

Report to Congressional Committees

November 2012

# RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

Labor and Peace Corps Need Joint Approach to Monitor Access to and Quality of Health Care Benefits

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Highlights of GAO-13-27, a report to congressional committees

#### Why GAO Did This Study

Peace Corps volunteers who suffer a service-connected illness or injury are eligible to receive certain health care and other benefits under FECA—a workers' compensation program administered by DOL. FECA provides health care benefits—reimbursements for medical expenses—to federal employees and volunteers for illnesses or injuries that DOL determines are service-connected.

GAO was mandated to report on the access and quality of health care benefits for Peace Corps volunteers. This report (1) identifies the health care and other benefits provided to volunteers from 2009 through 2011 under the FECA program, and (2) examines the extent to which DOL and the Peace Corps use available agency information to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA health care benefits provided to volunteers. GAO reviewed agency documents, interviewed agency officials, and analyzed DOL data. GAO developed a framework with four areas to define access and quality and examined available information in these areas that could be used for monitoring.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Labor and the Director of the Peace Corps jointly develop and implement an approach for working together to use available agency information to monitor the access to and quality of FECA benefits provided to volunteers.

Neither DOL nor the Peace Corps indicated whether or not they agreed with GAO's recommendation. Instead, the agencies provided additional context related to the provision of FECA benefits.

View GAO-13-27. For more information, contact Linda T. Kohn at (202) 512-7114 or kohnl@gao.gov.

#### RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

Labor and Peace Corps Need Joint Approach to Monitor Access to and Quality of Health Care Benefits

#### What GAO Found

From 2009 through 2011, the Department of Labor (DOL) provided a total of about \$36 million in Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA) benefits—health and other benefits—for Peace Corps volunteers who have returned from service abroad (volunteers). Specifically, DOL provided about \$22 million in health care benefits for these volunteers in the form of reimbursements for medical expenses related to service-connected injuries and illnesses, and \$13.8 million in other benefits, such as reimbursement for travel expenses incurred when seeking medical care. During this period, approximately 1,400 volunteers each year received these health care benefits under the FECA program. The most common types of medical conditions for which DOL provided reimbursements were mental, emotional, and nervous conditions; dental; other/nonclassified diseases; and infectious or parasitic diseases. These four medical conditions accounted for more than a quarter of all medical reimbursements for volunteers under FECA from 2009 through 2011.

In general, neither DOL nor the Peace Corps use all available information in the four areas GAO reviewed to monitor access and quality of FECA benefits for volunteers. GAO found that the Peace Corps uses information in just one of the areas—volunteers' awareness of the FECA program; however, in general, neither agency uses information in the remaining three areas. These areas are (1) information on volunteers' knowledge of FECA program and application requirements, such as required medical documentation; (2) information on DOL's timeliness in reviewing FECA applications and reimbursing medical expenses, and on the level of customer satisfaction; and (3) availability of FECA-registered medical providers. By not using information available to the agencies, DOL and the Peace Corps are missing an opportunity to determine whether, or to what extent, volunteers face access and quality issues in the FECA program. For example, DOL and the Peace Corps may not be able to determine the extent to which there are limitations in the availability of FECA-registered providers for certain medical specialties.

DOL and the Peace Corps each have certain responsibilities related to the provision of FECA benefits for eligible volunteers, and each has information that could be used for monitoring. From DOL's perspective, volunteers do not represent a large proportion of the overall FECA population. However, FECA is a relatively larger issue from the Peace Corps' perspective. The volunteers are a unique population compared to others who receive benefits under FECA, and the FECA costs associated with volunteers represent a growing portion of the Peace Corps' annual budget. Neither agency has all the information GAO reviewed, and the agencies generally do not work together to use available information to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits for volunteers. As a result, DOL and the Peace Corps are missing an opportunity to make use of the available information to help ensure the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits for volunteers.

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#### **Abbreviations**

DOL Department of Labor

FECA Federal Employees' Compensation Act

GPRA Government Performance and Results Act of 1993

OMB Office of Management and Budget

OWCP Office of Workers' Compensation Programs

POWER Protecting Our Workers and Ensuring Reemployment

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#### **Congressional Committees**

Founded in 1961, the Peace Corps' mission is to help host countries meet their needs for trained personnel while promoting mutual understanding between Americans and other peoples. Peace Corps volunteers commit to 2-year assignments in host communities in various countries, where they work on projects such as teaching English, strengthening farmer cooperatives, or building sanitation systems. As of July 2012, over 200,000 Peace Corps volunteers have served in 139 countries. After completing their service with the Peace Corps, volunteers typically return to the United States. In this report, we generally refer to returned Peace Corps volunteers as volunteers.

Returned volunteers who suffer a service-connected illness or injury are eligible to receive compensation for certain medical expenses as well as other benefits under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA).3 The FECA program is a federal workers' compensation program administered by Department of Labor's (DOL) Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP). The FECA program provides health care benefits—in the form of reimbursement for medical expenses—to federal employees and Peace Corps volunteers for illnesses or injuries that DOL determines were sustained while in the performance of an employee's duty.4 In addition to these health care benefits, the FECA program provides other benefits for federal employees, including Peace Corps volunteers, who are injured or become ill while performing their duties. These benefits include reimbursement for travel expenses related to obtaining medical treatment and wage-loss compensation—that is. disability payments—for those who are temporarily unable to perform their duties.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>The Peace Corps received an appropriation of \$375 million in fiscal year 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>According to the Peace Corps, about 4,000 volunteers per year completed their Peace Corps service from 2009 through 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>5 U.S.C. §§ 8101 et seq.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>The Peace Corps Act provides that its volunteers shall not be deemed federal employees except as specified by statute. 22 U.S.C. § 2504(a). FECA provides that it is applicable to Peace Corps volunteers with certain exceptions. 5 U.S.C. § 8142(b).

