

SAFETY AND SECURITY OF PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

STATEMENT BY KEVIN F. F. QUIGLEY
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PEACE CORPS ASSOCIATION

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Chairman Coleman, my name is Kevin Quigley, President of the National Peace Corps Association. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Sub-Committee to provide the volunteers' perspective on the important issue of the safety and security of Peace Corps.

My comments fall into four general categories: background, my experience, the focus on safety and security, and the results of a survey of our membership.

Background

The National Peace Corps Association (NPCA) is a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1979. The NPCA is the only national organization for Peace Corps volunteers, staff, and others whose lives have been influenced by the Peace Corps experience. Our mission is to "help lead the Peace Corps community and others in fostering peace through service, education and advocacy."

In the NPCA network, there are 154 affiliates and more than 36,000 individuals who participate in our national or affiliates' activities and support our mission. These individuals reside in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The NPCA has programs to promote service, enhance understanding of other cultures, and to advocate around issues of concern to our community.

Over the past ten months since assuming this position, I have met with 30 of NPCA's affiliates and talked about the Peace Corps experience with more than a thousand former volunteers and staff. One common theme through all of these discussions is that Peace Corps service is the defining experience that continues to shape our lives. Among the community of those who have served, there is broad, deep and passionate support for Peace Corps, which often leads to ongoing service back home. This community understands the vital importance of having volunteers working overseas--as they have done in more than 130 countries--to promote peace through training individuals in their host countries, educating them about the United States, and upon their return educating Americans about the countries in which they served. This reflects Peace Corps' three goals, which are perceived as every bit as vital today as when the agency was established 43 years ago.

This fervent support for the Peace Corps mission continues despite the growing awareness of concerns about our country's security and the safety and security of

volunteers. This community understands the vital importance of America's positive engagement with the rest of the world, especially at the grassroots level, and living together as friends and colleagues, which only Peace Corps provides.

During these many conversations, I also have learned that no two of the 171,000 Americans who have served as Peace Corps volunteers have an identical experience. There are differences based on the volunteer, the country, the assignment, the era, and the people we served. There are, however, many common threads linking these experiences across the generations of volunteers regardless of the country or region of service or the nature of the assignment. These common threads include serving in often remote locations, as perhaps the only American, learning another language, living with others as friends and colleagues, and developing a deep appreciation of another culture.

Even with these many commonalities, it is difficult to generalize. So, Mr. Chairman, I would like to provide some perspective on this important safety and security issue by describing my own experience, as well as providing information resulting from a recent survey that we have done with our membership.

My Peace Corps Experience

I became a Peace Corps Volunteer in 1976 and served for three years. My group arrived in Thailand the month after the last U.S. soldiers stationed there during the Vietnam War departed but while there was still fighting, especially in the border areas.

My training involved three components: 1) Thai language, 2) Teaching English-As-A-Second Language, and 3) Cross-cultural. Having studied nine different languages in some fashion, I can attest that Peace Corps provided the finest language training I ever received. The technical training was sufficient to ensure that we would succeed as teachers in a Thai classroom. The cross-cultural training component provided invaluable insights about how to live and adapt to what was then an extremely foreign culture.

After 9-weeks of training, I was sent to an isolated post in Dan Sai district, Loei province approximately ten miles from the border with Laos in an area described as "sensitive." In that area there was ongoing fighting between insurgents and government forces. The closest volunteers were 60 kilometers to the South or 90 kilometers to the East, both over mountainous roads that were nearly impassable in the monsoons. Like many volunteers who had gone before me, I knew there was some risk associated with my assignment since it was in one of the most isolated and poorest parts of the country.

Before my arrival at my post in Dan Sai, a Peace Corps program manager had visited the site and met with the host counterpart to ensure that there was an appropriate work assignment and housing.

Although there was considerable ongoing fighting in Dan Sai district, including frequent firings of 105 millimeter shells, common sightings of helicopter gunships and ambushes of government outposts, I never felt threatened or in danger at my site. This was due to the fact that I was included in and identified as part of the community. It seemed that all

the people in Dan Sai understood who I was and that I was teaching their children. Since I was incorporated into the community, filing the emergency action plan that Peace Corps required of all volunteers seemed a bit unnecessary, if not unreal.

