughout the agency. The training of Volunteers includes the most up-to-date safety and security information available. Lastly, compliance is essential to ensure that safety and security measures are adhered to and remain a top priority over the course of time. Each of these components helps create a framework to safeguard the well being of Volunteers and staff, institutionalizing enabling them to carry out the Peace Corps' mission.

Tracking Assaults for Prevention Purposes

In 1990, the Peace Corps designed the Assault Notification and Surveillance System (ANSS) for internal tracking purposes. From this data, Peace Corps has enhanced policies, systems, and training to help prevent future Volunteer assaults. The Peace Corps had collected assault data before 1990 but not in a form that facilitated trend analysis.

The ANSS established specific definitions to allow for the systematic collection of data regarding the characteristics of an assault event. Definitions are critical to ensure consistency for trend analysis and prevention purposes so that the prevention strategies are appropriate to the types of incidents taking place. The Peace Corps uses safety statistics to increase the understanding of trends so that training and policies can be adjusted and safety enhanced. Improvements in safety reporting have allowed the Peace Corps to identify associated risk factors (time of day, location, alcohol use, means of transportation, etc.) and develop strategies to help Volunteers address them.

In addition to the statistical data, the most effective tool for gauging success is to ask Volunteers. Every two years, the Peace Corps conducts a global survey to measure the levels of Volunteer satisfaction with programming, safety, medical, and other key indicators. In the most recent global volunteer survey, which had a 68 percent response rate (itself a high response rate):

- 97 percent of the respondents replied that they felt "very safe" to "adequately safe" where they live;
- 99 percent of the respondents felt "very safe" to "adequately safe" where they work;
- 84 percent of the volunteers felt "very safe" to "adequately safe" when they traveled; and,
- 89 percent -- overwhelmingly responded in the affirmative when asked if they would make the same decision to join the Peace Corps.

Proposed Legislation

I am aware of the legislation that has been introduced affecting the Peace Corps. One of the major strengths of the Peace Corps Act is that it is a broad authorization, which has over the years, given ample opportunity for the agency to maintain its independence and its effectiveness. Congress set forth broad objectives, and let the Executive Branch, in consultation with the host government or its peoples establish programs that meet the individual needs of each country. Few agencies have been so successfully and efficiently managed over such a long period. To maintain our effectiveness in an era of continued growth and opportunity requires that management has the flexibility to make decisions that best serve the agency and, most importantly, the Volunteers. The Administration

does not believe that this legislation is in the best interest of this agency or will significantly improve Volunteer safety.

The Peace Corps currently has a positive and independent working relationship with the Office of Inspector General (IG), as a Designated Federal Entity under the Inspector General Act of 1978. The budget for the office has consistently increased over the last three years, with a current budget of \$2.55 million in fiscal year 2004 supporting 17 positions (the total budget for the agency is \$308 million). Given the size of our agency and funding level, we find this arrangement appropriate and in line with similar agencies of our size and stature. Other agencies where the Inspector General is appointed by the head of an agency include AMTRAK, the Federal Reserve, EEOC, and SEC. The President appoints Inspector Generals at large departments and agencies, such as DOD, Commerce Department, Department of Education, HHS, and HUD.

The most recent debate in Congress over IG status has revolved not around creating more Presidentially appointed IGs, but instead eliminating the IGs of smaller agencies and putting those agencies under the IGs of larger agencies. This bill would move in the opposite direction, when we believe the current relationship is appropriate and working effectively.

An additional consequence of the proposed legislation would be that the IG would make his or her own budget request directly to Congress. This could result in the IG competing with the Peace Corps' overall budget request. At present, a competitive process does not exist and, over the past three years, the Office of the IG has consistently received the funding increases requested by the IG.

