



## **Peace Corps Frequently Asked Questions Safety and Volunteer Support**

The safety, health, and support of Peace Corps Volunteers are the agency's highest priorities. The Peace Corps devotes significant resources to provide trainees and Volunteers with the best training, guidance, support, and information they need to remain healthy, safe, and productive throughout their service. Below is a list of common questions regarding Peace Corps' efforts, approaches, and accomplishments.

### **Is Peace Corps service safe?**

The safety and security of Peace Corps Volunteers are fundamental elements in all agency decisions. Living and traveling in an unfamiliar environment, having a limited understanding of local language and culture, and being perceived as financially well-off are some of the factors that can put a Volunteer at risk. Many Volunteers experience varying degrees of unwanted attention and harassment. Petty thefts and burglaries are not uncommon, and incidents of physical and sexual assault do occur.

The Peace Corps has instituted a broad and systematic approach to help keep Volunteers safe during their service. This approach is based upon several fundamental tenets of Volunteer safety and security. These include: building relationships, sharing information, training, site development, incident reporting and response, and emergency communications and planning.

According to the 2010 Annual Volunteer Survey, the vast majority of Volunteers feel safe in the areas where they live and work. Eighty-seven percent of Peace Corps Volunteers reported they felt "usually safe" or "very safe" where they live and 92 percent reported the same in reference to their workplace.

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**Who administers Peace Corps' health and safety programs?**

The Peace Corps' global Volunteer health program is administered by the Office of Volunteer Support. Each Peace Corps post has at least one medical officer who is on call 24/7 for emergencies and coordinates medical care for Volunteers. The officers are supported by the Office of Medical Services and the Counseling and Outreach Unit at headquarters in Washington, D.C.

The Peace Corps' overall safety and security program is overseen by the Office of Safety and Security at headquarters in Washington D.C., which develops training programs for staff and Volunteers and protocols for handling crimes and other incidents against Volunteers. It also advises Peace Corps posts on safety and security issues. At each Peace Corps post, the country director is responsible for the safety and security of Volunteers and for implementing the safety and security program. Each post has a safety and security coordinator to assist the country director in carrying out this responsibility. The Peace Corps also works with other federal agencies, such as the Department of State and the Department of Justice, as needed, in responding to incidents.

**What does the Peace Corps do to assess the safety environment in a host community and identify Volunteer placement sites?**

Peace Corps staff members in-country are responsible for assessing and approving the communities where Volunteers will live and work to ensure that placements are appropriate and safe and that secure housing and worksites are available. Site selection is based on established safety and security criteria that reflect consideration of site history; access to medical, banking, postal, and other essential services; access to communication, transportation, and local markets; availability of adequate housing and living arrangements; and the potential for obtaining and maintaining the acceptance and consent of host country authorities and the population at-large. During their service, Volunteers are visited periodically at their sites by Peace Corps program managers and other key staff members to monitor issues related to Volunteers' site assignments. If a Volunteer's safety or well-being is placed at risk or compromised, the Peace Corps staff will address the situation and potentially move the Volunteer to another location.

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**What does the Peace Corps do to address larger countrywide security concerns?**

The Peace Corps addresses larger security concerns through country-specific Emergency Action Plans (EAP) that are in place in each Peace Corps country and for which each Volunteer is trained. These plans, developed to address such events as natural disasters or civil unrest, are tested and revised annually. If a situation arises that poses a potential threat to Volunteers, the Peace Corps will immediately assess the nature of the threat and respond in a manner that maximizes the Volunteers' safety and well-being. During emergency situations, the Peace Corps will maintain regular communication with Volunteers to keep them apprised of actions their post is taking to address their safety and security.

In addition, as part of the safety and security procedures, Volunteers are instructed to stay in touch with the Peace Corps office on a periodic basis. They are required to report their whereabouts when they travel from their communities and are required to receive Peace Corps authorization if they intend to leave the country of assignment. These requirements are necessary to ensure Volunteers can be contacted in an emergency.

**What does the Peace Corps do to raise Volunteers' awareness of potential health or safety issues?**

The Peace Corps provides a country-specific *Welcome Book* sent to invitees in their invitation materials. This includes information on health, safety and security, and crime data to enable potential Volunteers to make an informed decision about accepting their invitation to serve. In addition, the two- to three-month pre-service training that takes place in-country uses language, cross-cultural, and health and safety instruction to raise awareness of the Volunteers' new environment. It also builds their capacity to effectively handle the many challenges they may face and provides techniques and strategies they need to adopt a safe and culturally appropriate lifestyle. Through the course of their service, Volunteers also participate in ongoing training modules designed to reduce potential risks.

