

Peace Corps

On the
Home Front

A Handbook for the Families of Volunteers

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Introduction

It was a hot Friday morning in Safi, a town on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, four hours south of Casablanca. I finished my last morning English class, where Jamal had amused me no end by declaring proudly, “I am a tomato” (he meant “I have a tomato”), and I went by the office to pick up my mail. To my surprise, there was a telegram for me, the first I had ever gotten, which said simply: “Call Rabat.”

Rabat, the capital of Morocco, was the location of the Peace Corps office. This had to be something important; maybe it was even an emergency. But it wasn’t easy to call Rabat on a Friday afternoon, when people go to the mosque and when the post office—where the telephones are—is closed from 12 to 5 p.m. I waited outside the building’s big iron gate and darted in at 5 to place my call. “This is Craig Storti calling from Safi,” I said. “You wanted to talk to me?” My heart thumped in my chest. “Oh, yes,” the person who answered the call said, “just a moment.”

Then she came back on the line. “Craig?” she said.

“Yes,” I responded.

“Write your mother.”

Many former Peace Corps Volunteers can tell a similar story. It is recounted here to make the point that having a relative serving overseas not only is a source of pride and excitement for families of Volunteers but also has its moments of anxiety and frustration. In this instance, it was lost or late letters; in others, it might be television footage of rioting in the streets, newspaper headlines about an earthquake, or a letter reporting that one's daughter, brother, or mother has been sick.

When such things happen, families naturally worry. This worry is partly because they need more information. While families may be concerned, without firsthand experience in the country, they do not always have enough information to really understand. When people do not have all the facts, they often fill in the missing details with the aid of often-rich imaginations, tending to imagine the worst.

With the great distances involved, the communication difficulties, and other unknowns in the countries where Volunteers serve, a certain amount of risk and anxiety is inherent in Peace Corps service. The objective of this handbook is to provide some detail about the great adventure Volunteers embark upon while giving families of Volunteers as complete and realistic a picture as possible of Volunteer life overseas. It describes the conditions under which Volunteers live and work and explains the Peace Corps' procedures for emergencies and healthcare. The more informed families are, the more likely the Peace Corps experience will be positive for all concerned.



Part I: The Life of a Volunteer

To give families an idea of what it is like to serve in the Peace Corps, this section describes the various stages of Peace Corps service, from the time the Volunteer arrives at the pre-departure orientation (called “staging” in the Peace Corps) until the time the Volunteer returns home some 27 months later. This information may help put into context what a Volunteer says on the telephone, in letters, or in e-mails. It may also help family members respond with a greater understanding to questions, concerns, or issues raised by Volunteers.

Staging (Pre-Departure Orientation)

For many Volunteers, the real beginning of service is the staging event. At this pre-departure orientation, trainees (what Volunteers are called at this point) meet the people they will be serving alongside for the next two years. In some cases, this will be their first face-to-face encounter with Peace Corps staff. Staging occurs three days before trainees leave the United States for their overseas assignment, and it is normally held in a city from which the group then flies overseas, such as Miami, Philadelphia, and San Francisco.

At staging, Peace Corps staff members collect trainees' registration forms, prepare the group for travel, and address any last-minute concerns. Much of the time is spent introducing trainees to the Peace Corps and to each other. Trainees are also briefed on safety and security plans and procedures.

Staging is an exciting, often poignant event that leads to one of the pivotal moments in a Volunteer's life—when he or she finally boards the plane to begin 27 months (three months of training and 24 months of service) in a different culture. Behind trainees' excitement is the realization that the wait is over and their aspirations and apprehensions are becoming a reality.

Staging is often the occasion for a farewell call to family and friends, which can be very emotional. But the fear, uncertainty, or anxiety in a Volunteer's voice is quite normal, even healthy. These are typical emotions during a major life transition. Along with the excitement, it is natural to have some doubts.

