

Written Statement of Carol Spahn, Acting Director of the Peace Corps
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
“The Administration’s FY22 Budget Request for MCC, DFC and Peace Corps”
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INTRODUCTION

Thank you Chairman Meeks, Ranking Member McCaul, and distinguished members of the Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the President’s budget request of \$410,500,000 for the Peace Corps for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022. On behalf of the Volunteers and staff of the Peace Corps, I also want to express my sincere appreciation for the Committee’s continued bipartisan support for the agency and our mission, most recently reflected in your historic passage of H.R. 1456, the Peace Corps Reauthorization Act of 2021.

Your support, and that of the American people you represent, is vital as the Peace Corps prepares to return to service in a dramatically changed world. The COVID-19 pandemic has set back years of development progress, exacerbated existing inequalities, and produced unprecedented new challenges worldwide, while simultaneously reminding us of our interdependence. As our nation works to emerge from the pandemic, we recognize that America’s recovery requires our collaboration and cooperation with partners worldwide – not just with governments, but also with communities – to beat this virus and reverse its profound economic and social impacts. In this shared endeavor, the need for the Peace Corps and our mission of promoting world peace and friendship is more critical than ever.

The Peace Corps is committed to playing a critical role in global COVID-19 response and recovery by returning Volunteers to work in partnership with underserved communities around the world. Now celebrating its 60th anniversary, the Peace Corps’ decades of experience in “last mile” grassroots global health initiatives, including support for smallpox and Guinea worm disease eradication, and HIV, Ebola, and malaria prevention, will enable us to effectively support countries where our Volunteers are invited to serve, many of which have been disproportionately impacted by the ongoing pandemic. With a 19-month break in Volunteer presence overseas – dating back to the onset of the pandemic and our evacuation of nearly 7,000 Volunteers from more than 60 posts worldwide – the Peace Corps has used this time to reimagine and rebuild. Now, in FY 2022, our primary focus is to return Volunteers to service and fully apply our resources and assets in both new and time-tested ways to fill an essential, community engagement role in COVID-19 response and recovery.

In preparation for the return of Volunteers, the Peace Corps has continuously monitored country-specific COVID-19 conditions against a robust set of medical, security, programmatic, administrative, and logistical guidelines to determine when and how Volunteers can safely return to each individual post. Due to the evolving nature of the pandemic and emerging research findings, this guidance has changed over time. We now know – as a global community and as an agency – that the virus may continue to impact communities around the world for years to come due to breakthrough cases, waves, and variants. With the recognition that the many economic, social, educational, and health shocks attributable to this pandemic are being felt most acutely in underserved communities within which Volunteers traditionally serve, we are committed to responsibly returning Volunteers to countries that have met the agency’s reentry criteria. We have

an in-depth understanding of the trends in these countries; we have reengineered our programs and operations; and we are confident in our ability to mitigate risk to Volunteers, staff, and host communities. And, we have established systems to continually monitor and respond to changing circumstances after Volunteers return to service.

Currently, we are planning to deploy Volunteers to serve in five countries beginning in January 2022, we have several more that are very close, and we expect the number of countries and Volunteers to climb throughout the year as conditions evolve. Once at post, Peace Corps service will be different than in previous years, with Volunteers focused on supporting COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. These efforts will be integrated across the Peace Corps' six sectors, as most appropriate to the context. For example, Volunteers in Zambia will engage with their communities to provide COVID-19 education and promote access to vaccinations in coordination with local leaders and partner Ministries, including the Ministry of Health. Volunteers deploying to the Dominican Republic will focus on recovering literacy skills, addressing increased school drop-out rates, and preparing young adults for the workforce – all challenges that have been attributed to the educational and economic shocks of the pandemic.

The Peace Corps has a strong pipeline of Volunteers who are ready to share in our global mission with a deep sense of responsibility, empathy, and purpose. For Volunteers, service will require understanding and acceptance of the risks that come with volunteering in a pandemic, as well as compliance with agency standards for mitigating these risks. They will work alongside host country and community partners, contributing to the alleviation of the most multidimensional and expansive development challenge the world has faced in more than a century.

Even as we prepare for the return of Volunteers, the Peace Corps has developed new and innovative ways to advance our mission. Our headquarters staff and more than 150 Peace Corps Response Volunteers have contributed to whole-of-government initiatives to meet urgent needs here at home. These interagency efforts have included Volunteers assisting with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) COVID-19 vaccination campaign; staff supporting unaccompanied children at the southern border with the Department of Health and Human Services; and staff, through 25 detail assignments and more than 85 temporary volunteer assignments, working to facilitate Afghan evacuee resettlement with the Department of State, the Department of Defense and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). We are grateful that the Peace Corps Reauthorization Act of 2021, if signed into law as passed by this Committee in September, would allow the agency to respond in a timelier manner to the requests of other agencies for Volunteers to serve domestically during times of great need.