While a volunteer in Dan Sai, I was visited by the Country Director, Manuel “Mick” Zenick—who 25 years later gave me a copy of my letter regarding his visit. I was also visited by one other volunteer who lived in the provincial capital, who I would visit typically once a month. Communication was by mail since there was no phone service in my district. To make a phone call required travel to the provincial capital, 90 kilometers away. However, the mail and a yearly monitoring visit, plus periodic trips to Bangkok for training or medical purposes were sufficient to provide oversight of my activities.

In my second and third years, I worked in more urban settings. I transferred from Dan Sai because I thought I could make more of a contribution at a larger institution. I was visited once a year by a Peace Corps official, which was sufficient.

The very nature of my initial Peace Corps assignment--in a remote area far from where tourists traveled or where there were scant Americans--made a deep impression on the people I worked and lived with. This encouraged them to see Peace Corps and the government that supported it in profound and important new ways, contributing to the most memorable experience of my life. That was truly remarkable given that the consequences of the war in Southeast Asia were still reverberating around the region.

I recognize that my experience was unique to me and happened decades ago. Based on what I have learned from many other volunteers, however, it has bearing on this topic. My experience involved Peace Corps’s basic approach to volunteer placement: 1) site assessment, 2) volunteer training, 3) monitoring, and 4) emergency planning. If I had not been placed in such a remote site, for which I was well prepared, I would not have been able to contribute or learn anywhere near as much as I did. I have heard from hundreds of other volunteers who had comparable kinds of postings in remote and “sensitive areas,” and they share my assessment.

Focus on Safety and Security Issues

In the aftermath of the tragic events of September 2001, there has been growing public attention to the issue of safety and security of Americans overseas, including Peace Corps volunteers. Following the 2002 GAO Report and in the lead up and the aftermath of a series published by *The Dayton Daily News*, there has been lively discussion in the Peace Corps community about safety and security issues.

Within this community there is a broad spectrum of opinion. However, among those of us who have served we agree that the safety and security of volunteers must be a paramount concern. All our members grieve for the 260 volunteers who have lost their lives in service and have enormous sympathy for our fellow volunteers who have experienced harm. Whenever a tragedy occurs or whenever a volunteer is harmed we expect—in fact demand—that Peace Corps do everything humanly possible to be responsive.

There is also a sense that the discussion on safety and security misses the broader context, whether the Peace Corps experience is, relatively speaking, any more risky in terms of homicides and assaults than life for a comparable cohort in urban America, overseas development workers or for volunteers with Peace Corps German, British, France and Japanese counterparts. Unfortunately, there is no comparison regarding what those agencies' experiences are with regard to safety and security.

In addition, there is concern among the community that the necessary attention to safety and security does not diminish the essential uniqueness and value of the Peace Corps experience--allowing Americans to live and work alongside our host country counterparts and living as they live. Much of this value is based on a flexible approach to posting volunteers, whether it is in urban or rural settings. Volunteers are sent to where there is a cooperating host institution offering appropriate work, access to essential services, suitable housing, and an expressed need for them. All volunteers also prepare a plan for responding to emergencies. As I learned from the volunteers who were recently evacuated from Haiti, these plans work remarkably well. This is attested to by the fact that in the more than 30 post closings over the past decade due to civil war, political unrest, or concerns about repercussions related to the war in Iraq, there has not been an incident where a volunteer was harmed.

There is also some concern that the resources required to address safety and security concerns may undermine Peace Corps' unique and vital contributions to U.S. foreign policy. This is especially the case if adequate funding is not provided to enable Peace Corps to meet the President's goal of doubling the size of Peace Corps, which is strongly endorsed by the community.

In addition, the community believes that there is an opportunity to significantly expand the number of countries where Peace Corps is operating. Doing this would be extremely beneficial to the national interest. This can be done without jeopardizing volunteer's safety and security, although it may require that Peace Corps develop a more flexible approach to programming. For example, this may require relying on technical cooperation agreements in lieu of bilateral agreements as in the recent case of Mexico. It may also require somewhat shorter or more flexible assignments, perhaps only a year service or two years service that could be interrupted for a short period for a home visit.

Doubling the size of Peace Corps and expanding to new countries are goals endorsed by the community. It will require significant new resources, which do not appear to be forthcoming. Thus, any new requirements related to safety and security that Congress decides to implement must be accompanied by additional financial resources.

Much of the discussion seems to miss the fact that concern with volunteer safety and security is not new. Recently, I have had the chance to talk with eight of the Peace Corps Directors, spanning from the first Director to the current Director. For all of these directors, safety of the volunteers was a critical issue. Over the past few years,

significant new investments have been made to address these issues in the context of current global realities.