Training

Everyone who joins the Peace Corps goes through a training program upon arrival in the country of service. Training typically lasts 8 to 12 weeks and consists of a heavy dose of language lessons, technical skills sessions for work assignments, safety and health sessions, and cultural orientation. It is an extremely busy time for trainees, with eight or nine hours of scheduled activities five days a week, including an occasional field trip on weekends. In addition, they usually have homework of some sort to do at night. Families should know that trainees have very little time to themselves during this period.

The easy part of training is attending classes. The real work during training is adjusting to the country—the weather, the food, the living conditions, and the customs and values of the local people. Everywhere they turn, trainees have something new to adjust to—food they cannot identify and that is too spicy, too bland, or too rich; lack of air conditioning or heat; lack of running water or hot water; outdoor toilets; limited or no electricity (and a different voltage); no granola, sliced bread, or ice cream; a town they know nothing about; and people with whom they cannot yet communicate in a common language.

These first few weeks require constant adjustments. It might not be so bad if friends and family surrounded them, but as it happens, old friends and family are among the biggest things trainees have to learn to do without. They make new friends in due course, but in the beginning, it can be quite lonely. The typical trainee also has some doubts during this period. “What have I gotten myself into? Am I really cut out for this?” It can be hard to experience these doubts after all the time and effort the trainee has already spent getting ready for Peace Corps service.

Of course, training is also a tremendously exciting and stimulating experience. Trainees grow by leaps and bounds as they confront and overcome various challenges. They form deep and lasting bonds with one another and exult in their progress in language and in figuring out how things work in a new place. Thus, phone calls, e-mails, and letters from Volunteers may seem a bit contradictory, full of the homesickness and exhilaration that coexist during this period. Even if the doubts are not expressed explicitly, they may be apparent as a subtext.

Families can provide enormous support to trainees during this time by writing often. Having left their old friends behind, trainees need the support of loved ones more than ever. Indeed, when word gets around a training site that the mail has just arrived (usually forwarded from the Peace Corps office in the country’s capital), trainees converge from everywhere—the sick suddenly feel better, the weary have energy, and the strong, silent types melt along with everyone else.

Settling-In

After successfully completing training, Volunteers are sworn in and then report to various locations around a country to begin their service. These locations are called a Volunteer’s site. During the next few weeks, Volunteers will set up their living quarters and ease into their jobs. This period is called “settling-in,” but in reality, it can be a very “unsettling” time. Volunteers are cut off from the comfort of previous routines and friends and not yet comforted by new routines and friends. Volunteers say goodbye to the close friends they made during training and, in some instances, no longer have daily contact with other Americans or host country people (the training staff) who speak English.

Although this may be the moment they've anticipated (and prepared for) for months or even years, Volunteers are likely asking themselves, "Am I ready for this? Can I really do this? Can I make it at my site?"

Even though they have been in the country for two months or more, Volunteers have not fully adjusted. Being on their own as a Volunteer is very different from training. They no longer have the structure of classes, are surrounded by fellow Americans, get mail regularly, or are taken care of or given directions by Peace Corps staff. They now have to take care of and direct themselves. Moreover, they are, once again, in a brand-new place. However, during this time, many Volunteers discover that they manage quite well, even though they may not have cooked a meal or done their own laundry since arriving in-country.

The main task of the settling-in period is the housing process. This entails anything from renting and furnishing an apartment or house to moving in with a local family. In some cases, trainees arrange for housing during visits to their future sites; in others, Volunteers move into housing provided by the host country government. In all cases, housing is reviewed by the Peace Corps to ensure that it is safe. Once the matter of housing is settled, Volunteers turn their attention to work.

Letters home during this time will probably reflect the normal fears and self doubts of a transition phase. No matter how much a Volunteer appreciates and enjoys the new situation, there will be days when he or she feels discouraged.

Families should know that in some countries the Peace Corps office holds letters for Volunteers until they provide the office with their new site address. Thus, if a Volunteer's letter home makes no mention of a recent communication, there is no cause for alarm. It may also have been easy for the Volunteer to call home or send e-mail from the training site, and this may no longer be the case at the Volunteer's assigned site.