Our work during FY 2022 will continue to focus on other innovative service models, such as virtual service engagements. Over the last year, we have developed and sustained a Virtual Service Pilot (VSP) project that has connected more than 240 participants in the United States with community partners in 27 countries through the internet and digital platforms. This has enabled evacuated and returned Volunteers to continue to serve and has kept projects going even during the pandemic. The latest Volunteer cohort included Volunteers who previously served in every decade – from the 1960s and 1970s through 2020. Demand for this program continues to grow, with an anticipated request of up to 500 participants from 50 posts for the fourth phase.

We see great potential in virtual service, which is why we are also grateful that the Committee voted to authorize it as a new form of Volunteer service when it passed the Peace Corps Reauthorization Act. Not only does this service model allow for additional assistance for COVID-19 mitigation and relief projects worldwide, but it also has the long-term potential to reduce barriers to service and enhance the diversity of our Volunteer corps. For example, virtual service can enable the participation of Americans who might not otherwise be able to serve, perhaps because of physical limitations or financial and family obligations. Furthermore, it has the potential to allow participants to engage with host communities that have been historically unable to host Volunteers due to safety, security, or logistical reasons. For instance, Virtual Service Pilot Participants are currently engaging with host partners in the Pantanal region of Paraguay, a location where Volunteers have not recently been assigned due to the inaccessibility of the area. Of course, virtual service will never replace the two-year, in-person model that has been at the core of the Peace Corps for the last 60 years, but this new option will expand Americans' opportunities to contribute during this historic time.

Meanwhile, more than 2,200 Peace Corps post staff have responded to requests for support from our host country partners, utilizing the grassroots and context-sensitive approaches that define our agency. The current work of our staff is closely aligned to the U.S. COVID-19 Global Response and Recovery Framework. By adapting new operating models and leveraging technology, our field staff have supported host communities and governments to address an array of challenges. For example, 835 staff members from 90 percent of countries completed a Peace Corps-developed learning certificate program to design blended – in person and digital – training tools and are putting these skills to use. Since completing this course, Peace Corps North Macedonia staff have gone on to partner with the Ministry of Education and Science and deliver monthly workshops for the country's public school teachers, already supporting over 500 schools and 780 educators to create and deliver effective virtual learning experiences for students who are learning at home due to the pandemic.

As a people-to-people development agency, understanding, respecting, and communicating effectively with other cultures while representing the diversity of the American people is crucial to the success of the Peace Corps. With this acknowledgement, we have intentionally prioritized the recruitment and support of a diverse Volunteer corps. Since 2009, we have increased the percentage of our Volunteers who self-identified as a member of the Black, Indigenous, People of Color community from 16 to 35 percent. We remain steadfast to this commitment and have redoubled our efforts to incorporate Intercultural Competence, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (ICDEIA) into everything we do. We are reviewing our structures, programs, and policies to identify how we can best recruit and support a diverse cohort of Volunteers and staff who represent the depth and breadth of the U.S. to the world. Among these efforts, we are intentionally reducing financial and other barriers to service and employment at the Peace Corps. For example, we tripled medical reimbursement allowances to support applicants in navigating the medical clearance process and we are conducting targeted outreach to underserved communities to build knowledge of the Peace Corps and its opportunities for potential staff and Volunteers.

This focus on ICDEIA has an impact beyond Peace Corps service, as many Peace Corps Volunteers and staff go on to join the State Department, USAID, and other agencies. In fact, we estimate that there are nearly 5,000 returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) currently serving in the federal workforce not including the RPCVs currently working for the Peace Corps. By

diversifying Peace Corps Volunteers and staff, we can help increase the representation of historically underrepresented communities in the overall federal workforce. The interpersonal and intercultural skills and understanding honed through service by staff and Volunteers contributes greatly to enhanced government services, particularly to underserved communities here in the U.S. and abroad. We saw this firsthand over this past summer, when the Peace Corps Volunteers working domestically with FEMA utilized their language and intercultural skills to promote vaccination among non-English-speaking individuals.

This period without Volunteers overseas has also provided a unique opportunity for the Peace Corps to identify ways to enhance and modernize our systems, policies, procedures, and training to meet the needs of our agency, our partner communities, and our Volunteers and to set the foundation for our future. Included in these efforts are the substantial actions we have taken to not only upgrade our information technology systems, security incident management systems, and volunteer reporting and grants systems, but also our focused work to promote volunteer health and safety. This includes intensive efforts to close outstanding Office of Inspector General (OIG) recommendations, and, over the past year, we have reduced the overall number of open OIG recommendations by 55 percent. And from March to October of this year, we have closed five of the open recommendations related to our Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response program, in total completing 90 percent of the recommendations since the evaluation reports were published. Our staff – at headquarters and around the world – continue to step up, making key advancements to ensure we are consistently delivering quality by revamping our systems and increasing accountability to our many stakeholders. We have extensive plans to continue these improvements throughout FY 2022, including through the expansion of our compliance and quality assurance staffing.