Secondly, we find it unnecessary to permanently institute an Office of the Ombudsman. This new statutory requirement would be duplicative on many levels, diluting the authority already granted to the Office of the Inspector General and supplanting existing complaint/grievance process. Given the broad parameters that we understand the legislation would create for the Ombudsman, it could actually conflict with the Inspector General's existing jurisdictional authority and could artificially interrupt standard review procedures. In addition, the office could open the agency to a large universe of potential complainants and complaints, since the legislation not only allows current and former Volunteers access to the Ombudsman, but all current and former Peace Corps employees including personal services contractors. The agency has already taken steps to consider establishing an internal liaison to facilitate post-medical services issues on behalf of returning Volunteers -- an item I will address further at the close of my remarks. Again, while the idea of an Ombudsman may have merit, we do not see the creation of a separate office of the proposed scope and magnitude as an effective use of agency funds, in part because it is duplicative of current grievance procedures.

Impact of the 5-year rule

As you may know, the Peace Corps is a unique federal agency in that most employees are limited to serving the agency for five years, though we are permitted to extend the

service of a limited number of employees past the five-year mark. This creates a dynamic, energetic atmosphere in which Peace Corps staff works hard to have a positive impact on the agency during their five-year tenure. Recently, Congress gave the Peace Corps authority to exempt certain positions associated with safety and security from the five-year rule. Since this is a departure from our historical employment laws and regulation, I carefully reviewed the positions and formally designated our first group of 23 exempt positions on October 29, 2003. Nineteen of these positions are in our newly re-organized Office of Safety and Security, which is the Peace Corps office primarily responsible for Volunteer safety and security. One Safety and Security Desk Officer position in each of the regional directorates has been designated, and the position of Director of Quality Improvement in the Office of Medical Services has also been exempted. We believe that these 23 positions are the most clear-cut and readily justifiable applications of the new authority, as they most directly and obviously impact Volunteer safety. Additionally, the 71 safety and security coordinator positions at post are not subject to the five-year rule limitation.

While these were the most obvious designations, I directed the hiring of an independent expert to review Peace Corps operations and make recommendations on what additional, second-tier safety-related positions should be exempted from the five-year rule. Just last month, the Peace Corps contracted with outside experts to perform an objective and independent analysis of the Peace Corps workforce, including the Office of the Inspector General. At the conclusion of the consultants' review, I will make decisions about any other appropriate exemptions for personnel related to safety and security. Because of these on-going activities to implement the five-year rule exemption appropriately, we also do not see the necessity of further legislation in this regard. The first 23 positions, which directly impact Volunteer safety and security, are now exempt and we expect to exempt a number of second-tier positions as we proceed through this process.

Volunteer Care

Lastly, let me take a moment to address the issue of Volunteer care and reiterate a point that is true agency-wide: the Volunteer is at the heart of all Peace Corps programs and policies. These are Americans who commit to serving 27 months abroad with the hope of making a contribution and a connection to people they do not know and often learning a language that they do not speak. Volunteers exhibit great commitment, optimism, and a "can-do" attitude as they work toward sustainable development at the grassroots level in emerging countries. While the circumstances in which they work may be challenging, the personal and professional rewards can be immeasurable. As an agency, we commit to providing the best experience possible to our Volunteers from their first contact with Peace Corps as an applicant to their years as a returned Peace Corps Volunteer. The Volunteers are the heart and soul of the Peace Corps and everything this agency does revolves around them.

Thus, we constantly work to provide support to our Volunteers and continually seek ways to improve. During a Peace Corps Volunteer's service in the field, the Office of

Special Services plays an essential role in our Volunteer support system. For instance, the Office of Special Services coordinates the after-hours duty system, which provides 24 hours a day, seven days a week coverage for all Volunteers and their families. Parents may call this office, at any time, if they need to advise their Volunteer of a critical illness or death of a family member. The Office of Special Services immediately informs the Country Director so that the information is passed on to the Volunteer as soon as possible, and arrangements can be made for special emergency leave if appropriate. The Office of Special Services also serves as a key link with families in the intense time of a country evacuation or the tragic event of the death of a Volunteer. This office is also a key resource for staff and volunteers in assisting with mental health and behavioral issues. In all of these situations, the trained professionals who work in the Office of Special Services strive to provide top-quality care, timely information, and supportive service to Peace Corps Volunteers and their families. Here is just a sample of one family's experience. "When Peace Corps called us about Beth's accident in Zambia and her life-flight to Pretoria, my husband, Gerry, immediately flew to South Africa to be with our daughter ... Through this terrible time, I was in close telephone contact with a Peace Corps counselor in Washington, D.C. When Gerry arrived, he was met and supported throughout by a Peace Corps medical officer ... the Peace Corps was our advocate in every way possible. They treated us as though we were part of their own family."