The First Year

A Volunteer's first nine months or so after settling-in have a quality all their own, quite unlike the periods before or after. Two issues

dominate this time: coming to terms with language limitations and getting a grip on job responsibilities.

Language training gives Volunteers survival skills; it does not make them fully functioning members of the host country society. This means that, while they can hold their own at the cafe and the grocery store, they often are at a loss for words at work or in more sophisticated conversations. It can be discouraging to Volunteers to know that they are not as effective as they could be if they spoke and understood the local language better. Not speaking a language well can easily lead to feelings of isolation.

The language-learning challenge only complicates the other primary issue of the first year: getting good at the job. There is always a learning curve when starting a new job, even in the United States, but it can be frustrating when the Volunteer has come so far and spent so many months in preparation. People join the Peace Corps to make a difference, so it can be especially frustrating to feel like they are unable to operate at 100 percent. For some, the frustration is not so much in learning the job as it is in figuring out how best to contribute. This can involve anything from piecing together projects out of an assortment of community needs to fleshing out complex goals and objectives.

These difficulties take their toll under the best of circumstances—especially if Volunteers go through the experience alone. They may not yet have had time to make any close friends in the community or at work, so there are few people they know well enough to confide in. While Volunteers still have the friends they made in training, those friends may not be posted nearby.

The first year is also when nearly all Volunteers face the question of why they joined the Peace Corps. Inevitably, as Volunteers start doing what they have agreed to do for the next two years, they are prompted to reflect on the contributions they are making and on what they are getting out of the experience. In taking stock, one or more of the following thoughts are bound to surface:

- This is not what I thought I was going to be doing.
- I am not really needed here; anybody could do what I am doing.
- I am not making a significant contribution.

- I am not using my technical skills in this position.
- I do not have any co-workers.
- I am just filling a slot.
- It is impossible to get anything done in this country.
- No one cares that I am here.
- No one is interested in what I have come to teach.
- I am taking a job away from a local person.
- Everything here takes too long.
- I do not speak the language well enough to be of any real use.

If a Volunteer expresses such doubts in letters home, it is important to realize that they are normal during this period. Volunteers generally resolve most of them, but it can be a lengthy process that extends all the way to the end of their service.

The Second Year

Not surprisingly, many Volunteers find the second year as fulfilling as they found the first year frustrating. Their language skills inevitably improve, which means they feel more comfortable on the job and in the community. They get better at their job and feel increasingly useful. They begin to feel enriched by the close friendships they make. It is hard to capture the exhilaration that Volunteers feel in the second year when they have become comfortable in what, not long before, was an alien, somewhat threatening and frustrating new environment. Volunteers gain a tremendous sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, recognizing, quite rightly, that they have become stronger people.

As Volunteers feel more fulfilled in their country of service, they may identify less with the U.S. In some cases, they may even start to feel alienated from it. They may write home less often, criticize America more in their letters, or declare that they are in no hurry to return home after they finish their work with the Peace Corps. Such reactions may be due partly to the multicultural perspective Volunteers develop on political, economic, and social issues while they serve overseas. It may also be due to apprehension about going through another major change. It is also likely that they have

developed a genuine love for the host country, their friends, and life as a Volunteer.

Coming Home

It's a surprise to most Volunteers—and a shock to most families—that the hardest part of the Peace Corps experience is often coming home. Many former Volunteers have remarked that readjusting to life back home is even more difficult than adjusting to life overseas.

But what can be so hard about coming home? The Volunteer already speaks the language and understands the culture. He or she is reuniting with family and friends. Part of the issue is that Volunteers at the end of their service often strongly identify with their Peace Corps country. They may now have more in common with friends in their country of service than with their old friends in America. Moreover, Volunteers are keenly aware that they may never see these overseas friends again. The goodbyes may be permanent, unlike those of two years earlier.

Returning Volunteers may miss the stimulation of living in a foreign culture, of the small triumphs that occur each day. No one gets excited in a shop or on a bus in America when someone starts speaking English. Volunteers may have no idea what they are going to do after Peace Corps service. While they can dine off their Peace Corps stories for a few weeks, people soon expect them to get on with their lives.