As we continue to reimagine and rebuild for the next 60 years of the Peace Corps, we are mindful of the many divides in privilege, access, and opportunity exposed over the last 19 months– not only in the countries where the Peace Corps serves, but also in the U.S. These divisions have shown just how connected we are as a global community, and in FY 2022, the Peace Corps has the opportunity to help bridge those divides as we work toward our founding three goals, as set forth in the Peace Corps Act of 1961: to help the people of interested countries in meeting their needs for trained individuals; to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served; and to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. The President’s FY 2022 budget request for the Peace Corps strengthens the agency’s ability to adapt in this uncertain environment and allows us to bolster critical investments in the programs, systems, and services required to meet this historic moment and to lay a strong foundation for the future.

RETURNING TO SERVICE OVERSEAS

Worldwide evacuation and support of evacuated Volunteers

In March 2020, the trajectory of the Peace Corps changed. As the agency monitored the COVID-19 outbreak in those early days, the imminent spread of the virus became clear. The agency made the difficult – but critical – decision to suspend operations and to evacuate nearly 7,000 Volunteers from more than 60 posts worldwide. Though the Peace Corps is no stranger to evacuations – we have decades of experience safely evacuating Volunteers during times of crisis, civil unrest,

epidemics, war, and natural disasters – this worldwide suspension marked the first time in the agency’s 60-year history that all Volunteers had to be evacuated simultaneously.

Over the course of eight days, Peace Corps staff worked day and night to manage transportation, lodging, and myriad logistics to return Volunteers safely home to the U.S. We are forever grateful for the tireless work provided by our staff during that decisive and emotional period. That week, communities in more than 60 countries said abrupt farewells to the Volunteers with whom they had lived and worked. And the nearly 7,000 evacuated Volunteers returned home to unknown circumstances despite their commitment to serve for two years.

With much appreciated support from Congress through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, our staff worked to support our evacuated Volunteers in both well established and unprecedented ways. The agency provided evacuation and readjustment allowances, a wellness stipend, extended health insurance coverage, health and quarantine instructions and resources, and information about federal and private sector job opportunities, as well as graduate school options. Evacuated Volunteers also qualified for non-competitive eligibility in federal hiring, making it easier for them to join the federal workforce. To this day, we continue to support evacuated Volunteers through efforts that include providing access to an online career and education planning tool as well as maintaining a job board that averages 500 public, private, and non-profit job postings.

Robust strategy for Volunteer reentry

Since the global evacuation, the Peace Corps has developed a comprehensive strategy to return Volunteers to service overseas as soon as conditions allow. Our pipeline of prospective Volunteers is eager to return to service, and all of the countries where we are preparing to return Volunteers to service have requested their return. The Peace Corps has also received formal requests from multiple countries to establish new programs, or to return after pauses in service. In 2022, the Peace Corps plans to send Volunteers to Viet Nam for the first time, and is negotiating country agreements to re-establish its operations in El Salvador and Solomon Islands.

The Peace Corps’ strategy for return to in-person service involves a robust process for evaluating each Peace Corps post based on medical, security, programmatic, administrative, and logistical criteria. The reentry process consists of three key components: external evaluation; internal review; and continuous monitoring. Our external evaluation tracks and considers COVID-19 factors that are outside the control of the agency, with a focus on the evolving health conditions at each post and collaboration with host country governments and partners. Our internal review, which occurs concurrently, includes the evaluation of posts’ plans for reentry, focusing on each post’s readiness to implement measures to reduce and mitigate risks related to the pandemic. The third component, continuous monitoring, involves Peace Corps staff at headquarters and at each post who continuously monitor and relay conditions related to COVID-19. At headquarters, designated staff meet weekly to ensure the agency is up-to-date on evolving conditions and is able to adapt agency guidelines for effective field operations. At the same time, designated teams at each post meet regularly to monitor in-country conditions, plan post-specific mitigation strategies, and review guidance as it becomes available.

This robust reentry process has required that Peace Corps reengineer virtually every aspect of our programming and operations to mitigate risk, wherever possible. For instance, education

Volunteers who often serve in overcrowded classrooms will, during the pandemic, be required to take measures to mitigate risks. This could include, for example, teaching outdoors or reducing class size by offering the same lessons multiple times in a day. Operationally, stable access to medical evacuation hubs and ongoing lockdowns has been a barrier to the return of Volunteers to some countries and regions. In response, Peace Corps is exploring and establishing multiple options for effective and timely evacuations when necessary.

Within its internal evaluation processes, the Peace Corps has established key requirements that Volunteers must agree to before they can return to in-person service. For example, all Volunteers must be vaccinated against COVID-19 before deployment. Once in-country, Volunteers will be tested regularly and will be required to quarantine if they test positive for COVID-19. If booster shots are required, Peace Corps will arrange for Volunteers' additional vaccinations. Throughout this process, and even after Volunteers are deployed, the Peace Corps will rely on its decades of experience in emergency response to continuously monitor conditions and make informed decisions throughout the ongoing and evolving COVID-19 pandemic.