The Peace Corps and DOL each have certain responsibilities related to the provision of FECA benefits for eligible volunteers who return from service abroad. Specifically, the Peace Corps is responsible for informing volunteers that they may be eligible for FECA benefits, assisting in the application process, and paying DOL back annually for FECA benefits provided to volunteers. DOL is responsible for administering the program by reviewing and approving applications for FECA benefits and for providing reimbursements for the costs of medical care and other expenses for service-connected injuries or illnesses. Given their responsibilities, it is important that DOL and the Peace Corps periodically monitor the accessibility and quality of the program for the volunteers.<sup>5</sup>

Peace Corps volunteer advocates have raised several questions regarding whether volunteers have access to timely, high-quality health care and other benefits under FECA for service-connected injuries and illnesses. For example, these advocates have asked whether volunteers are made aware of FECA benefits, whether they report injuries or illnesses, and whether they can locate or access medical providers. Advocates also raised questions about whether volunteers face challenges during the FECA application process, such as dealing with multiple agencies—the Peace Corps and DOL.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>Federal internal control standards call for agencies to establish policies and procedures—including conducting ongoing monitoring of agency activities and effective information sharing throughout the organization—to provide reasonable assurance that agency objectives are being met. See GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO/AIMD-00-21.3.1 (Washington, D.C.: November 1999). The Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) Circular No. A-123 also defines management's responsibility for internal control in federal agencies on the basis of GAO's standards. See OMB Circular No. A-123, (*Revised*): *Management's Responsibility for Internal Control* (Dec. 21, 2004).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>According to a Peace Corps volunteer advocate, some volunteers who are victims of sexual or other assaults may not report illnesses or injuries to the Peace Corps staff incountry or at close-of-service because the volunteer is ashamed or fearful of filing a report. As a result, the volunteer may be unable to gather the required medical evidence while in-country to support their FECA application and thereby establish a service connection.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>Volunteers are responsible for finding medical providers who have registered for the FECA program. According to DOL officials, to be considered a FECA-registered provider, a provider must (a) enroll in the program, (b) be state licensed, and (c) accept DOL's terms of payment for the FECA program.

In response to the questions raised by advocates, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs convened a hearing in May 2011. Subsequently, the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act of 2011 was enacted in November 2011.<sup>8</sup> Among other things, the law requires that GAO examine the accessibility and quality of the health care services provided through DOL to volunteers who return from service abroad in the Peace Corps.<sup>9</sup> In this report we

- identify the health care and other benefits provided by DOL to returned Peace Corps volunteers from 2009 through 2011 under the FECA program, and
- examine the extent to which DOL and the Peace Corps use available agency information to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA health care benefits provided to returned Peace Corps volunteers.

To identify the health care and other benefits provided to volunteers by DOL under the FECA program from 2009 through 2011, we reviewed agency documents, such as those that describe FECA benefits provided to volunteers. We also conducted an analysis of DOL's claims data from the FECA chargeback database on the reimbursements for medical expenses that DOL, under the FECA program, made on behalf of federal agencies from 2009 through 2011. We analyzed these data to identify (1) the number of volunteers receiving FECA benefits each year, (2) the total amount of reimbursements DOL made for medical expenses, (3) the types of injuries and illnesses for which volunteers received health care benefits—reimbursements for medical expenses—and (4) the other benefits provided under FECA. We also identified the total amount of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>Pub. L. No. 112-57, 125 Stat. 737 (codified at 22 U.S.C. §§ 2507a et seq.). Kate Puzey was a volunteer who was murdered in 2009 during her service in Benin.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>22 U.S.C. § 2507i(b).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>The costs of reimbursement of health care and other expenses for work-related injuries, illnesses, and deaths are assigned to employing agencies annually using the FECA chargeback mechanism. Each year OWCP furnishes each agency with a statement summarizing the costs for injuries and illnesses suffered by its employees.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>When analyzing these data, we selected all claims—or FECA applications—with an adjudication status of compensable, which identifies the number of claims that were approved for FECA benefits. Medical reimbursements and medical conditions are associated with individual FECA claims submitted by volunteers that have been approved by DOL. Some volunteers may be approved for multiple FECA claims.

wage-loss compensation and reimbursements DOL made to volunteers for travel expenses from 2009 through 2011. We compared the types of injuries and illnesses for which volunteers received health care benefits and the demographic and other characteristics of volunteers to other recipients of FECA benefits. In addition, we interviewed DOL and Peace Corps agency officials about the benefits provided to volunteers under FECA and the types of injuries or illnesses reported by volunteers.