**What does safety and security Volunteer training include?**

Safety and security training is covered in detail both during pre-service and in-service training for Volunteers. Training objectives include helping Volunteers understand risks they may face while serving overseas; promoting country-specific strategies and best practices to reduce security risks; encouraging Volunteers to report an incident of crime; and explaining the Peace Corps' support systems. In addition, an individual will not be sworn in to serve as a Peace Corps

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Volunteer if that person demonstrates risky behavior that could put his or her safety and security at risk.

**What does the Peace Corps do to prevent sexual assaults against Volunteers?**

The Peace Corps has made great efforts to reduce the risk of sexual violence against Volunteers. Both staff and Volunteers participate in regular training on safety and security. This training covers a variety of topics related to the prevention of sexual assault. The Peace Corps has a reporting system to track and analyze safety and security incidents, and the data collected is used to augment and enhance Volunteer and staff training, both globally and at individual posts. The Peace Corps' efforts have resulted in a significant decline in the incidence of rape and major sexual assault among Volunteers over the past 14 years.

The Peace Corps' Sexual Assault Working Group works with agency staff to analyze agency protocols and recommend strategies to reduce the incidence of sexual assault and rape, and to strengthen support for victims. The Peace Corps will never be able to eliminate crimes committed against Volunteers overseas, but employs extensive measures to train Volunteers in the skills they can use to reduce the likelihood of becoming victims of crime.

Enhanced training specifically designed to further reduce the risk of sexual violence during service overseas for Volunteers is currently being developed. This training will build upon current Peace Corps and industry-wide best practices. This new training will also include pre-departure online training for those who have accepted their invitation to Peace Corps service. The Peace Corps is also developing bystander intervention training that teaches Volunteers safe techniques and tools to help other Volunteers who may be targeted for sexual assault or other crimes. Furthermore, the Peace Corps is creating a standardized training curriculum for Volunteers that places a greater emphasis on sexual violence and risk reduction strategies.

**What does the Peace Corps do to support victims of crime?**

The Peace Corps has comprehensive protocols for its overseas staff that outline procedures to be followed and support services to be provided when assisting a Volunteer who has been a victim of a crime. Each incident is unique and must be handled in accordance with the circumstances of the event and in adherence to local law. Volunteers who are victims of sexual assault can expect to receive extensive support as it relates to their safety, medical and psychological care, legal options, and continued service with the Peace Corps. As part of the

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agency's victim-centered approach, there are systems in place to make sure victims can report rapes or other crimes and seek assistance. The Peace Corps is committed to taking care of Volunteer victims with compassion and dignity.

**Where can I find information about the incidence of crime in the Peace Corps?**

The Peace Corps is completely open and transparent about the extent of crimes committed against Volunteers. The Peace Corps publishes an [Annual Report of Volunteer Safety](#). All reports are public, and the reports from the last five years are posted on the Peace Corps website. Each report provides detailed information regarding crime against Volunteers, including the incidence of rapes and sexual assaults. Starting in 2008, the agency has specifically reported on the total numbers of rapes, major sexual assaults, and other sexual assaults for the preceding 10 years.

**How has the Peace Corps updated operations in response to sexual assault and rape?**

Strengthening the Peace Corps' systems is an ongoing effort and the agency continually reviews operations for areas of improvement. The agency recently finalized [The Peace Corps' Commitment to Sexual Assault Victims](#), which outlines principles the agency will follow when working with the victims of sexual assault and rape. The Peace Corps has considered feedback from many returned Peace Corps Volunteers to develop a comprehensive commitment to Volunteers in writing.

The Peace Corps has updated *Guidelines for Responding to Rapes and Sexual Assaults*, which outlines in detail the procedures for overseas staff to follow when handling incidents of major sexual assault and rape. Training on these guidelines has been conducted for overseas staff at all posts.

**Do Volunteers have to end their overseas service in Peace Corps if they are victims of a crime or assault?**

The Peace Corps works with every victim, and considers both their ongoing safety and their recovery to determine the best course of action. Some Volunteers choose to stay in the Peace Corps, but for some, in order to fully recover, the most appropriate course of action is to leave Peace Corps service. The Peace Corps will work closely with the Volunteer to make decisions regarding the possibility of continued service.

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**Who at the Peace Corps helps and supports victims of crimes?**

Many Peace Corps staff members are involved in providing support to victims of crime in-country. The primary staff includes the country director, safety and security coordinator, and Peace Corps medical officers. The Peace Corps medical officers work with the Counseling and Outreach Unit at headquarters to ensure that a Volunteer who is a victim of crime receives the support and assistance needed.

The Office of Safety and Security has regionally-based Peace Corps safety and security officers who provide expertise and support to posts. All Peace Corps safety and security officers have completed specialized victim assistance training through the Department of Justice.