This reentry preparation work represents our deep commitment to returning to in-person service as soon as conditions allow. As a result of that dedication, and in accordance with our comprehensive procedures and protocols, the Peace Corps is currently moving forward in the reentry process with plans to return Volunteers to five of our posts – Belize, St. Lucia in the Eastern Caribbean, Rwanda, Zambia, and the Dominican Republic – beginning in January 2022. By the end of the second quarter of FY 2022, we anticipate Volunteers will be deployed to many more countries, depending on the evolving nature of the pandemic in specific countries. We will continue to work with a combination of caution, flexibility, and pragmatism as we determine the timing and cadence of Volunteers' return in FY 2022.

Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 in the Context of Peace Corps' History of "Last Mile" Contributions to Public Health Efforts

As noted previously, a particular focus of the Peace Corps when we return Volunteers to service will be to contribute to COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. Throughout the Peace Corps' 60-year history, the agency has been a part of many large-scale public health efforts. Much of our work during past public health initiatives has focused on "the last mile" – reaching some of the most isolated and vulnerable populations across the world. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Peace Corps partnered with the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and others to contribute to smallpox vaccination programs in more than 20 countries. From the 1980s to the early 2000s, the Peace Corps worked with The Carter Center and a coalition of countries and organizations to make meaningful progress toward the eradication of Guinea worm disease, mainly in West Africa. And, since the early 1990s, the Peace Corps has played a vital role in HIV and malaria prevention, under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the President's Malaria Initiative.

In 2014, Peace Corps worked with the CDC in West Africa to build local support systems in areas affected by Ebola. At the time, many CDC experts arriving in West African countries to assist the containment of the Ebola outbreak had never been to Africa and did not know the local languages and cultures. Peace Corps staff played a vital role bridging gaps between these experts and local communities by facilitating community entry and assisting with overall logistical support. Then,

following the outbreak, Peace Corps Response Volunteers in Liberia provided recovery assistance to medical colleges, and nursing and midwifery institutions that were forced to close during the crisis. Through the Peace Corps Response program, which brings in specialized Volunteers for short-term assignments, American doctors, nurses, and midwives helped meet the demand for critical health care following the outbreak. Many of our other Volunteers who served in West African countries post-outbreak supported teacher training centers and high schools to help overcome educational disruptions caused by Ebola.

Now, we are uniquely positioned to provide the same grassroots, last mile service in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in countries that will likely lag U.S. vaccination rates for years to come. Serving at the community level, we are poised to support overseas efforts of our U.S. government partners as well as global initiatives like COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access. The intangible benefits of our work will be just as important as the visible health impacts. We recognize the damaging reality of isolation and divisiveness that accompany health crises. And, by fostering people-to-people connections, we have an opportunity to promote peace and friendship in a world that is facing compounded crises.

To that end, the Peace Corps is an active member of the interagency working group supporting the United States' global response to COVID-19. Through this engagement, we are identifying key areas where the agency can assist the U.S. in meeting its COVID-19 Global Response and Recovery Framework objectives, focusing on mitigating the harmful impacts of the pandemic on society, and building capacity for recovery and resilience. For example, we are partnering with the CDC, with which we are renewing our five-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), on a range of opportunities for Volunteers, including COVID-19 activities. We are also exploring opportunities for collaboration with CDC that would enable in-country Peace Corps staff to support activities under the COVID-19 Framework.

DEVELOPING INNOVATIVE SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES

During the last 19 months, the Peace Corps has developed and rolled out creative service models to engage with communities in the United States and overseas despite the suspension of our traditional service model.

Domestic deployment

During the summer of 2021, Peace Corps deployed Volunteers within the U.S. for only the second time in our agency's history, the first being after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. From May to August of this year, more than 150 Peace Corps Response Volunteers took part in the whole-of-government effort to address the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S.

At the request of FEMA, Volunteers who previously served at 52 posts worldwide, ranged in age from 22 to 80, and collectively speak 88 languages served in seven states (Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Nevada, New Jersey, Oregon, and Virginia), assisting FEMA in their vaccine distribution efforts. The Volunteers' service focused on underserved communities where vaccination rates were significantly lower than state averages. Their work required great adaptability and included door-to-door community outreach and support at mobile vaccination units and large vaccination sites.

Our Volunteers used the interpersonal skills they honed in service overseas to honor the dignity of all the people they met, taking extra time to explain the importance of being vaccinated. They often used their language skills – including Amharic, Spanish, Arabic, and Wolof – to speak to individuals in their native languages and share COVID-19 and vaccination information.

For example, Volunteers leveraged the Peace Corps brand and characteristic ingenuity to make inroads with a homeless tent community in Oregon. When individuals living in the community were hesitant to leave their belongings to visit a local vaccination site, Volunteers brought a nurse to their community to administer vaccines. Twenty-seven individuals were vaccinated through the effort. Some community members confided that only after they learned the Volunteers were part of the Peace Corps were they confident enough to get vaccinated.