To assess the reliability of DOL's FECA data, we reviewed prior GAO work using DOL's FECA chargeback database—which is used to track FECA costs for employing agencies, such as the Peace Corps—and obtained information from agency officials knowledgeable about the database. We performed data quality checks to assess the reliability of the FECA chargeback database received from DOL. These data quality checks involved an assessment to identify missing or incorrect entries or outliers. On the basis of the information we obtained and analyses we conducted, we determined that the data we used were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

To identify the extent to which DOL and the Peace Corps use available agency information to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA health care benefits provided to volunteers, we developed a framework with four key areas to define accessibility and quality and that could be used to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits. Because the FECA program is a workers' compensation program and not a health care delivery program, DOL does not deliver or actively manage the health care services received by returned volunteers. Therefore, we did not assess the quality of health care services delivered by medical providers to volunteers. Rather, we examined volunteers' access to FECA benefits and the quality of the FECA workers' compensation program using the following four areas: (1) volunteers' awareness of the FECA program, including their general awareness of the FECA program and knowledge of the specific health care benefits available under FECA; (2) volunteers' knowledge of FECA program and application requirements, including knowledge of the FECA eligibility requirements and the documentation that is typically required by DOL to make a FECA application decision; (3) DOL's timeliness in reviewing FECA applications and providing reimbursement for health and other benefits, including average time to review and approve or deny a FECA application, average time to provide reimbursement for submitted medical claims, and the level of customer

satisfaction with the FECA program; <sup>12</sup> and (4) availability of FECA-registered medical providers, including the ability of volunteers to access these providers. <sup>13</sup>

We interviewed officials and reviewed documentation about the information available to DOL and the Peace Corps for monitoring access and quality of the FECA program, including information related to our four key areas. For example, we examined: (1) the Peace Corps' policies on informing volunteers of their rights to FECA benefits to determine what information is available on volunteers' awareness of the FECA program, and (2) letters sent by DOL to volunteers whose FECA applications were denied. We synthesized the information provided by agency officials to determine the extent to which the two agencies use information in the four areas to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits for volunteers. Because the Peace Corps and DOL both have certain responsibilities related to the provision of FECA benefits for eligible volunteers who return from service abroad, we also looked at the extent to which the Peace Corps and DOL work together by sharing this information. <sup>15</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>To calculate DOL's timeliness in reviewing FECA applications, we selected only the initial, or first, adjudication of a FECA application. We calculated the time it took DOL to process the receipt of the initial FECA application and then approve or deny the claim.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup>As part of our review of FECA-registered providers, we examined an online provider search tool published by DOL. When doing so, we followed the instructions provided on the tool, which state that users are recommended to enter either the state, the city and state, or the zip code to define the search area. Users are also recommended to leave the field "provider specialty" blank.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup>We reviewed about 30 percent of the denial letters sent to volunteers from 2009 to 2011. These letters were randomly selected and provided to us by the Peace Corps. These letters include a summary of the volunteer's reported injury as well as the reason(s) for denying the FECA application.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup>In prior work, GAO identified eight key practices that can help enhance and sustain collaboration—broadly defined as any joint activity that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when the organizations act alone—among federal agencies. For example, agencies should agree on roles and responsibilities and identify and address needs by leveraging resources. See GAO, *Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies*, GAO-06-15 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 21, 2005).

We conducted this performance audit from March 2012 to November 2012, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

#### Background

After volunteers separate from the Peace Corps they typically return to the United States, and may transition into new employment. As they make this employment transition, the Peace Corps offers various health care services and benefits to returned volunteers. First, each volunteer receives a close-of-service medical evaluation that assesses their health status as they complete their service. The Peace Corps also has a contract with an insurance company to make a health insurance policy—AfterCorps<sup>16</sup>—available for volunteers to purchase. This policy covers non-service-connected illnesses or injuries. The Peace Corps also pays for certain health examinations for 6 months after a volunteer's service is completed. Finally, volunteers may also be eligible for reimbursements under the FECA program for medical expenses associated with service-connected illnesses or injuries, such as those identified during the physical conducted at the close-of-service medical evaluation.

#### FECA Eligibility

The FECA program provides health benefits—reimbursement for medical expenses related to illnesses or injuries that DOL determines are service connected—as well as other benefits, such as wage-loss (death and disability) compensation. To receive benefits through FECA, a volunteer must establish that, among other things, he or she was in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup>AfterCorps is a private health insurance policy that covers non-service-connected medical problems. The Peace Corps enrolls all volunteers after their close-of-service and pays for the first month of coverage. Volunteers are eligible to extend their coverage for up to 18 months. This is a medical policy and does not include routine dental coverage.

performance of duty at the time the illness or injury occurred. 17 Under the FECA program, volunteers are considered to be in the performance of duty 24 hours a day while abroad during the period of their Peace Corps service. DOL requires that if an illness or injury is first discovered after a volunteer has returned from service, then the medical evidence must show that the injury or illness was sustained while overseas or in the performance of duty. 18 In order to be eligible for FECA health care benefits for preexisting illnesses or injuries—a condition that existed prior to service—the volunteer's medical evidence must demonstrate that the volunteer's service was the proximate cause of or aggravated, accelerated, or precipitated the illness or injury. 19 Further, volunteers must apply for FECA benefits within 3 years of the date of injury or illness. or within 3 years after they recognize that a health condition is serviceconnected.<sup>20</sup> In 2010, the FECA program provided about \$2.8 billion in health and other benefits to about 251,000 federal and postal employees—including volunteers—who suffered a service related illness or injury.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup>DOL requires claimants to meet the following five criteria when establishing eligibility for FECA benefits: (1) claim is filed within a 3-year statutory time period, (2) the injured or deceased was a federal employee, (3) an injury, disease, or death occurred, (4) the injury, disease, or death occurred in the performance of duty, and (5) the resulting medical condition was caused by the injury, disease, or death. See 20 C.F.R. § 10.115 (2012). Though not generally deemed federal employees, Peace Corps volunteers are eligible for FECA benefits. 5 U.S.C. § 8142(b).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup>The FECA program requires that claimants submit a medical report from the attending physician. 20 C.F.R. § 10.115 (2012). The FECA physician definition includes surgeons, podiatrists, dentists, clinical psychologists, optometrists, chiropractors, and osteopathic practitioners and does not include nurse practitioners or physicians' assistants. 5 U.S.C. § 8101(2). Further, DOL requires that the medical report include, among other things, a formal diagnosis, which is used to guide DOL in assigning a medical diagnosis that is used as the basis for reimbursement.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup>20 C.F.R. § 10.730(c) (2012).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup>5 U.S.C. § 8122.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup>GAO, Federal Employees' Compensation Act: Benefits for Retirement-Age Beneficiaries, GAO-12-309R (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 6, 2012).