While Volunteers may or may not have circumstances that necessitate the involvement of the Office of Special Services during their tenure, all Peace Corps Volunteers go through a readjustment process upon completion of their service as a Peace Corps Volunteer. For some, the transition back to life in the United States is a return to familiarity -- the filling out of paperwork and taking care of any needed medical follow-up. For others, however, moving from two years of medical care by the Peace Corps, helping with everything from a toothache to a serious medical issue, can present a more significant challenge.

The Post Service Unit in our Office of Medical Services facilitates post-service medical benefits to returned Peace Corps Volunteers with service-related medical conditions as their care is transferred to the U.S. Department of Labor. Volunteers are considered Federal employees for the purpose of health benefits provided through the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA) program administered by the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs at the Department of Labor. The FECA program provides post-service medical and compensation benefits for conditions exacerbated, accelerated, or precipitated by service in the Peace Corps.

Peace Corps staff has been vigilant in trying to ensure that claims on behalf of returned Peace Corps Volunteers are processed by the Department of Labor in a timely manner. We are proud to report that the backlog that previously existed has now been eliminated and that the Peace Corps recently received recognition by the Department of Labor as the agency with the quickest filing results. Progress in this area rewards former Volunteers that have already served their country and enhance the attractiveness of the

Peace Corps Volunteer program to future Volunteers. As we strive to provide our Volunteers with the best service possible, we always welcome new ideas.

Additionally, when a Volunteer completes his or her service, the Volunteer has the opportunity to purchase private health insurance through CorpsCare (a program similar to the COBRA health insurance plan). Peace Corps pays the first premium covering the first 31 days and then the individual can continue to purchase the policy for up to 18 months. The policy is designed to cover any medical issues not related to a Volunteer's service, including full coverage for pre-existing conditions without a waiting period. After identifying a gap in which many Volunteers who purchased CorpsCare were experiencing a lag time as they awaited a decision on their FECA claim, Peace Corps renegotiated the CorpsCare contract to provide former Volunteers with greater continuity of coverage. The new CorpsCare contract went into effect on March 1, 2004, and we are especially pleased with this new arrangement, which should be a great improvement in providing care for returned Peace Corps Volunteers.

As we seek to further Peace Corps' three goals, the Volunteer is always the central focus. We are continually striving to improve the agency and ensure that our Peace Corps Volunteers have meaningful, productive, and life-changing experiences as they serve throughout the world. More than 171,000 Americans have served in the Peace Corps, and we look forward to providing excellent care to the people of the United States who may serve, are serving, or have returned from service. The Peace Corps will not rest on our achievements and accomplishments. We will build on the successes and learn from events as they occur. Not long ago, I read a message from the parent of a volunteer who was grateful for the quality of care that was rendered by Peace Corps staff overseas and here in the United States. The parent wrote, "As a United States citizen, I am very proud of the Peace Corps; it is a superb organization worthy of every citizen's support."

Conclusion

The safety of the Volunteer is the number one priority of the Peace Corps, and remains the primary focus of many of the research, planning, training, and compliance components of the agency. As noted above, our agency has accomplished a great deal over the past 26 months -- in both safety and security and the growth of our program. Our FY 2005 budget request of \$401 million will support this continued growth and maintain the infrastructure we presently have in place.

In conclusion, I am grateful to you and members of the Committee for your continued support of the Peace Corps mission. September 11th is a grim reminder that the work of past, present, and future Volunteers is more critical than ever. I believe that the Peace Corps is well positioned to safely achieve expansion and build upon the successes of the past 43 years.
