



One of "America's 100 Best Charities"
— *Worth* magazine

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May 11, 2011
"Peace Corps at 50"
House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Good morning Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Berman, and distinguished members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs. Thank you for the invitation to participate in today's hearing on the Peace Corps at 50.

My name is Jennifer Wilson Marsh, and I am the hotline and affiliate service director of the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, or RAINN. RAINN, the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, founded and operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline. The hotline is a partnership of 1,100 local rape crisis centers across the U.S., and has provided free, confidential counseling and support to more than 1.5 million victims of sexual violence. RAINN also operates the National Sexual Assault Online Hotline, a secure web-based service that provides help to victims who are more comfortable seeking help online than via telephone. In addition to hotline services, RAINN educates more than 120 million Americans each year about sexual assault prevention and recovery.

I want to begin by outlining several best practices used in serving victims of sexual violence. Peace Corps has a long history of successfully promoting peace and friendship around the world and we believe that, if applied correctly, these best practices can strengthen the Peace Corps organization and their response to victims. I will follow this with a brief description of how RAINN is currently working with Peace Corps, and conclude with key recommendations.

Best Practices in Victim Response

The response and care that a victim receives immediately following an assault can greatly impact their recovery and willingness to participate in an investigation.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime, *Standards for Victim Assistance Programs and Providers*, accessibility of quality advocacy services following an assault is paramount, to diminish the short- and long-term impacts of trauma.¹ RAINN recognized the importance of crisis intervention services for victims and created a way to gain immediate access to crisis support through the

¹ National Victim Assistance Standards Consortium. *Standards for Victim Assistance Programs and Providers*. May 2003. P. 31.



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National Sexual Assault Online Hotline. Since the launch of the Online Hotline in 2006, we have seen the demand continue to increase and have now served almost 80,000 visitors, as victims choose to reach out for help online following an assault.

It is important to make services accessible to victims, as the value of crisis intervention services is lost if victims do not know of their existence. Peace Corps Volunteers need to receive, as part of their training, information describing the services available to them in the event they, or someone they know, is assaulted as well as the scope and duration of these services. This training should also include general information on victimization, safety planning, risk reduction, an overview of available medical and mental health services, and other relevant information.²

To be most effective, this information should be readily accessible to Peace Corps Volunteers at all times and reinforced through their training experience in a layered and meaningful way. We are aware of the extensive amount of training a Peace Corps Volunteer receives and suggest that information relating to sexual assault resources and prevention be not just a singular training but incorporated throughout multiple trainings and refresher courses to ensure the knowledge is not easily forgotten or overlooked. We are familiar with the bystander intervention training that Peace Corps is currently developing for volunteers and believe that this model is an effective approach in risk reduction.

All staff members who may be first responders to a victim following a sexual assault should receive a minimum of 40 hours of training, with at least five hours of refresher training annually.³ This training should include information on best practices in sexual assault response protocols, safety planning, recognition of and response to trauma, offender behavior, and other information relevant to specific positions, such as forensic exam training for medical professionals.⁴

A Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) model is the most effective, comprehensive approach to victim response following a sexual assault. A SART is most typically comprised of a victim advocate, law enforcement, and a forensic medical examiner. When a victim is identified, whether it is after arriving at an emergency room, through police interaction, or through interactions with an advocacy organization, the SART will be activated and the members will respond with an organized, coordinated response to meet the immediate – and long term needs of the victim. Some of the services that can be provided by the SART include providing information about reporting options, forensic exams and medical treatment, and assistance in coordinating with counseling services, available benefits and overall support. This multidisciplinary team approach results in a more streamlined response to victims thereby minimizing the re-traumatization that

² Ibid. P. 34-35

³ Ibid. P. 40-41.

⁴ The Peace Corps Safety and Security Act of 2011 DRAFT



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may be caused by the process following an assault.⁵ The victim advocate is the leader and main point of contact for the SART, and coordinates the response to the victim.

In the days and months following the assault, the victim advocate operates as the single point of accountability for the team, and follows the victim throughout any medical exams, interaction with law enforcement, and assists with accessing mental health services. Anyone specifically serving in a victim advocate role should receive, in addition to the 40 hours of training received by first responders, at least 20 hours of specialized training, have a minimum of two years of experience as a victim advocate, and observation of at least three case interventions.⁶ Having a victim advocate there from the beginning of the process through the medical exam, to review and discuss reporting options and have the ability to connect and coordinate the victim with long-term legal and counseling resources, will simplify the recovery process for the victim and allow them to focus on their recovery instead of navigating multiple systems. This is a model that is adaptable to special circumstances and could be modified to fit the needs of those assaulted in the Peace Corps.

Because sexual assault is a violent crime and such an extreme violation of one's privacy, rape victims often suffer a wide range of effects following an assault. Without a guarantee of confidentiality, sexual assault victims may not be willing to disclose personal information for fear that their experience will be scrutinized or in some way negatively affect them further. One of the most important considerations for a victim when deciding whether or not to reach out for help is how the information they provide will be used and shared. This need has been supported statutorily, as 39 states, plus DC and Puerto Rico, have recognized the interactions between a victim and a rape crisis counselor to be deserving of some level of protection. The issue of control over one's personal information is not only a matter of privacy, it is also related to personal safety. Therefore, it should be made clear during trainings for both staff and Peace Corps Volunteers how exactly information disclosed in this context will be maintained and shared with others and all possible attempts to keep this information private and secure should be made.⁷

We have seen through the National Sexual Assault Online Hotline that almost 80 percent of users say they will utilize resources provided to them during Online Hotline sessions. These visitors came to the Online Hotline to ask questions in a secure and anonymous environment prior to reaching out to in-person support services or to the legal system. By providing accurate information and emotional support in an anonymous manner the likelihood that these victims will report increases. Many victims blame their own actions for causing the assault, which can lead them to not report or access available services. Through anonymous and confidential services, victims can discuss these concerns and know that what happened was in no way their fault, thereby eliminating one of the barriers to reporting.