Mr. Chairman, I understand that the Committee is considering legislation to address the issue of volunteer safety and security. I have had a chance to review this legislation and ask our membership about its main provisions and some of the topics you mentioned.

Membership Survey

Last week, we at the NPCA posted a short survey to our website to garner responses to the proposed legislation. While not necessarily scientific, the survey results and the accompanying narrative responses offer insight into the array of returned volunteer attitudes on this important topic. Following are my own views, informed by my experiences and supplemented by the results from our recent survey:

- *Office of Ombudsman.* Creating an Office of Ombudsman would be perceived by the Peace Corps community as being responsive to many former volunteers, especially those who have been harmed or become ill during their service and not received promised post-service support. They will perceive that their concerns are being addressed by a strong, vibrant mechanism advocating for their interests. Seventy-two percent of the respondents to our survey endorsed this.
- *Office of Safety and Security.* Establishing statutorily the Office of Safety and Security would underscore the Congress's concern with and commitment to ensure the safety and security of volunteers and recognition that these issues are a current reality and will be with us for many decades to come. This Office should be charged with notifying any volunteer victimized by crime and should also be notified about the processing of criminal charges. The respondents to our survey were equally split regarding the merits of this proposal.
- *Inspector General's Office.* Changing the status of the Inspector General by making it independent is not perceived as likely to have any appreciable effect on volunteer's safety and security. The respondents to our survey were equally split regarding the merits of this proposal.
- *Volunteer Posting.* There have been proposals to post at least two volunteers to each site or consolidate groups of volunteers. That would diminish the experience and lessen the impact of Peace Corps without necessarily enhancing the safety and security of volunteers. Two volunteers posted together tend to be less well integrated and perhaps less well accepted by the local community. Two volunteers are more likely to be perceived as able to look after each other, thus diminishing the community's need to have a stake in their safety and security. In our recent survey, 90% of the respondents opposed requiring that all volunteers be assigned in pairs.
- *Five-Year Rule.* The legislation proposes a report to Congress of the "Five-Year Rule" and the rule's potential implications on issues of recruitment, health, safety,

and productive work assignments. Seventy percent of our respondents supported this provision.

- *Office of Medical Services.* The legislation calls for a report to Congress concerning medical screening processes and guidelines, as well as a statistical review of the medical appeals process. The community considers this Office critical to volunteer's safety and security and wishes to see that this Office has the resources required and the authority necessary to play its critical role. Sixty-five percent of the respondents in our survey supported this provision.
- *Provision of Cellular/Satellite Phones.* Modern technology, especially satellite and cell phones and access to the internet, provides today's volunteers a much greater ability to stay in touch with the in-country Peace Corps staff, as well as their family and friends at home. If regular access to these technologies can appreciably improve volunteers' safety and security, they should be provided at the discretion of the country director. In our survey, 67 percent of the respondents opposed requiring volunteers to have modern communication equipment.
- *Self-Defense Training.* If this training improves volunteers' safety and security, it should be offered on a voluntary basis, again at the discretion of the country director.
- *Frequency of Site Visits.* A successful Peace Corps experience does require that there be oversight of the volunteer's activities. That oversight can be accomplished through a variety of means, site visits, phone and email interactions, as well as meetings in the Peace Corps country offices and during various in-service trainings. The frequency of site visits should be determined by the country director. Legislatively mandating the frequency of site visits can not possibly recognize the vast differences between Peace Corps countries and assignments.

Conclusion

It is essential that whatever Congress does to address this issue of volunteer safety and security should not impede the fundamental mission and style of Peace Corps, which has contributed to its success over the past four decades. Peace Corps' greatest contributions have resulted from the fact that it provides Americans a relatively unique opportunity to live and work alongside our host country counterparts and live as they live. Policies that isolate volunteers from the communities they live and serve in and mandate more frequent site visits are not necessarily going to enhance the safety and security of volunteers. Equally important is that whatever Congress does on this issue should not detract from the vitally important goal of expanding the numbers of serving volunteers and that the President's 2005 budget request be met.

Chairman Coleman, the Peace Corps community thanks you for addressing the issue of volunteer safety and security. The NPCA will work with you and the Committee to ensure that these issues are addressed in ways that preserve the essence of the Peace

Corps mission and best advance U.S. interests. We will also work so that the President's budget request can be met, providing many more Americans with the opportunity to serve their country through the Peace Corps and to bring that experience back to America in ways that help shape our place in the world.

Thank you.