The more families understand about this difficult stage, the better they will be able to help their loved ones through it—and get through it themselves. Consider these excerpts from a Volunteer's essay that eloquently describes the reentry stage:

The problem is this notion of home. The word suggests a place and a life all set up and waiting for us; all we have to do is move in. But home isn't merely a place we inhabit; it's a lifestyle we construct (wherever we go), a pattern of routines, habits, and behaviors associated with certain people, places, and objects all confined to a limited area or neighborhood. We can certainly construct a home back in our own culture, just as we did abroad, but there won't be one waiting for us when we arrive....

In other words, no one goes home; rather, we return to our native country and, in due course, we create a new home. This condition of homelessness is perhaps the central characteristic of the experience of reentry, and the confusion, anxiety, and disappointment it arouses in us are the abiding emotions of this difficult period.

To put it another way, the trouble with reentry is that you suddenly find yourself in transition when what you expected was to simply pick up where you left off (though, of course, neither the place where you left off nor the person who went overseas exists anymore). Even when they're expected, transitions are troublesome; when they're not, they can be genuinely debilitating.

Your self-esteem isn't helped, meanwhile, by the fact that no one seems especially interested in what you've been doing for the last two years. You have just gone through what may be the seminal experience of your life (certainly of your life to-date), an experience that has transformed your view of the world and your own country—and changed you profoundly in the process—and yet your family and intimates somehow aren't bowled over. You have so much to explain, but alas, their capacity to absorb is not nearly matched by your need to recapitulate; they're filled up before you're even half empty. The typical returned Volunteer is a catharsis waiting (not so patiently) to happen.

This dynamic only adds to the returned Volunteer's growing crisis of identity. With no present role, your sense of self—and of self-worth—is embodied in the sum of all the experiences you've had in the Peace Corps; you are what you have been through in the last two years. But if nobody wants to hear this, then how can they know how you've changed and who you've become? And if they don't know who you are, how can they value or even like you?

Another frustrating dimension of readjustment is the sudden return to anonymity. While Volunteers often complain about living in a fish-bowl overseas, their every move the subject of intense scrutiny and still more intense speculation, they nevertheless enjoy being the center of attention and interest; it makes them feel special, even important. Speaking the local language, for example, makes celebrities—even heroes—out of Volunteers, as does being the first American ever to teach at the King Hassan II Elementary School or to ride the local bus from Song Kwah to Phu Banh. Now, no one

looks up when we enter a room or squeals with delight when we start speaking Swahili. Our every move has more or less the same novelty value as everyone else's every move. We aren't special anymore—and we miss it.

Something else we miss, acutely, is the intensity of the Peace Corps experience. Even when it was difficult—indeed, especially when it was difficult—the experience of living and working among an alien people had an almost palpable richness about it. We could practically feel ourselves growing and maturing, being stretched beyond what we thought were our limits and forced to come up with more patience or tolerance or persistence than we thought we had in us. We knew we were being transformed. And this was immensely stimulating and sustaining. Back home, life is easy and predictable; our character no longer gets a regular workout.

These losses—of home, self-confidence, and independence—are at the core of readjustment and all but guarantee that most returned Volunteers are not going to pick up where they left off. What's worse, the typical Volunteer suffers these losses alone and largely in silence. For two years, throughout all the excitement and frustration of culture shock, pre-service training, settling-in, and beyond, we were supported by other Volunteers going through the same experience we were. Now, suddenly and precipitously, we're on our own. We have our family and friends about us, and they are sympathetic, but they don't really understand.

What about a returned Volunteer's family members? Such reactions are probably not exactly what they expected, either. They were looking forward to seeing their loved one again after a long two years. Yet, after a week or two, all the Volunteer wants to do is get away, to go see a Peace Corps friend in another town. He or she is even talking about going overseas again! How is that supposed to make the family feel?

