

**Testimony of Kate Raftery  
County Director  
Peace Corps/Eastern Caribbean  
Inter-America and the Pacific Region**



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

**Wednesday, July 25, 2007**

**9:30 a.m.**

Good morning, Chairman Dodd, Senator Corker, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to share with you today my thoughts on the legislation entitled the “Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act.” As a Peace Corps Volunteer, staff member and an active Returned Peace Corps Volunteer since my service in the earlier 1970s, I have had the deepest respect for the Peace Corps Volunteer. My commitment to the Peace Corps’ mission cannot be legislated or dictated because for me it is a passion.

By way of background, I currently serve as the Peace Corps Country Director in the Eastern Caribbean. I have also served as the Country Director in Honduras and Peru, and as a trainer in El Salvador and Costa Rica. I am a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer who left Collinsville, Connecticut, in 1973 to serve in the country of Paraguay in South America.

The Peace Corps appreciates the strong support of this Subcommittee, and the commitment of Senator Dodd to Volunteers around the globe. We also appreciate the support of Congress as the agency seeks its funding each year, and the great interaction we have when Members of Congress travel and meet with Volunteers firsthand. As a Country Director, I have been on the receiving end of many of these congressional visits and it is energizing to the Volunteers to know that Congress is taking an active interest in their work.

Ensuring a quality Peace Corps Volunteer experience is a shared responsibility. The Volunteer, in concert with staff and the local support network, perhaps carries the heaviest of the burden. On a regular basis I express great appreciation to Volunteers for the commitment, creativity, resourcefulness and perseverance that they bring to their service daily. I sincerely hope that I personally, and the staff that I supervise, provide the assistance necessary to maximize this amazingly unique experience; but, I will tell you quite honestly that a Volunteer can be extremely successful and satisfied in spite of the Country Director or the staff. They do so because of the passion they bring to their service and their strength of conviction.

## **Sources of Volunteer Funding**

Now I would like to speak to some of the specifics of the legislation, which in my opinion may not be the best way to get at the underlying desire of empowering Volunteers or increasing staff support. I would like to begin in relation with external funding that is proposed for demonstration projects. This is an issue around which there is considerable debate within the Volunteer and staff community.

Many Volunteers feel that external funding flies in the face of sustainable development. Dependency on outside support can potentially hinder indigenous development from thriving. If getting the grant is the end goal—then there is a problem. The end goal must be the empowerment of a community, an institution, or an individual to identify their own dreams, possibilities and then bring that to fruition through hard work, strategic planning, and realistic financing. The end goal is the development of a skill set that will matter and enable a host country community or individual without an abundance of resources— or bureaucratic strings attached—to accomplish a specific objective.

The Peace Corps has made significant resources available for Volunteers through partners such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, U.S. embassy funds, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and many others. These partnerships allow for resources to be available for appropriate uses, but also allow the Peace Corps to become a development partner of choice, particularly at the grassroots level, for agencies often too large to facilitate resources reaching the most underserved communities.

The introduction of, or expanded use of, external resources needs to be reviewed and assessed very carefully so that bringing money to a host community does not become more important to the community than bringing in the human resource of a Peace Corps Volunteer.

In relation to the bill's proposed expansion of the Volunteer's ability to do fundraising, I have sadly seen good Volunteers transform from being productive grassroots development workers to full-time fundraisers. With this transition we too often see more "Volunteer projects," and fewer projects with strong and visible community buy-in and commitment. This is another area in need of close review and guidance.

The bill speaks of the need to increase attention and support of Third Goal activities. This is an area that has historically received little attention and few resources. I am concerned by the recommendation that only "certain" non profits will be used to facilitate this effort, and that the type of activities eligible for support would have to fit such a limited scope. There is no doubt in my mind that the same type of creativity, imagination and resourcefulness that Volunteers demonstrate during their service will be evident in the work that the Returned Volunteer will propose.

### **Recruiting and Programming for Mature Volunteers**

The bill encourages the Peace Corps to be more proactive in the recruitment and selection of Volunteers with five years of relevant work experience. The bill places, in my opinion, its focus on the wrong constituency. Over the last five plus years, the Peace Corps has looked for new ways to engage truly experienced Volunteers with 25 or 30 years of experience to join the Peace Corps. Those with five years of experience are already attracted to the Peace Corps quite regularly. The realization was made some years ago that the Peace Corps had to rethink the way we do business in terms of recruitment, placement and support for the more mature Volunteer. I have become part of a pilot to increase significantly this population at my post which I am thrilled about. I have worked with the currently serving older Volunteers to assess our present training models, site placement criteria and what I call our basic support package and have made some initial recommendations to headquarters' staff.