By gleaning COVID-19 best practices and testing health behavior change methods here in the U.S., the agency will be better positioned to train Volunteers to meet the emerging needs of the countries where we have been invited to serve. And we will return to in-person service better equipped to support our counterparts as, together, we help rebuild the systems that have been significantly disrupted over the last year.

Virtual Service Pilot

Late last year, even though it was clear that the COVID-19 pandemic would slow the Peace Corps' return to in-person service, host country partners continued to ask the agency for critical support. To meet this demand, in October 2020, the Peace Corps launched its Virtual Service Pilot (VSP), connecting host country partners with Volunteers who were evacuated due to the pandemic. Our first phase of the pilot included 45 evacuated Volunteers who donated their time as private citizens on virtual engagements with nine host country partners. Data and feedback collected during this phase demonstrated that these projects made meaningful impacts despite the challenges of time zones and technology. After the overwhelmingly successful pilot, even more of our host country partners requested to collaborate on virtual projects, which led to a second phase of the pilot.

Currently, we are partnering with 27 countries worldwide in our third phase of the VSP, which will conclude in FY 2022. To date, we have engaged more than 240 participants, expanding the program beyond evacuated Volunteers to include all RPCVs. We have engaged participants from all generations of Peace Corps service, including RPCVs who served during the very first years of the agency in the 1960s. Each participant donates five to 15 hours per week to accomplish specific, locally-prioritized projects as identified by host country partners.

For example, in the Eastern Caribbean, Virtual Service Pilot Participants (VSPPs) are supporting four Ministries of Education in the region to develop a blended learning program designed to train teachers across the post's four countries to use digital media and online learning tools, with a specific focus on teaching literacy and mathematics in the virtual space. In Kosovo, VSPPs are working with representatives of a community youth center to strengthen their technological capacity to adapt to COVID-19 realities by improving their internal operations, increasing access to donor organizations and funding opportunities, and designing and conducting virtual activities with at-risk youth during lockdown periods. And in Nepal, VSPPs are supporting government health and agriculture workers to develop communication materials and activities to increase the number of people who consume locally available, nutritious food. In addition, they are providing training in agriculture-based business skills to address growing food insecurity and economic

hardship. Attributable to the pandemic, these development challenges have disproportionately impacted Nepali women living in rural areas. Based on the ongoing success of this pilot and continued, growing interest from our partner communities and RPCVs, we plan to start our fourth phase of the VSP in January 2022 with up to 500 participants and 50 Peace Corps countries.

Not only does virtual service provide an opportunity for the Peace Corps to collaborate with our host country partners during this period of prolonged global isolation, but it also presents a long-term opportunity to break down barriers to service and increase the diversity of our Volunteers. Individuals who, for a variety of factors (i.e., health, socioeconomic, family responsibilities, employment, or other reasons) may be unable to participate in traditional, in-person Volunteer programs, may have greater flexibility to engage virtually. This service model also allows individuals with specific skills to support host partners requesting to learn a particular skillset. Further, communities that have not been able to host in-person volunteers due to safety, security, or logistical reason may now be reached through virtual engagements. Overall, as we continue to encourage service as a way to bridge the divides caused or widened by COVID-19 and civil unrest, virtual engagement can allow more Americans to serve and contribute to the Peace Corps' mission of promoting world peace and friendship.

ADVANCING OUR MISSION THROUGH CONTINUED SERVICE BY POST STAFF

During this time of prolonged uncertainty due to evolving COVID-19 conditions, more than 2,200 agency staff at our posts across the world continue to promote the Peace Corps mission by advancing service in new and innovative ways. Their work has enabled the agency to support our local partners while setting the stage for Volunteers to have an even greater impact when they return to in-person service.

By developing new operating models and creatively utilizing resources, staff have engaged in projects that address the local impact of COVID-19, leverage the potential of technology, and promote volunteerism in host countries. During FY 2022, as we phase in the return of Volunteers, our staff will continue their involvement with host country projects and strive to expand, innovate, and adapt to meet emerging host country needs.

Peace Corps Staff Work to Address Local Impacts of the Pandemic

Worldwide, staff continue to advance the Peace Corps mission and make meaningful contributions to the development priorities of the countries where they serve. In combination with the efforts of VSPPs, Peace Corps staff are strongly contributing to the objectives of the U.S. COVID-19 Global Response and Recovery Framework in over 90 percent of the countries in which we operate and, in more than half of countries where we have health programs, staff are directly supporting partners in COVID-19 prevention activities and behavior change campaigns.

In FY 2022, as we phase in the return of Volunteers, we anticipate that nearly all of our health programs will support partners in these activities. For example, in Benin, staff are delivering COVID-19 training of trainers programs in secondary schools located in COVID-19 hotspots of the country's southern region. They have trained over 560 student leaders across 13 schools, empowering these students with the skills and information needed to promote COVID-19 prevention behaviors among their peers and families. The student leaders are expected to reach over 10,000 students and 5,000 households.