Families should not take this personally. While some returned Volunteers may not be thrilled about being back in America, most are very happy to see their loved ones again. The problem is not with their family but with the new situation they find themselves in. Families can, of course, make the situation worse by getting upset. What really bothers many returned Volunteers is hearing family members say things like: "So what are you going to do now?" or,

“Why are you so down on your own country? It was good enough for you before!”

Coming home after successfully completing two years abroad is not the only way Volunteers end their Peace Corps service. There are, in fact, four other ways:

1. The Volunteer is sent home before completing a full tour (because of failure to abide by Peace Corps policies, for example). This is called administrative separation.
2. The Volunteer decides to leave before completing a full tour. This is called early termination.
3. The Peace Corps evacuates Volunteers from a country due to unrest, disaster, or other occurrences beyond the Volunteer’s control.
4. The Volunteer gets sick or injured and comes home to recover.

The first, third, and fourth of these possibilities—all essentially involuntary—may make a homecoming even more difficult. It is one thing to leave the Peace Corps because the Volunteer wants to; it is another to leave because he or she has to. Even when a Volunteer has made a conscious decision to leave early, the homecoming is likely to produce many of the feelings described above.

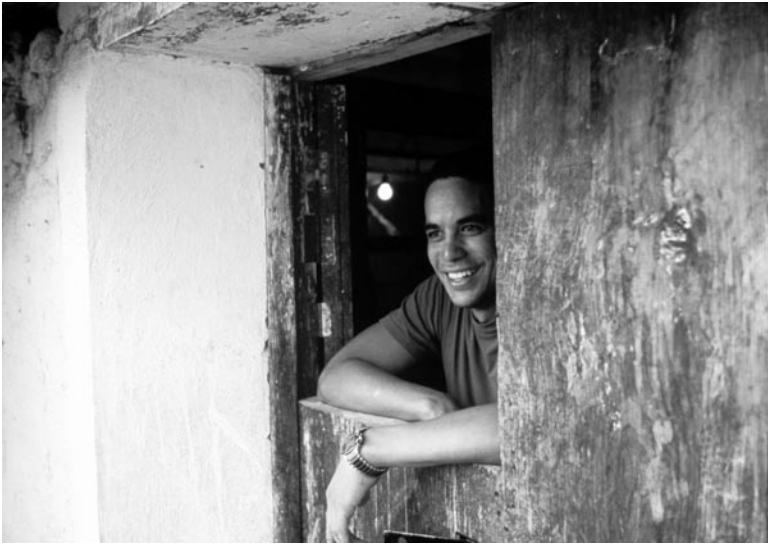
The Peace Corps does not simply dump former Volunteers on their U.S. doorsteps and wish them well. In fact, the Peace Corps offers a great deal of support to returning Volunteers, beginning with a close of service conference held overseas that previews many of the issues of reentry and helps Volunteers develop coping strategies, including assistance in finding jobs.

For the first year after return to the United States, returned Peace Corps Volunteers have access to resources for career planning and reentry through the Office of Returned Volunteer Services at headquarters and the Peace Corps’ 11 regional recruiting offices. (Currently, these are located in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, DC.)

Returned Volunteers who are interested in graduate education may apply for a Peace Corps Fellows program at dozens of universities

around the country. If selected, they can earn a master's degree at reduced cost while working in underserved U.S. communities in, among other areas, education, health, and economic development.

Returned Volunteers can maintain a connection to their host country through the Peace Corps Partnership Program and the Paul D. Coverdell World Wise Schools program. The Partnership Program supports specific community-initiated projects as well as projects focused on the advancement of women, HIV/AIDS prevention and education, information technology, and global development. World Wise Schools matches Volunteers with U.S. schools, helping bring geography and cross-cultural issues to life for schoolchildren. Returned Volunteers are welcomed participants in this program, especially as classroom speakers.