The Peace Corps recently created a full-time victim's advocate position to assist any Volunteer victim, and help Volunteers access the appropriate support after a crime. The advocate ensures that victims receive the emotional, medical, legal, and other support services they need and deserve both during and after the completion of their Peace Corps service.

**Does the Peace Corps provide counseling to Volunteers?**

The Peace Corps offers professional counseling to all Volunteers. Volunteers who need counseling during service are eligible for support through their Peace Corps medical officer at post, Peace Corps-approved local mental health providers, or the professional staff at Peace Corps headquarters. For victims of rape and sexual assault, Peace Corps medical officers are trained to provide a continuum of mental health support and counseling. From the initial mental health assessment after the trauma, through monitoring for acute stress reactions and post traumatic stress symptoms, the Peace Corps medical officer is the key person at each post in supporting Volunteers.

**Does the Peace Corps provide counseling for Volunteers who depart Peace Corps service after falling victim to a crime?**

Initial readjustment counseling sessions are offered to Volunteers who leave Peace Corps service. The Peace Corps then provides continued counseling services to returned Peace Corps Volunteers through the Federal Employees Compensation Act (FECA). FECA is the workers compensation program for federal employees, and although Peace Corps Volunteers are not federal employees, they are covered by the FECA program. Although counseling services are coordinated through the Department of Labor, they are funded by the Peace Corps.

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There is no limit on the number or duration of counseling sessions under FECA. In fiscal year 2010, the Peace Corps paid over \$11 million in FECA claims for, among other things, returned Peace Corps Volunteers who were injured during service or were the victims of sexual assault and other crimes.

The FECA claims process, which is administered by the Department of Labor, can be difficult for returned Peace Corps Volunteers to navigate. The Peace Corps has worked with the Department of Labor over the past few years to expedite and clarify the claims process. In addition, the Peace Corps Post Service Unit assists returned Peace Corps Volunteers in filing and tracking FECA claims with the Department of Labor. These steps have led to a significant improvement in FECA claims processing. Nevertheless, in order to address the specific needs of returned Peace Corps Volunteers who have been victims of sexual assault and other crimes, one of the responsibilities of the victim advocate will be to assist with filing and following up on FECA claims.

**Does the Peace Corps work with outside organizations to better support victims of sexual assault and rape?**

The Peace Corps has consulted with highly respected organizations in the sexual assault prevention and response field, such as the Department of Defense's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, the Department of Justice's Office of Violence Against Women, and Speaking Out About Rape (SOAR). The Peace Corps actively works with these organizations to share best practices in prevention and support.

**Does the Peace Corps provide legal representation to Volunteers who wish to press charges against an assailant?**

When it is required for, or materially beneficial to, the prosecution of the case, the Peace Corps may hire a local lawyer to represent a Volunteer who is the victim of a serious crime to assist in the criminal prosecution of that crime. The local lawyer is provided by the Peace Corps at no expense to the Volunteer.

The Peace Corps has been successful in working with its partners in host countries to bring perpetrators to justice. In 2009 and 2010, arrests were made in 61 percent of the rape and attempted rape cases in which the victim elected to file a report with local police. This is 20 percent higher than the United States arrest rate for rape in 2009.

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**How does the Peace Corps respond to Volunteers' safety concerns?**

Volunteers and Peace Corps staff at post work together on addressing concerns if they arise. All Volunteers are strongly encouraged to report safety concerns or incidents to Peace Corps staff immediately. Staff members are prepared to provide appropriate medical, emotional, and administrative support as needed. In such cases, Volunteers' need for confidentiality will be respected. The Peace Corps also maintains a collaborative relationship with the U.S. Embassy and host government officials in order to respond to Volunteers' safety and security concerns as they arise. 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.

**If a Volunteer has safety concerns and is worried about confidentiality issues, are there systems in place to protect him or her?**

The agency has a policy detailed in [Manual Section 271](#) which protects the confidentiality and safety of Volunteers who bring allegations to the attention of agency officials. Any Peace Corps staff member who receives or has knowledge of a Volunteer allegation or concern must treat it with the utmost discretion and confidentiality consistent with appropriate handling of such information and applicable law, including, where appropriate, referral to the Office of Inspector General (IG). No Peace Corps staff person may retaliate in any manner against a Volunteer because the Volunteer reported an allegation. All allegations by Volunteers will be given serious consideration and review and will be handled and resolved, as appropriate, by the IG or by management. Based upon the nature of the allegations and the available facts, the Peace Corps will take every step necessary to ensure the safety of Volunteers.

**Where can applicants, friends, and family find more information on Volunteer service?**

The Peace Corps' website is a great resource for information and links to publications. For example, the [Family & Friends Resource Guide](#) was designed to help answer the most frequently asked questions and provide information that can alleviate concerns and facilitate a supportive role in the Volunteers' success.