# Application Process for FECA Program Benefits for Volunteers

Volunteers who apply for FECA benefits typically go through the following steps:

#### Preapplication

- 1. Each volunteer is informed of the availability of FECA benefits at the close-of-service medical evaluation.
  - a. Each volunteer is expected to receive a close-of-service medical evaluation that assesses his or her health status prior to leaving service to document any service-connected illnesses or injuries. Should a volunteer terminate service early—before completing his or her assignment—the volunteer will also undergo a complete medical and dental exam to identify any unmet health care needs and potential medical issues.
- 2. Volunteers complete a FECA application and submit it to DOL through the Peace Corps' Post-Service Unit.<sup>22</sup>
  - a. The Peace Corps—through its Post-Service Unit—assists volunteers applying for benefits by helping them to complete the appropriate forms and providing the appropriate medical evidence from volunteers' Peace Corps medical records.<sup>23</sup>
  - The Peace Corps' Post-Service Unit sends all FECA applications—which includes information on the injury or illness reported by the volunteer—to DOL for review and eligibility determination.

#### **Application Review**

- 3. FECA applications submitted for volunteers are reviewed by DOL, and the agency then makes an eligibility determination.
  - a. For those applications that do not include sufficient information and require further development, volunteers are given approximately 30 days to submit additional information to support their request for FECA benefits. If the additional information submitted is sufficient, the application is approved. If the additional

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup>Volunteers seeking FECA benefits are required to complete form CA-1 or form CA-2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup>The Peace Corps maintains medical records for any injury or illness reported during a volunteer's service. In addition, any injury or illness noted at the close-of-service medical evaluation is documented in the volunteer's medical record, which is included in the FECA application should a volunteer apply for FECA benefits.

information is not sufficient, the FECA application is denied and medical treatment is not authorized.

b. For those applications that are approved, DOL assigns a medical diagnosis on the basis of medical evidence submitted in the FECA application. This assigned medical diagnosis defines the medical treatment and services for which the volunteer is eligible for FECA reimbursement.

### Reimbursement for Medical Expenses

- 4. Typically, after benefits are approved by DOL, a volunteer obtains health care services through a medical provider. After receiving these services, the volunteer or the volunteer's medical provider submits a bill to DOL for reimbursement.<sup>24</sup> DOL provides reimbursement for medical expenses.
- 5. On an annual basis, DOL requires the Peace Corps to pay DOL back for these reimbursements.

From 2009 through 2011, DOL Provided about \$36 Million in Health Care and Other Benefits for Volunteers From 2009 through 2011, DOL provided a total of about \$36 million in FECA benefits for volunteers, providing about \$22 million in health care benefits—reimbursements for medical expenses to treat service-connected injuries and illnesses for Peace Corps volunteers—and \$13.8 million in other benefits. During this period, almost 1,400 volunteers each year received health care benefits. The average reimbursement for medical expenses per volunteer was about \$5,000 in 2009, and about \$5,600 in 2011. The most-common medical conditions for which DOL provided health care benefits—reimbursements for medical services—were mental, emotional, and nervous conditions; dental;

In 2009, volunteers received medical reimbursements of \$6.5 million, volunteers received \$7.7 million in 2010, and volunteers received \$7.6 million in 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup>Peace Corps officials told us that volunteers may choose not to wait for DOL's approval of their FECA application before receiving medical care; however, any related medical expenses are not reimbursable by DOL if the FECA application is ultimately denied.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup>Medical reimbursements and medical conditions are associated with individual FECA claims—or applications—submitted by volunteers that have been approved by DOL. Some volunteers may be approved for multiple FECA claims. This happens infrequently—for up to about 5 percent of the approved application from 2009 through 2011. For the purpose of our reporting, we refer to the number of approved FECA claims as the number of volunteers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup>In this report we do not adjust the reimbursements for medical expenses for inflation.

other/nonclassified diseases; and infectious or parasitic diseases.<sup>27</sup> These four medical conditions represented about 40 percent of all medical conditions and accounted for about \$5.9 million—or more than a quarter—of all medical reimbursements for volunteers under FECA between 2009 and 2011. See table 1 for the medical conditions for which DOL provided reimbursements for volunteers under FECA.

Table 1: The Medical Conditions for Which the Department of Labor (DOL) Made Reimbursements for Returned Peace Corps Volunteers under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA), 2009 through 2011

Medical condition	Frequency	Amount reimbursed (dollars in millions <sup>b</sup> )	Percentage of total reimbursement (percent)
Mental, emotional, or nervous conditions	466	\$3.3	15.2%
Dental	417	0.4	1.8
Other/nonclassified diseases <sup>c</sup>	388	1.3	6.1
Infectious or parasitic diseases	336	0.8	3.8
Pain, swelling, stiffness, or redness in joint	278	1.0	4.8
Sprain or strain of ligament, muscle, tendon (not back)	247	1.6	7.5
Fracture	199	1.2	5.6
Pregnancy	136	0.5	2.1
Musculoskeletal Condition	119	1.0	4.6
Skin Condition	110	0.07	0.3
Other <sup>d</sup>	1,371	10.5	48.2
Total	4,067	\$21.9	100%

Source: GAO analysis of DOL data.

