SAFETY AND SECURITY

SAFETY AND SECURITY: THE OVERARCHING PRIORITY

Office of Safety and Security

While all Peace Corps staff members play a role in promoting safety and security, coordination of these activities is the primary responsibility of the Peace Corps Office of Safety and Security. Established in 2003, this office fosters improved communication, coordination, oversight, and security systems for all Peace Corps safety and security efforts. These include federal employee background investigations, domestic physical security, continuity of operations, crime statistics and analysis, and most importantly, the safety and security of Peace Corps Volunteers and staff overseas.

The Policy of the Peace Corps on Volunteer Safety and Security

Because Volunteers serve at the grassroots level worldwide, experiencing the broadest range of social and environmental conditions health and safety risks are an inherent part of Volunteer service. Peace Corps staff and Volunteers work together to create a framework that maximizes, to the extent possible, Volunteers' well-being, enabling them to carry out their mission effectively. The Peace Corps incorporates safety and security information into all aspects of Volunteer recruitment, training, and service, and ensures that safety and security policies and training curricula are current. Volunteers are asked to do their part by taking responsibility for their behavior at all times and by integrating successfully into their host communities. The safest and most secure Volunteers are those who demonstrate respectful behaviors and who are often at their sites, well-known in their communities, integrated into the culture, able to speak the local language, and who work on well-designed projects.

The Peace Corps takes an integrated approach to Volunteer training. Through language, cross-cultural, and health and safety instruction, Volunteers learn about their new environment and are shown how to effectively cope with the many challenges they will face. They are given tools to adopt a safe and appropriate lifestyle, and instruction about Peace Corps' policies and procedures and their responsibility to abide by them. Throughout pre-service training and regular in-service trainings, Volunteers develop or enhance skills and receive information that helps them understand their surroundings, cope with unwanted attention, and develop personal safety strategies. At the conclusion of pre-service training, every trainee must demonstrate proficiency in key worldwide safety and security core competencies before they are sworn-in as Volunteers. Posts are encouraged to develop additional, locally based training topics to supplement these learning objectives. The Volunteer Safety and Overseas Security division within the Office of Safety and Security manages the integrated facets of safety and security training. Though each post is responsible for training its Volunteers, much of the technical safety and security expertise and staff training is provided by nine regionally-based Peace Corps safety and security officers (PCSSOs), three to each region. PCSSOs provide training to posts in their sub-areas and usually visit each post at least once a year.

In addition to PCSSOs, each post hires a local staff person responsible for coordinating the post's safety and security activities. In spring 2005, the job description for the safety and security coordinator (SSC) was further refined. The Office of Safety and Security provides sub-regional training workshops for every country's SSC every two years, and individual training when required. The office held its most recent SSC workshop in 2007 and will lead this refresher training again in FY 2009 to ensure that all SSCs are receiving continual, uniform training to strengthen their skills and further develop their capacity to support every post's Volunteer security efforts.

An integral part of a post's network for maintaining safety and security is the U.S. embassy. Each Peace Corps country director is a member of the embassy's emergency action committee and a regular participant

in weekly country team meetings. The country director also communicates regularly with the embassy's regional security officer. This officer represents the U.S. government's interests in any safety and security situation and is the first point of contact with local law enforcement officials. The regional security officer reviews with the country director any situation that is deemed of importance to the Peace Corps as well as any travel advisories or other issues of concern.

Volunteer Crime Incident Analysis

The Office of Safety and Security includes a Crime Statistics and Analysis Unit that continually tracks and analyzes information related to the safety of Volunteers. The unit employs a social science analyst and a safety and security data analyst to develop protocols for reporting violence and other crimes against Volunteers and to compile and analyze the data that are received. Crime statistics for posts are presented to prospective Volunteers at the time of invitation so they can make informed decisions on joining the Peace Corps. Data are published in an annual Safety of the Volunteer report, which provides summary statistics on all assault events against Volunteers for each calendar year as well as information on historical trends in the three Peace Corps regions. The publication's twofold objective is to identify and analyze trends in safety conditions among in-service Volunteers; and to provide useful feedback on noted trends to support the safety and security training and education of Volunteers and staff. Analysis is also used to enhance existing policies and procedures or to develop new procedures as needed.

Improvements in safety reporting have enabled the Peace Corps to profile specific crimes by identifying associated risk factors (e.g., time of day, location, alcohol use, and modes of transportation) and to develop strategies to help Volunteers mitigate these factors. In 2008, the unit will launch an updated crime incident reporting system that expedites the notification of appropriate personnel at headquarters when an incident occurs in the field. A previous enhancement to this system made the definitions of incidents more compatible with national crime categories to allow comparative analyses.

Emergency Communications and Planning

Most Volunteers live and work in communities at some distance from the Peace Corps post office. Volunteers are expected to stay in touch regularly with the Peace Corps office. They are required to report their whereabouts when they travel away from their sites and to receive the Peace Corps' authorization if they intend to leave the country for any reason.

The Peace Corps addresses larger security concerns through country-specific emergency action plans. These plans, developed to address serious events such as natural disasters or civil unrest, outline the strategies developed by each post to prepare for, respond to, and recover from such crises. The Peace Corps works closely with the U.S. embassy to share information, develop strategies, and coordinate communications in a crisis. If a decision is made to evacuate Volunteers from a country, the Peace Corps commits every available resource to safely move them and staff members out of harm's way. In 2003, the agency established a "situation room" dedicated to handling emergencies as they arise. Located at headquarters, the room includes computer access to emergency contact information and other necessary resources for crisis management support. Staff members are continually trained to support crisis management, using material drawn from the Peace Corps' extensive experience with emergency situations and the agency's *Evacuation Support Guide*. The facility was used on numerous occasions in FY 2007—from evacuating Volunteers due to civil unrest to monitoring the developments following an 8.0 magnitude earthquake in South America.

Continuity of Operations

The federal continuity of operations (COOP) program ensures that agencies can fulfill their essential functions if offices are forced to close in response to an emergency event. COOP serves as an insurance policy for federal services to the American people and allows each agency to maintain a presence even in the worst natural or manmade emergency scenario. During the past year, the Peace Corps' COOP team has consulted with senior leadership and agency offices to identify essential agency functions and

activities that support these functions. The two functions considered critical to the Peace Corps in a COOP event are: 1) the safety and security of Volunteers; and 2) the recovery of business systems. The Office of Safety and Security developed the Peace Corps' COOP plan, which has been approved by the Peace Corps Director. Additionally, an addendum to the COOP was approved which outlines the specific steps the agency will take in response to an influenza pandemic. The office has also developed several COOP alternate relocation sites using existing Peace Corps resources that will allow the seamless continuation of Peace Corps' programs at a minimal cost.

Director Ron Tschetter with Returned Peace Corps Volunteers Representatives Sam Farr (D-CA), Tom Petri (R-WI), Jim Walsh (R-NY), and Mike Honda (D-CA) at the annual Peace Corps Capitol Hill Intern and Staff Recruiting Event, July 2007