

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 2, 2020

Dr. Josephine K. Olsen
Director
Peace Corps
1275 First Street NE
Washington, DC 20526

Barbara Stewart
Chief Executive Officer
Corporation for National and Community Service
250 E Street SW
Washington, DC 20024

Peter T. Gaynor
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street SW
Washington, DC

Dear Director Olsen, Chief Executive Officer Stewart, and Administrator Gaynor,

We write to express concern regarding the employment status of returned Peace Corps volunteers. While we support the decision to recall volunteers from their overseas posts amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe that terminating their service contracts and health insurance coverage – at a time when our country’s public health and economic crises are rapidly worsening – not only endangers the livelihood of volunteers, but also squanders their unique skillset. We therefore urge you to provide them opportunities to enlist in domestic efforts to combat COVID-19.

Evacuated from their postings in over 60 countries, more than 7,000 volunteers are returning to the United States with little or no economic safety net. They will return without a job, a lack of clarity on whether they are eligible for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, and with only two months of health insurance coverage in the midst of a public health pandemic. As American citizens who volunteered their service to advance U.S. interests and international development goals, Peace Corps Volunteers deserve better.

To date, COVID-19 has sickened more than 186,000 people in the U.S. and resulted in over 3,600 deaths. States and local governments are shoring up every resource at their disposal to effectively respond to this public health threat and manage all of the additional challenges and responsibilities associated with it. Governors in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. have mobilized components of their Army and Air National Guard to assist in their COVID-19 responses. A vetted, trained workforce with experience in on-the-ground development projects, returned Peace Corps volunteers should be given the opportunity to assist states and localities in their relief efforts.

Since the Peace Corps’ founding in 1961, its volunteers have helped to curtail the HIV/AIDS and malaria epidemics in Africa, build education systems for remote communities, and improve food security for underserved, vulnerable populations around the world. The expertise and dynamism

of this trained corps are now desperately needed on the home front. For instance, Peace Corps volunteers could support affected areas with COVID-19 mitigation and surveillance activities or assist hospitals in emergency procurement and supply chain logistics. For primary and secondary schools creating distance learning programs, they could offer information and technology support and help develop curricula. Volunteers could also provide social and food support for at-risk and low-income populations, among the many other relief roles they are equipped to fill.

There are a number of avenues for integrating returned volunteers into COVID-19 response efforts. Given that they have completed the Peace Corps application process and have noncompetitive eligibility for federal jobs, volunteers could be fast tracked into the FEMA Corps or another AmeriCorps program. In those capacities, they could be immediately deployed to organizations and state and local agencies that are on the frontlines of the pandemic response. Another option would be to establish a dedicated COVID-19 Response Corps – a unit specifically tasked with COVID-19 relief efforts that could be administered by FEMA or AmeriCorps within an existing program or as a standalone unit. This new corps could draw from returned Peace Corps volunteers and AmeriCorps volunteers who have lost their positions due to COVID-19.

Resolving the twin public health and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic demands marshalling resources and enlisting the help of talented workforces across all sectors of government and industry. To this end, we urge you to take the following steps and request a briefing by April 16, 2020:

1. Provide Peace Corps volunteers the option of joining FEMA Corps or another AmeriCorps program whose members are engaged in COVID19 response efforts. Peace Corps volunteers should be given commensurate stipends and benefits or allowed to complete the terms of their Peace Corps service contracts in their new COVID-19 relief positions.
2. Evaluate the feasibility and costs of establishing – within FEMA Corps, another AmeriCorps program or as a standalone unit – a dedicated COVID-19 Response Corps. With a trained, versatile workforce, the new unit would immediately deploy members to affected areas for relief efforts and could include in its initial cadre returned Peace Corps volunteers and AmeriCorps volunteers who have lost their positions due to COVID-19.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests, and we look forward to working with you on these urgent matters.

Sincerely,

/s/ Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/ Susan M. Collins
United States Senator

/s/ Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

/s/ Tom Udall
United States Senator

/s/ Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator

/s/ Tim Kaine
United States Senator

/s/ Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

/s/ Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

/s/ Patrick Leahy
United States Senator

/s/ Tina Smith
United States Senator

/s/ Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

/s/ Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator

/s/ Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

/s/ Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

/s/ Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

/s/ Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/ Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

/s/ Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/s/ Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/ Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

/s/ Dean Phillips
Member of Congress

/s/ David Trone
Member of Congress

/s/ Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan
Member of Congress

/s/ Vicente Gonzalez
Member of Congress

/s/ Ted Deutch
Member of Congress

/s/ Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress

/s/ Angie Craig
Member of Congress

/s/ David E. Price
Member of Congress

/s/ Gregory W. Meeks
Member of Congress

/s/ Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress

/s/ Ami Bera, M.D.
Member of Congress

/s/ Albio Sires
Member of Congress

/s/ Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress

/s/ Anthony G. Brown
Member of Congress

/s/ Jim Costa
Member of Congress

/s/ James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

/s/ Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress

/s/ Thomas R. Suozzi
Member of Congress