At all of our posts whose countries are home to U.S. embassies, our Peace Corps Medical Officers (PCMOs) have stepped up to support embassy staff throughout the pandemic. In FY 2022, we will continue to assist our embassy partners when opportunities arise. For example, PCMOs have assisted embassies with almost 7,500 hours of health care duty support when embassy medical personnel were on authorized departure, and provided over 4,000 hours of support to embassy vaccination efforts.

In 70 percent of countries where the Peace Corps has education programs, staff and VSPPs are helping children return to learning safely and recover from education disruptions. For example, in Mozambique, staff are working with partners to convert USAID-funded project materials into a community library radio program by collaborating with local radio stations to provide early grade lessons to learners in half of the country. Because of this program, one parent remarked, “Our kids can’t go to school, but now school has come to us.” In FY 2022, we anticipate that 90 percent of posts with education programs will help children safely return to learning.

In 50 percent of countries where the Peace Corps has agriculture programs, staff and VSPPs are working with partners to mitigate increased food insecurity and malnutrition attributable to COVID-19. In FY 2022, we anticipate that 70 percent of agriculture programs will work to mitigate food security and malnutrition. For example, in Senegal, staff worked as part of the USAID- and Feed the Future-supported Senegal Food Security Initiative. Along with master farmers, staff created technical training videos on sustainable farming in three local languages which helped support farmers throughout the country to address their seasonal, agricultural needs. As part of the training, seeds were distributed to over 75 farms and community gardens.

Adapting technology to COVID-19 reality

Peace Corps staff have also engaged in projects aimed at empowering host governments and communities with knowledge and tools to more effectively utilize technology to continue their critical work during the pandemic. To bolster posts’ ability to do this work, the agency launched a series of workshops and practicum for staff on how to design online courses and deliver blended learning opportunities for Volunteers and partners. Teams from over 90 percent of Peace Corps countries have completed the intensive eight-week course with 835 staff members now equipped with the skills to design and facilitate blended learning courses.

Following this training, more than 70 percent of posts have delivered virtual trainings and 60 percent of these efforts were focused on helping partners build the foundational skills to design content and facilitate virtual learning themselves. For example, in Moldova, with support from USAID, staff launched an Education Community of Practice to support Moldovan teachers’ rapid transition to virtual instruction. This community of practice involved weekly professional development trainings focused on online teaching competencies, the procurement of 25 laptops for five of the country’s most vulnerable communities, and the establishment of a social media group for participants to share resources and have ongoing dialogue.

In FY 2022, we anticipate that at least 90 percent of posts will use technological innovations to continue the important work of supporting our host countries and partners. These efforts will complement the technology leveraged through the Virtual Service Pilot and the blended learning course certificate and have the potential to, again, reach communities previously inaccessible to in-person Volunteers due to health, safety, or logistical reasons.

Promoting volunteerism in host countries

Currently, five Peace Corps countries are providing support for establishing or growing national volunteer service programs at the request of government and non-governmental organization partners. For example, in the Republic of Georgia, staff are contributing to the development of a national strategy for youth volunteerism. With the help of a VSPP, our staff are co-leading the design of the program, helping to set up a network of partners, and organizing the first ever virtual volunteer conference in the country. Similarly, nine VSPPs in Costa Rica have supported a local foundation to develop a national corps of local volunteers, matching volunteers with nonprofit organizations and public school English teachers to support development needs. There is a specific provision for this work in the Peace Corps Act and, in FY2022, we will build out a robust strategy to support this work in interested countries.

REDOUBLING OUR COMMITMENT TO INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE, DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESSIBILITY

As a development and people-to-people agency whose Volunteers live and work across cultures, our success has always been dependent on the interpersonal and intercultural skills of our Volunteers and staff to engage with others respectfully and effectively. That is why the Peace Corps is constantly and actively reinforcing our structures, programs, and policies to ensure that our workplace, our Volunteer systems, and our organizational culture reflect our commitment to Intercultural Competence, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (ICDEIA). Our approach to ICDEIA transcends a single program or standalone office and we embrace these values as an integral piece of achieving our mission of world peace and friendship. To this effect, over the past five years, more than 80 percent of our posts have completed a five-day, intensive foundational ICDEIA training. Equipped with this foundational understanding, staff in multiple countries have been asked to support similar efforts among partners and host communities. For instance, staff in Colombia have conducted trainings on the Peace Corps' approach to ICDEIA to U.S. embassy colleagues, host country partners, and teachers from underserved communities across the country.

Intercultural competence, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility competencies

When Peace Corps Volunteers and staff foster and demonstrate ICDEIA skills during their time with the agency, they build a foundation that will help them navigate their future professional and personal spheres more competently. These skills provide a variety of benefits including the ability to navigate complex environments, communicate across broad stakeholder groups and cultures, and bridge differences to achieve common goals.