⁵ Office for Victims of Crime. SART Toolkit: Resources for Sexual Assault Response Teams. <http://ovc.ncjrs.gov/sartkit/about/about-sart.html>. March 2011.

⁶ National Organization for Victim Assistance. National Advocate Credentialing Program. <http://www.trynova.org/nacp/>. September 2008.

⁷ National Victim Assistance Standards Consortium. P. 37.



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Finally, even the best victim response programs may experience problems at times. For this reason, there needs to be a clear grievance procedure for victims who feel as though they were treated poorly by staff, or did not receive an adequate or appropriate response following their assault.⁸ This ensures that any response issues are addressed and rectified and will lead to improved services for victims in the future.

RAINN and Peace Corps

RAINN began meeting with Peace Corps staff on a regular basis in February 2011. Peace Corps approached us in what we believe to be an effort to improve their response to Peace Corps Volunteers who are victims of sexual assault.

On March 23, 2011, RAINN and the Peace Corps signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to collaborate and share educational resources and training tools on sexual assault prevention and response. Through this partnership, RAINN will provide Peace Corps with expertise on Peace Corps' sexual assault prevention and response training for Peace Corps Volunteers and staff.

As part of this partnership, RAINN will provide Peace Corps with guidance on the development of an enhanced sexual assault prevention and response program. In return, Peace Corps will share information with RAINN on cross-cultural issues of sexual assault risk reduction and response in other countries.

Since the signing of our MOU with Peace Corps, we have been asked to review and give comment on revised training policies and procedures. While Peace Corps is still in the process of updating and improving their response to victims of sexual assault, we believe that they are moving closer towards implementing some of the best practices I mentioned earlier.

Recommendations

As the Committee on Foreign Affairs is charged with general oversight of the activities and programs of the Peace Corps, we believe it should do the following:

Enact legislation that will ensure that Peace Corps adopts established best practices in victim response. This is especially important given the time-limited appointments that Peace Corps places on its staff. While we believe the current Director and other leadership staff at Peace Corps are working towards improving their response to victims of sexual assault, we want to ensure that institutional knowledge regarding what is being done remains in place once the current Director and staff have left. This legislation should also include a mechanism for formalized succession planning, to ensure that knowledge gained during the tenure of outgoing staff can be passed down to incoming staff.

⁸ Ibid. P. 44.



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The Peace Corps has made progress by hiring a dedicated victim advocate. We believe that the person in that role will be more successful with the addition of one or two deployable victim advocates, trained staffers who can immediately travel to the location of a volunteer who has been assaulted and provide direct, on-the-ground help.

While we recognize the difficulty of our current economic situation, having help on-site, as in the SART model I discussed earlier, will complement the help available from Peace Corps headquarters and ensure that victims receive the care they need. The presence of the victim advocate both on the ground with the victim in addition to a long-term support resource would strengthen the SART model they are working towards. These victim advocates will be activated when a Peace Corps Volunteer is assaulted and will have the ability to fly to personally assist the victim through the process. The staffers in this position should be experienced in navigating foreign legal and cultural systems. Cultural and geographic issues can play a large role in the response provided to victims in the Peace Corps. A Peace Corps Volunteer who is a victim of sexual assault will benefit from having a victim advocate who is familiar with the culture, legal environment, language, and resources unique to that victim's circumstances.

In conclusion, we believe that Peace Corps is making positive steps in improving its response to victims of sexual assault. The areas of staff and volunteer training, accessibility of services, and clear confidentiality policies are basic tenants of effective service provision for victims of sexual violence. There are best practices already in existence in the field of victim services that can further assist Peace Corps in updating these aspects of their programs. Implementing these recommendations will ensure all those who are victims of sexual assault while serving in the Peace Corps will have access to the quality services they need and deserve.

**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs**

“TRUTH IN TESTIMONY” DISCLOSURE FORM

Clause 2(g) of rule XI of the Rules of the House of Representatives and the Rules of the Committee require the disclosure of the following information. A copy of this form should be attached to your written testimony and will be made publicly available in electronic format, per House Rules.

1. Name: Jennifer Wilson Marsh	2. Organization or organizations you are representing: Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network
3. Date of Committee hearing: 05/11/2011	
4. Have <u>you</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	5. Have any of the <u>organizations you are representing</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
6. If you answered yes to either item 4 or 5, please list the source and amount of each grant or contract, and indicate whether the recipient of such grant was you or the organization(s) you are representing. You may list additional grants or contracts on additional sheets. See attached.	
7. Signature: 	

Please attach a copy of this form to your written testimony.



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I, Jennifer Wilson Marsh, hereby disclose that the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network has received federal funding from the following sources:

Grant:

Date of Award	Agency	Program	Amount
FY 2009	Department of Justice	Office for Victims of Crime	\$200,000
	Department of Justice	Office for Victims of Crime	\$500,000
FY 2010	Department of Justice	Office for Victims of Crime	\$300,000

Contract:

Date of Award	Agency	Program	Amount
FY 2010	Department of Defense	Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office	\$781,000
FY 2011	Department of Defense	Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office	\$887,908