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# HIPAA for Applicants— Frequently Asked Questions

## What is HIPAA?

HIPAA—the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act—is a set of federal laws and regulations designed in part to protect information about your health care from unreasonable disclosure. It limits the extent to which your “protected health information”—individually identifiable information about your health condition or treatment—can be used for purposes other than treatment and payment, and the business operations to support them. HIPAA also requires individuals to be given a notice describing how medical professionals and health plans use their medical information. Most of you have probably received these kinds of notices from your doctors over the last year or so. Peace Corps’ notice is available on its website at [www.peacecorps.gov/policies/pdf/hipaa.pdf](http://www.peacecorps.gov/policies/pdf/hipaa.pdf).

## What impact does HIPAA have on the Peace Corps?

The Peace Corps provides medical care to its Volunteers while they are overseas. It also pays for certain tests and exams before, during, and after Peace Corps service.

Even without HIPAA, the Peace Corps takes its responsibilities to protect the confidentiality of your medical information very seriously. Peace Corps policy strictly limits disclosure of such information only to those who have a need to know it to do their jobs; and they all are required to protect its confidentiality. This policy, which applies to Peace Corps wherever Peace Corps operates, is consistent with the agency’s obligations under the Privacy Act, a federal law applying to all federal agencies. The Privacy Act permits only those agency staff with the need to use the information to do their jobs to use personal information in agency files, such as medical records.

The Peace Corps does much more than provide medical services. It provides diverse support to more than 7,500 volunteers in more than 70 countries. This includes recruiting, giving medical clearance, placing thousands of Volunteers each

year, training them, protecting their safety and security, providing program support to them overseas, and ensuring that the whole Peace Corps system operates as effectively and efficiently as possible. Administration of the program does occasionally require the use of health information about an applicant or Volunteer for reasons other than for medical care; for example, in ensuring the safety and security of Volunteers.

Because HIPAA puts strict limits on the use of personal health information in the U.S., the Peace Corps is required to observe the formality of getting a signed authorization from you to use your medical information for most purposes other than for treatment. The Peace Corps is not changing the confidential way it uses medical information. What has changed is the law about the permissible routine use of such information.

## So, what does this mean for me as an applicant?

Since Peace Corps Volunteers spend their time in places with relatively less sophisticated sanitation and health-care networks, and in countries with higher levels of endemic illness, all applicants must get a medical clearance before they are invited to join the Peace Corps. Your medical status is a key factor in your eligibility to be a Volunteer. To perform this medical clearance, the Peace Corps needs access to information about your medical status. Under the formalities of HIPAA, the agency is required to ask you to authorize it to receive such information and to use it for screening and for placement purposes. Without that authorization, the Peace Corps will not be able to provide the necessary medical clearance for you to be a Volunteer.

One piece of the application kit is an “Authorization For Peace Corps Use of Medical Information.” **This document must be signed and returned to the Peace Corps as part of the application. Without it, the agency cannot consider your application for medical clearance.** This authorization also will permit the Peace Corps to use medical information as described below if and when you become a Volunteer.

## What will this mean for me as a Volunteer?

If you are accepted for Peace Corps service, the medical information that was part of your application and the medical screening is put into your health record, which goes with you overseas. The Peace Corps medical officer(s) in your country will use and add information to your health record as they care for you.

For the most part, your medical information is used for treatment and payment purposes only. This information may be disclosed to Peace Corps staff in-country and in the U.S. on a need-to-know basis. However, there are occasional situations where Peace Corps staff in the U.S. need access to information about your medical situation for non-treatment purposes in order to provide sup-

port to and manage the Peace Corps Volunteer program itself. For example, there may be times when it is relevant to protecting your safety and security, and that of your fellow Volunteers. It may be relevant to whether it is appropriate for you to continue to serve as a Volunteer. It may be relevant to the Peace Corps' analysis of the effectiveness of its programs.

The authorization HIPAA requires the agency to get from you, which permits it to use medical information for program administration purposes, is included in the "Authorization For Peace Corps Use of Medical Information." The protections of the Privacy Act apply, and the information will be used only by those Peace Corps staff who have a specific need to know the information to do their job, and only for those limited purposes. The Peace Corps appreciates your cooperation.