Our highly ICDEIA-competent Volunteer corps and workforce – with their deep understanding of intercultural issues and host countries – can further advance the values of ICDEIA well after their service ends as they reenter the U.S. workforce. For example, with a current estimate of nearly 5,000 returned Volunteers serving in the federal workforce beyond those employed by the Peace Corps itself – more than 800 of whom are RPCVs and former Peace Corps staff members working at USAID and more than 900 working at the State Department – our historical commitment to ICDEIA competencies among Volunteers and staff is already contributing to the Biden-Harris Administration's commitments to whole-of-government improvements in these areas.

Fair and just systems

To critically examine and improve our systems to be more fair and just, we took several deliberate steps during FY 2021 to expand our ICDEIA work. A Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force was formed to respond to recommendations submitted by staff and the broader Peace Corps network on ways to achieve the goals set forth by our agency. In addition, the Peace Corps is actively implementing Executive Orders and memoranda related to racial equity and support for underserved communities. Through the new Agency Equity Council, the Peace Corps is working toward holistically facilitating, informing, and advancing our progress on equity – all of which are aimed to build in accountability and transparency mechanisms to ICDEIA around the agency. These efforts will result in structural and systemic improvements that the agency will execute in FY 2022 and beyond.

In addition to the equity-centered implications of fostering fairer and more just systems, the Peace Corps believes that these advancements can help attract and retain top talent, both among Volunteers and staff.

Reducing barriers to service

By reducing barriers to recruiting and retaining Volunteers and staff who represent the diversity of our country, we are not only providing opportunities for all talented people to serve on behalf of the American public, but we are also dispelling myths and stereotypes about the U.S. around the world.

One critical barrier to service is financial, which impacts Americans regardless of race, but impacts communities of color disproportionately. In 2021, we increased reimbursement for medical clearance costs, including those related to required appointments, tests, or procedures required prior to admission. In 2022, we will pilot other programs to reduce pre-service costs for invitees and will enhance efforts to understand other barriers to service and to retain diverse volunteers throughout the application process.

Expanded outreach into historically underserved communities

We continue to expand our partnerships with Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), with traditionally underserved communities on non-MSI campuses, and in communities. As part of this initiative, our Office of University Programs team maintains more than 270 partnerships, 49 of which are with MSIs, through Peace Corps Prep – a university partnership program that prepares students for international service work. Peace Corps Prep also includes a requirement for university counterparts to develop and employ marketing plans to reach students of backgrounds that have historically been underrepresented among Volunteers. Our Office of University Programs also manages a Campus Ambassadors program for students who help recruiters reach underrepresented students and groups on campus.

In addition, our recruiters all receive training and mentorship on diversity recruitment. All recruiters are required to conduct outreach specifically to underrepresented communities, and MSIs in their area. To assist them in doing so in a thoughtful and appropriate way, a dedicated team of Diversity Recruiters – who specialize in partnering with MSIs and underserved communities – serve as context experts to the recruitment team.

IMPROVING SYSTEMS TO DELIVER QUALITY

During this historic break in service, we have also taken the opportunity to strengthen staff capacities, internal systems, accountability measures, and processes and procedures so the agency can consistently deliver quality Peace Corps service for Volunteers, staff, and communities. By investing in and embedding structural improvements now, and expanding our quality assurance staffing, we are positioning ourselves to return Volunteers to service on a strong foundation and to build in consistent and proactive feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement.

A major focus of our investments has been to reinforce our requisite management structures, systems, and oversight. This has included agency-driven initiatives, such as the implementation of a new Security Incident Management System (SIMS), the alignment of our Programming, Training, and Evaluation (PT&E) system, and strengthened mental health systems for our Volunteers. We have also enhanced our compliance structures to facilitate real-time oversight, system improvement, and quality assurance.

New Security Incident Management System

As part of the agency's ongoing efforts to mitigate the risk of crimes against Volunteers, we recently launched a new, more streamlined crime tracking and case management system. SIMS documents and categorizes crimes, records support services provided to Volunteer victims of crimes, and monitors related criminal proceedings.

SIMS stores all case management data in one location, enabling relevant agency staff to track compliance with applicable policies, regulations, and laws such as the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of 2011 (P.L. 112-57) and the Sam Farr and Nick Castle Peace Corps Reform Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-256). Further, the system includes embedded data quality checks and checklists that remind users to provide complete data and to offer all relevant services to Volunteer victims. All staff members who are required to use the system have been trained and the system will be fully functional before Volunteers return to service.

Programming, Training, and Evaluation alignment

PT&E alignment is a field-focused, multi-office, multi-year effort to help the Peace Corps better fulfill our service commitments to host countries and better prepare Volunteers to meet the agency's mission and goals. This effort introduced evidence-based logical project frameworks for all sectors and updated the way we design and deliver training for Volunteers. The new approach outlines training and assessment across the entire Volunteer service experience, from pre-departure through close of service. It includes health, safety and security, language, and ICDEIA critical competencies that will be developed and evaluated throughout service. And, it expands opportunities for ongoing Volunteer learning and development by creating clear, consistent standards and support for Volunteer performance throughout service.