Though there are definitely areas still in need of improvement we cannot lose sight of a basic premise that each Country Director is taught as he/she comes into the

agency. Our responsibility is to ensure that every Volunteer has a meaningful and productive experience no matter how old, young, experienced or inexperienced that individual happens to be when they arrive in country. I take that challenge very seriously, and I know that my fellow Country Directors also do.

### **Soliciting the Views of Volunteers**

Each Volunteer needs to feel confident that they will have a voice and a forum for expressing opinions. I personally involve Volunteers in the most important activities which take place at post. I remain mindful that they did not come to country to run the Peace Corps' operations, but to contribute to the development of their country of assignment. My requests for input, I hope, are strategic, transparent, and appropriate. Volunteer input requested respectfully, sincerely, and transparently has never disappointed me. But at the same time I will very honestly and directly point out to Volunteers that at the end of the day they have one reason for being in country and I have another. I am the "hired help" and they are the Volunteer. When a problem arises the Peace Corps Director will not be calling them for an explanation, he will be calling me.

Let me share with you some of the ways that I involve Volunteers in our operations as illustrations as to the incredible value added that can result from the Volunteer contributions.

At performance appraisals time, I include both Volunteers and staff in the review process. Part of my job is to insure that all staff I supervise is working at full performance. That supervision, staff development and training, and support is part of my job description. I request from Volunteers feedback on all staff performance. This feedback should come to me as Country Director, not the regional director miles away.

Volunteers have provided me invaluable input on program direction, focus and frailties. The number of vehicles used to solicit this feedback is many. I use specific training venues to hold focus groups on the country program - initial thoughts at the end

of the first three months of service; at the mid-service conference at the end of the first year; at the end-of-service conference and interviews. Drafts of program documents are shared with Volunteers to review and revise. Meetings on agency counterparts are held frequently to ensure that there is a shared vision as to the development niche Volunteers should be playing in any country. Additionally, the Peace Corps regularly surveys Volunteers and the survey results are shared with senior agency management and passed along to the Country Directors for their benefit.

Volunteer input is also invaluable in the identification and development of sites for new Volunteers. As I mentioned earlier, it is the responsibility of the program staff to identify meaningful assignments for Volunteers, but the engagement of Volunteers in this endeavor is critical. The Volunteer point of view is then coupled with the request from a community and/or agency and the overall development goals the Peace Corps is attempting to address.

The Volunteer Advisory Committee (VAC) is one of the most important ways for any Country Director to thoughtfully and appropriately engage Volunteers. Whenever I am reviewing policy documents, considering new regulations, or facing issues with the Volunteer community I turn to the VAC. Again, I have never been disappointed in the performance of the VAC. We share the strong desire to support Volunteers, maintain the Peace Corps' institutional reputation in the country, and make any policy or procedure transparent and reasonable.

A Country Director must be prepared at all times to be honest, forthcoming, and transparent in their interactions with staff and Volunteers. A Country Director must accept the fact that they will not always be popular with everyone. I accepted that a long time ago, but I work very hard to be defined as fair, consistent, and transparent. We do not always have to agree, but I am confident that each Volunteer understands where I am "coming from" on an issue and the spirit that drives my decisions and/or actions.

I treat Volunteers as I would hope a Country Director would treat me, whether I was a

23-year old college grad from Collinsville, Connecticut, or a 65-year old retired educator from Albuquerque, New Mexico. I believe the Country Director really needs the flexibility to manage his or her post by balancing the complex issues of Volunteer safety and security, programming, and the cultural nuances of the host country.

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps the Peace Corps should be challenged to ensure that all staff views their commitment in a similar fashion, and perhaps the Peace Corps should be encouraged and supported to look at their support to Volunteers and Third Goal activities more creatively. All of this might be true, but in my humble opinion this bill does not do that.

Thank you for your time and attention. It has been an honor speaking before you today. I am pleased to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have.