

# 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/ Bernard Sanders  
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