In addition to health care benefits, volunteers also received other benefits—such as wage-loss compensation and reimbursement for travel to receive medical treatment. Specifically, from 2009 through 2011, these

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>a</sup>The frequency represents the number of times a medical condition or nature of injury is recorded as the basis for FECA reimbursement. We used the recorded nature of injury as a proxy for medical condition because it provided the best link to reimbursements made on behalf of volunteers. Volunteers can receive reimbursement for more than one condition, thus the number of conditions may exceed the number of volunteers who received FECA benefits.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>b</sup>Dollar amounts may not add to the total due to rounding.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>c</sup>Other/nonclassified diseases are illness or injuries that generally do not fit neatly into the existing illness and injury categories used by DOL.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>d</sup>These represent all other medical conditions for which volunteers received reimbursements.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup>Other/nonclassified diseases are illness or injuries that generally do not fit neatly into the existing illness and injury categories used by DOL.

other benefits received by volunteers totaled about \$13.8 million.<sup>28</sup> In 2011, the total reimbursements for both health care and other benefits were about \$12 million, which represents about 3.3 percent of the Peace Corps' 2012 appropriation of \$375 million. According to Peace Corps officials, these health care and other expenses represent a growing portion of its annual budget. These officials explained that from 2009 through 2011 these expenses have increased a total of approximately 7.2 percent.<sup>29</sup>

Volunteers who received FECA benefits from 2009 through 2011 are unique in several ways when compared to other recipients of these benefits. <sup>30</sup> Specifically, our analysis of DOL's FECA program claims data found that the volunteers were generally younger and more likely to be female when compared to others who received benefits under the FECA program. Volunteers were, on average, 12 years younger than others who received FECA benefits. About two-thirds of volunteers receiving FECA benefits were female, whereas less than half of others receiving FECA benefits were female. These differences in age and gender are consistent with the overall demographics of these two populations—the volunteers and federal workers.

In addition, the medical conditions for which volunteers received FECA benefits were different than those for others who received FECA benefits. For example, volunteers were more likely than others to receive FECA benefits for mental, emotional, or nervous conditions; dental conditions; other/nonclassified diseases; and infectious or parasitic diseases. While these four medical conditions represented 40 percent of the conditions for volunteers, they represented less than 2 percent for the others receiving FECA benefits.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup>Volunteers received other benefits totaling about \$4.6 million in 2009, \$4.7 million in 2010, and \$4.4 million in 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup>In contrast, DOL officials stated that costs for the overall FECA population increased an average of 5 percent each year over the last several years.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup>For purposes of analyzing medical conditions, other recipients of benefits under FECA do not include the State Department. However, when comparing volunteers to State Department employees who received FECA benefits we saw similar results to those we found when comparing volunteers to other recipients of benefits under FECA.

The Peace Corps Uses
Information on
Volunteers'
Awareness of FECA,
but Neither DOL Nor
the Peace Corps Use
Other Available
Information to
Monitor Access and
Quality

The Peace Corps uses information it has to monitor volunteers' awareness of the FECA program; however, in general, neither DOL nor the Peace Corps use information in the remaining three areas in our review to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits for volunteers. These areas are (1) information on volunteers' knowledge of FECA program and application requirements, such as medical documentation that is required to be submitted with an application; (2) information on DOL's timeliness in reviewing FECA applications and reimbursing medical expenses, and on the level of customer satisfaction with the FECA program; and (3) information on the availability of FECA-registered medical providers.<sup>31</sup> Table 2 summarizes the extent to which DOL and the Peace Corps use information available in the four key areas to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits for volunteers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup>The information in the four areas we identified does not represent a comprehensive list of all types of information that could be used to monitor the accessibility and quality of the FECA program for volunteers.

Table 2: Extent to Which Available Information Is Used by the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Peace Corps to Monitor Accessibility and Quality of Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA) Benefits for Returned Peace Corps Volunteers

	Agency with information on volunteers		
Type of information	DOL	Peace Corps	Do the agencies use the information to monitor access and quality?
Peace Corps volunteers' awareness of the FECA program			
Signed documentation from volunteer acknowledging informed of FECA <sup>a</sup>		✓	Yes
Peace Corps volunteers' knowledge of FECA program and application	on requirem	ents	
Statistics on the application review process, including the number of volunteers who were approved, needed to submit additional documentation, and were denied <sup>b</sup>	✓	✓	No
Information on the most-common reasons for denial for volunteers, such as from review of those provided in denial letters	✓	<b>√</b>	No
Copies of application, medical records <sup>c</sup> , and correspondence with volunteers during review	✓	✓	No
DOL's timeliness in reviewing applications and reimbursing for med with the FECA program	ical expense	es, and the level of c	ustomer satisfaction
Data on timeliness in reviewing FECA applications for volunteers	√d		Partially <sup>e</sup>
Statistics/data on timeliness of DOL's reimbursement of medical expenses for volunteers	√f		No
Data on customer satisfaction measures for volunteers	✓		No
Availability of FECA-registered medical providers			
Registration information from all FECA-registered medical providers	✓		No
Geographic location and medical specialty of FECA-registered medical providers	<b>√</b>	Partial <sup>9</sup>	No

Source: GAO review of DOL and Peace Corps information.

Notes: The Peace Corps and DOL each have certain responsibilities related to the provision of FECA benefits for eligible volunteers who return from service abroad. Specifically, the Peace Corps is responsible for informing volunteers that they may be eligible for FECA benefits, assisting in the application process, and paying DOL back annually for FECA benefits provided to volunteers. DOL is responsible for administering the program by reviewing and approving applications for benefits and for making reimbursements on behalf of volunteers for the costs of health and other FECA expenses.