By the end of 2023, the agency will have harmonized all of its programming, training, monitoring, and evaluation efforts in posts across the world, allowing each country program to better respond to U.S. and host country priorities such as climate change. A new monitoring and reporting platform launched in October 2021 supports PT&E alignment by enabling Volunteers and staff to seamlessly plan, manage, and share information about programmatic activities and their results, including those funded by small grants. Results of the PT&E alignment effort will increase the

agency's accountability to host country governments and communities. The overall impact of building the capacity of staff and strengthening critical systems at headquarters and posts will pay dividends for years to come.

Strengthened mental health services

Although Volunteers will return to their posts with renewed purpose and resolve around COVID-19 response and recovery, we recognize the deep psychological impact the ongoing pandemic has had on many Americans, including those who choose to volunteer. Our Behavioral Health and Outreach (BHO) unit, a dedicated group of licensed mental health professionals, has developed several new tools and services to support anticipated needs stemming from the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, BHO piloted resilience training for Volunteers focused on helping Volunteers overcome adjustment challenges related to living and working in new environments. Resilience training is now fully available for posts and will be redesigned for online use. The team has also launched on-demand, well-being coaching services aimed at providing preventative mental health support to Volunteers through a series of sessions with a certified coach. Volunteers will also have access to a new online resource for around-the-clock access to well-being resources in the form of podcasts, videos, and other digital learning tools on topics like pandemic stress management. Finally, a new procedure has been instituted to prevent delays in the delivery of care to Volunteer victims of sexual assault who elect to receive counseling services. As Volunteers return to pre-pandemic levels, we anticipate the need to increase our regional mental health staffing to meet the growing demand for mental health services.

Improved management and accountability

Identifying and resolving outstanding compliance issues has also been a major focus during this time. Thanks to this aggressive effort, we have reduced the number of open recommendations from the OIG from 281 in September 2020 to 121 today – a reduction of over 55 percent – and we are well on our way to resolving many more. The implementation of these recommendations, combined with the agency's initiatives in this area, will improve the quality and delivery of Peace Corps service and experience. It is important to note that there are several open OIG recommendations which require Volunteers to be deployed overseas or the ability of our staff to safely travel in order for the agency to take the required actions necessary to close the recommendations. We expect to close these recommendations as soon as conditions allow.

In a similar vein, we have worked diligently to resolve recommendations related to two evaluations of our SARRR program. Combined, these reports consisted of 39 recommendations, of which 36 are now closed. We have strengthened our processes and our program significantly through the implementation of these recommendations. To date, there are three recommendations remaining to be closed and we expect to be able to close two of them by May 2022. In addition, we have established a new case management process that ensures post staff proactively and formally review sexual assault cases and identify challenges and areas for improvement with every documented case and confirm all appropriate measures are followed. This process will serve as an opportunity for real-time improvements to post-level responses and overall systems.

As part of Peace Corps' strong commitment to making improvements to our systems, we are investing in robust compliance and quality assurance structures. This includes a new Compliance Accountability Officer position at headquarters, a role dedicated specifically to proactively

identifying and implementing improvements to the agency's internal controls. We will also be creating several regional positions to enhance quality assurance, as well as establishing quality assurance positions at every post. This investment will continue into FY 2022 as we further execute internal improvements and embed internal controls.

CONCLUSION

In our 60th year, we have taken intentional steps to return to our business of promoting world peace and friendship, even with the challenges posed by the pandemic. But we are not returning to business as usual; we are returning to service having reinforced our foundation. The core of our service model has not changed, but our reach into underserved communities and our programmatic focus has. We aspire to help the world move through and beyond this pandemic. And to do so, we have reimagined, refined, and rebuilt to meet this historic moment. We have continued to advance our mission through innovative service models, interagency efforts, and the engagements of domestically-deployed Peace Corps Response Volunteers, Virtual Service Pilot Participants, and staff worldwide.

We have renewed our commitment to intercultural competence, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, and made systemic improvements for a quality Peace Corps experience for decades to come. We have adapted and harnessed the power of technology as a way to forge new connections and sustain old ones. We have instituted the necessary health and safety precautions and structures to return to the world in a fundamentally different way, and with a Volunteer corps representative of the United States. And we are ready to offer our distinctive last mile, people-to-people support to underserved communities both in countries from where our Volunteers were evacuated and in the many other countries that have since requested our support so that we can meaningfully contribute to COVID-19 response and recovery efforts, just as we have done with other public health efforts.

The Peace Corps' partnership with communities around the globe will contribute to building world peace and friendship – just as it has for the last 60 years. On behalf of the Peace Corps, our Volunteers preparing to deploy, the hundreds of thousands of returned Volunteers, our staff, and our partners that make the achievement of this great mission possible, thank you for your consideration and for your continued bipartisan support of the Peace Corps.