<sup>a</sup>Currently, volunteers' are required to review material related to the FECA program during the standard close-of-service medical evaluation that assesses their health status prior to leaving service and sign a document acknowledging they were made aware of the FECA program.

<sup>b</sup>Review of information on application review process—such as the number of volunteers who are approved, denied, and need to submit additional documentation—could provide information about the extent to which volunteers lack knowledge about the required medical documentation.

<sup>c</sup>Any injury or illness noted at the close-of-service medical evaluation is documented in the volunteer's medical record, which is included in the FECA application should a volunteer apply for FECA benefits.

<sup>d</sup>DOL did not have this information specific to volunteers until requested by GAO in June 2012.

<sup>e</sup>As part of the review of the timeliness of FECA applications, DOL has and uses the Protecting Our Workers and Ensuring Reemployment (POWER) Initiative metrics to monitor the Peace Corps' timely

submission of FECA applications. However, DOL does not use information related to DOL's timely review of FECA applications for the Peace Corps population.

<sup>f</sup>DOL did not have this information specific to volunteers until requested by GAO in June 2012.

<sup>9</sup>Peace Corps officials told us that they have the ability to generate lists of DOL FECA-registered medical providers by state, zip code, and medical specialty; however, they do not use this information to monitor availability of FECA-registered medical providers for volunteers.

As shown in table 2, the Peace Corps uses information related to volunteers' awareness of the FECA program. Specifically, to monitor volunteers' awareness, the Peace Corps currently documents that volunteers have acknowledged that they have been informed of their potential eligibility for FECA during their close-of-service evaluation. Peace Corps officials told us the agency uses this information to help ensure all volunteers are made aware of their possible eligibility for FECA benefits.

While the Peace Corps uses information on volunteer awareness, neither DOL nor the Peace Corps use available information related to the remaining three areas of our review to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits for volunteers.

Volunteers' knowledge of FECA program and application requirements. As table 2 shows, neither DOL nor the Peace Corps use available information, such as data on FECA application denial rates, and information on reasons for denials, in order to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits for volunteers. 32 DOL officials told us that it is not their responsibility to use this information for this type of monitoring. However, by not using this available information to review volunteers' level of knowledge of the FECA requirements, DOL and the Peace Corps may be unaware, for example, of the extent to which volunteers experience difficulties accessing FECA benefits because of limited understanding of certain application requirements, such as in (a) providing appropriate and sufficient medical evidence and (b) establishing a service connection for the illness or injury for which the volunteer is seeking FECA benefits.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup>Our analysis of FECA claims data indicated roughly 96 percent of volunteers who applied were approved by DOL to receive FECA benefits, while 4 percent were not approved.

According to volunteer advocates, volunteers and their physicians may lack knowledge of certain FECA documentation requirements, such as the need to include a medical diagnosis rather than just the symptoms of an injury or illness in the FECA application. Furthermore, our examination of a limited number of FECA denial letters confirms that these difficulties are often a contributing factor in the FECA applications that were not approved from 2009 through 2011. To example, our review of denial letters showed that the most-common reasons for denial were lack of sufficient medical documentation and inability to establish a service connection. Further, DOL and the Peace Corps also do not work together to use the information available to them on volunteers' knowledge of program and application requirements.

<u>DOL's timeliness in reviewing applications and reimbursing medical expenses, and customer satisfaction</u>. As table 2 shows, DOL and the Peace Corps are not using, or are only partially using, available data on DOL's timeliness in reviewing applications and reimbursing medical expenses, and customer satisfaction.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, DOL only uses timeliness metrics to monitor the timeliness with which the Peace Corps submits FECA applications to DOL but does not conduct periodic examinations of timeliness of the review of volunteers' FECA applications after it receives the application. Further, DOL only tracks data on customer satisfaction measures for all FECA recipients, but not specifically for volunteers. DOL explained that it does not use these timeliness data to monitor access and quality specifically for volunteers. DOL also noted the level of effort required to pull out the timeliness data for volunteers is too extensive, and volunteers represent a small portion

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup>We reviewed about 30 percent of the denial letters sent to volunteers from 2009 to 2011. These letters were randomly selected by the Peace Corps, and include a summary of the volunteer's reported injury as well as the reason(s) for denying the FECA application. DOL noted that in cases when an application lacks required documentation, volunteers are provided with an explanation of what additional documentation is needed, and are given the opportunity to provide the requested documentation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup>DOL maintains metrics for measuring performance for the overall FECA program, including those that are part of the Protecting Our Workers and Ensuring Reemployment (POWER) Initiative, the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), as amended, and measures outlined in DOL's Operational Plan. The POWER Initiative established goals related to FECA—such as the timeliness of filing a FECA application. Under GPRA, DOL established customer satisfaction measures for the FECA program. Under its Operational Plan, DOL established additional timeliness and customer satisfaction measures, such as those to monitor the timeliness of the FECA application review process.

of the overall FECA population. Instead, DOL's focus has been on using the data in order to monitor FECA program timeliness and customer satisfaction for all individuals who receive FECA benefits. While it is reasonable that DOL focus on the entire FECA program, DOL and the Peace Corps also do not work together to use the timeliness and customer satisfaction information to help the Peace Corps gauge whether volunteers are receiving FECA benefits in a timely and satisfactory manner. For example, Peace Corps officials told us that a survey of former volunteers specifically about access and satisfaction issues would be useful. According to Peace Corps officials, the results of such a survey could help clarify whether volunteers have access to the care they need and what the volunteers think about the quality of the care they receive. Without this information, DOL and the Peace Corps may be unable to determine volunteers' level of satisfaction with the FECA program.

Our review of DOL timeliness data suggests that between 2009 and 2011, the agency met its timeliness benchmarks related to review of FECA applications for volunteers. However, because DOL does not use these data to determine the timeliness in reviewing volunteers' FECA applications, DOL may not be able to determine whether or to what extent its performance on timeliness is sustained in the future. Furthermore, a lack of ongoing examinations of timeliness may make it difficult for DOL to identify problems if they should arise in the future or to provide information to alleviate the concerns of advocates and Peace Corps officials regarding the timeliness of the review of FECA applications.

Availability of FECA-registered medical providers. DOL does not use the information it has on FECA-registered providers to determine the accessibility of these providers to volunteers. FECA-registered providers are required to provide several pieces of information to DOL when registering for the FECA program, including their geographic location and medical specialty. DOL officials reported that they do not believe it is their responsibility to use the information on FECA-registered providers to examine the accessibility of FECA-registered providers in certain

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup>DOL examines timeliness and customer satisfaction for all federal employees under FECA using metrics outlined in its Operational Plan.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup>For example, our review of information showed that DOL reviewed about 97 percent of all volunteers' applications related to traumatic cases within 45 days of receiving the application—meeting its benchmark to review 90 percent within that time frame.

geographic areas and for certain medical specialties.<sup>37</sup> By not using the information DOL has on the geographic location and medical specialty of FECA-registered providers, DOL and the Peace Corps cannot determine the extent to which there are limitations in the availability of FECA-registered providers in certain geographic areas and for certain medical specialties.

DOL's available information on FECA-registered providers suggests that volunteers may face some challenges accessing registered providers. Officials stated that although it is the responsibility of the volunteer to find a FECA-registered provider, DOL publishes an online search tool that contains a partial listing of the available FECA-registered providers as a service to FECA beneficiaries, including volunteers, to help locate providers. Officials also noted the agency does not actively manage or update the list.<sup>38</sup> Although the online search tool is recognized by DOL as incomplete, it does provide some partial information about the availability of FECA-registered providers. We reviewed this online search tool and found, for example, that as of June 2012 there were no FECA-registered providers in the online search tool listed as mental health specialists in any of the 10 states with the largest population of volunteers.<sup>39</sup> Peace Corps officials and volunteer advocates also noted there are a limited number of FECA-registered providers in some geographic locations and medical specialties. In addition, Peace Corps officials told us that they

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup>DOL officials noted that under FECA a volunteer has the right to select his or her own physician and reiterated that it must refrain from involvement in any activity that could be construed as pre-selecting or creating a bias toward certain physicians.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup>Officials explained that the search tool includes a partial list of registered providers, including only those that are willing to have their names published. Officials stated that they are concerned that taking a more active role in managing providers could cause beneficiaries to incorrectly view physicians as working on behalf of DOL rather than beneficiaries.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup>We reviewed the provider listing using the instructions provided by DOL at the site. These instructions ask the user to enter either (1) the state, (2) the city and state, or (3) the zip code. Users are also recommended to leave the field "provider specialty" blank. We reviewed the 10 states with the largest population of volunteers between 2009 and 2011—California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, New York, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. Furthermore, the online search tool did not consistently report the medical specialty of providers. For example, not all medical providers clearly indicate their specialty in the specialty field on the online search tool making it difficult to get a sense of the complete number of specialists for a given area, such as mental health. DOL officials told us that providers are not required to include medical specialty on the form when registering for the online search tool.

have assisted volunteers in finding and enrolling providers, and have had difficulty in doing so. Although the information on FECA-registered providers in the online search tool that DOL provides as a resource to volunteers may be incomplete, it includes information that could be used to help identify potential access issues and areas for monitoring the accessibility of FECA benefits for volunteers.

#### Conclusions

The Peace Corps and DOL both have certain responsibilities related to the provision of FECA benefits for eligible volunteers who return from service abroad. Specifically, DOL administers the FECA program and the Peace Corps pays for the expenses incurred by volunteers in the program. From DOL's perspective, volunteers do not represent a large proportion of the overall FECA population. However, FECA is a relatively larger issue from the Peace Corps' perspective. The volunteers are a unique population compared to others who receive benefits under FECA—for example, they are more likely to have mental, emotional, or nervous conditions that are service-connected—and, according to Peace Corps officials, the amount the Peace Corps pays DOL for FECA reimbursements represents an increasing portion of the Peace Corps' annual budget. Because both of the agencies have certain responsibilities related to the provision of FECA benefits for eligible volunteers who return from service abroad, it is especially important that the Peace Corps and DOL jointly monitor the accessibility and quality of the FECA program to ensure that the FECA program is achieving its intended objectivesincluding ensuring that eligible volunteers receive needed FECA health care benefits.

The Peace Corps and DOL have information available to them in the four key areas we reviewed that could be used to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits for volunteers: (1) volunteers' awareness of FECA; (2) volunteers' knowledge of program and application requirements; (3) DOL's timeliness in reviewing FECA applications and reimbursing medical expenses, and the level of customer satisfaction with the FECA program; and (4) availability of FECA-registered medical providers. However, in general, the two agencies are not using this information for such monitoring. For example, the agencies do not use the information they have to determine whether there is a gap in the number and geographic location of FECA-registered providers, such as the potential gap we identified in the number and geographic location of FECA-registered providers who treat mental health conditions—the most common medical condition for which volunteers received reimbursement.

While information is available to DOL and the Peace Corps that could be used for monitoring, the agencies are generally not working together to use the available information to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits for volunteers. Working together is important because neither agency has all the information to monitor the program on its own. Finally, because the information we identified under the four areas is not a comprehensive list of all the information the agencies could use to monitor FECA benefits for volunteers, the Peace Corps and DOL may be able to identify other information that could be used for this purpose. Unless the two agencies work together on monitoring, they will miss the opportunity to make use of the available information to help ensure the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits for volunteers.

# Recommendation for Executive Action

We recommend that the Secretary of Labor and the Director of the Peace Corps jointly develop and implement an approach for working together to use available information to monitor the access to and quality of FECA benefits provided to returned volunteers.

# Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Peace Corps for review. Peace Corps provided written comments (reprinted in app. I), and both provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. Neither DOL nor the Peace Corps indicated whether or not they agreed with our recommendation. Instead, among other things, DOL's technical comments identified examples of the agency's collaboration with the Peace Corps to provide benefits under the FECA program. For example, DOL noted that officials from both agencies have met multiple times over the last 2 years to try to improve the handling of volunteers' claims, and that DOL officials are available to work with the Peace Corps to improve the process of providing benefits to volunteers. In contrast, the Peace Corps noted specific improvements that it believes could assist returned volunteers, but stated that it cannot make these reforms on its own and needs action from DOL. DOL's and the Peace Corps' comments further underscore that the two agencies do not have a joint approach for monitoring the quality and accessibility of benefits for returned volunteers under the FECA program. As a result, we are concerned that the two agencies are missing opportunities to collaborate. We also remain convinced that DOL and the Peace Corps should, as we recommended, work together and develop an approach for using available agency information to monitor the accessibility and quality of FECA benefits for returned volunteers.

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of Labor, the Director of the Peace Corps, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on GAO's website at <a href="http://www.gao.gov">http://www.gao.gov</a>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7114 or at kohnl@gao.gov. Contact points for our Office of Congressional Relations and Office of Public Affairs can be found on the last page of this report. Other major contributors to this report are listed in appendix II.

Linda T. Kohn

Director, Health Care

Junão T Kolin

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### Appendix I: Comments from the Peace Corps

THE DIRECTOR OF THE PEACE CORPS WASHINGTON, D.C.

October 24, 2012

Ms. Linda T. Kohn
Director, Health Care
U.S. Government Accountability Office
Washington, D.C.
KohnL@gao.gov

Dear Ms. Kohn:

I would like to thank you and your staff for your diligent work in reviewing the health care that returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) receive through the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA) system. As the Acting Director of the Peace Corps and as a returned Peace Corps Volunteer, I am well aware of the frustrations that RPCVs have expressed about FECA, and I am committed to doing whatever I can to address those frustrations. Peace Corps Volunteers ("Volunteers") have given outstanding service to our country, and they deserve access to good, timely medical care for service-related conditions once their service is complete.

During their service, Volunteers receive their medical care directly from the Peace Corps. Once they leave Peace Corps service, however, they are required to work through the FECA system for care of service-related conditions. That system is administered by the Department of Labor (DOL), and the Peace Corps' role in this process is limited by law. Only DOL has the authority to review and accept claims, to authorize payments, and to set the rules on provider participation.

Notwithstanding its limited authority, the Peace Corps does try diligently to assist RPCVs with FECA. The agency has a Post-Service Unit which helps RPCVs to file their claims by collecting relevant agency health records and submitting the necessary paperwork to DOL. The Post-Service Unit also works to facilitate communication between RPCVs and DOL staff. In order to better assist RPCVs, the Peace Corps has expanded the position of case manager in the Post-Service Unit to include care coordination for some catastrophic illnesses or injuries during the transition from the Peace Corps to FECA. The Peace Corps is also creating two positions in the Post-Service Unit to try to further assist RPCVs with the FECA process.

Despite these efforts, too many RPCVs continue to find the FECA process to be bureaucratic, frustrating, and time-consuming. The Peace Corps would welcome enhanced efforts to monitor RPCVs' experience with FECA. However, the considerable feedback that the agency has received from RPCVs to date makes clear that systemic improvements are needed.

#### **Appendix I: Comments from the Peace Corps**

Ms. Linda T. Kohn October 24, 2012 Page 2

The Peace Corps has been negotiating with DOL for several years about changes we believe would improve the system. We have shared with GAO and DOL specific reforms that we believe would assist RPCVs, including: establishing a direct DOL point of contact to assist RPCVs; establishing a centralized claims processing location for RPCVs' claims, thereby allowing relevant DOL staff to specialize in the specific issues those claims entail; and easing the transition to FECA by allowing Volunteers to submit their FECA claims while still in service. The Peace Corps does not have authority to make these or other proposed reforms on its own; ultimately, DOL or congressional action is necessary. Your report recommends a joint approach, and the Peace Corps continues to be ready and willing to work with all parties on necessary improvements.

The Peace Corps takes the health and well-being of those who serve very seriously. The agency will continue working to ensure that our sick or injured RPCVs receive the help and support they deserve.

Sincerely, Caroly Hersh-Radelit

Carolyn Hessler-Radelet Acting Director

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# Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact	Linda T. Kohn, (202) 512-7114 or kohnl@gao.gov
Staff Acknowledgments	In addition to the contact named above, Will Simerl and Cynthia Grant, Assistant Directors; N. Rotimi Adebonojo; Melinda Cordero; Carolyn Fitzgerald; Krister Friday; Marina Klimenko; Amy Leone; and Jennifer Whitworth made key contributions to this report.

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