Part II: Common Questions

The Peace Corps experience is rich in rewards to Volunteers. They gain fluency in a new language and hone skills that make them extremely attractive to employers and graduate schools. They become more sensitive to cross-cultural issues, form lifelong friendships with people around the world, and grow stronger in many unexpected ways. Former Volunteers often say they got much more out of the experience than they gave. While this handbook alludes to the many tangible and intangible benefits of Peace Corps service, its primary purpose is to provide families with a picture of both the routine life of Volunteers and some of the unusual things that can happen.

Living Conditions

The image most families and prospective Volunteers have of living conditions in the Peace Corps is largely based on the view of developing countries presented in the U.S. media. These images typically include substandard housing; no electricity, running water, or bathroom facilities; limited availability of food and other basic commodities; and an absence of basic infrastructure, such as transportation, medical facilities, and public utilities.

That being said, a thorough safety and security assessment is conducted for every country that the Peace Corps considers entering.

A team from the Peace Corps composed of representatives from several offices previews work and housing sites to assess the ability of the Peace Corps to provide a safe, secure, healthy, and productive environment for Volunteers.

While it is true that most Volunteers go without some amenities, very few have none at all. Media images notwithstanding, most Volunteers live in comfortable housing and have access to standard conveniences. Indeed, an increasing number of countries served by the Peace Corps have well-developed infrastructures, so programs often focus more on technical assistance than on development.

Less Is Merely Less

Even basic living conditions are not necessarily unhealthy, unsafe, or unpleasant. Lack of indoor plumbing, hot water, or electricity, while inconvenient in the beginning, does not threaten a Volunteer's health, safety, or emotional well-being. Indeed, after adapting to a different culture and making the necessary adjustments, most Volunteers develop a comfortable life. If they are having difficulty adjusting, their living conditions are usually only a small part of the adjustment. As a former Volunteer in Guinea-Bissau, West Africa, wrote:

Most of us agree that although we knew the Peace Corps was going to be hard, it is often hard in a different way than we expected. We all worried about adjusting to the bugs and the heat, but that's the easy part. It's more of a challenge to get used to dealing with a perplexing bureaucracy ... or cultural barriers.

This is not meant to discount the very real challenges that Volunteers must overcome (usually of the cross-cultural sort), the security risks they face, or the sacrifices they are asked to make. It merely highlights that what families and prospective Volunteers tend to worry about the most are among the easiest adjustments for Volunteers to make. In fact, Volunteers with the most difficult living conditions are often among the best adjusted. They expected and even wanted to have to give things up while serving in the Peace Corps, to test their mettle, and they savor the opportunity to rise to the occasion.

Safety and Security

Maximizing the safety and security of Volunteers is the top priority of the Peace Corps. Because Volunteers serve at the grass-roots level worldwide, in urban centers, very remote areas, and everything in between, health and safety risks are an inherent part of Volunteer service. Peace Corps staff and Volunteers work together to create a framework that safeguards Volunteers' well-being to the greatest extent possible. Safety and security information is fully incorporated into all aspects of Volunteer recruitment, training, and service, and safety and security policies and training curricula are adjusted as situations change. Volunteers do their part by taking personal responsibility for their behavior at all times and by integrating successfully into their host communities. They reduce risks by following recommendations for locally appropriate behavior, exercising sound judgment, and abiding by Peace Corps' policies and procedures. Both out of respect for the host country's culture and to minimize security risks, Volunteers may have to change much of their behavior, at least while serving overseas. How they choose to speak, dress, entertain themselves, travel, and make friends matters a great deal.

While most Volunteers serve for two years without experiencing a major incident, Peace Corps service does involve certain risks, including road accidents, natural disasters, crime, and civil unrest. From many years of experience in dealing with such incidents, the Peace Corps has developed a detailed plan to help Volunteers stay safe during their service. This plan starts with Volunteers building relationships with people in their communities. Each post's security measures include information sharing, Volunteer training, site selection criteria, protocols for addressing safety and security incidents and a detailed country-specific emergency action plan.

The coordination of safety and security activities falls primarily to the Peace Corps Office of Safety and Security, which was established in 2002. This office fosters improved communication, coordination, oversight, and accountability for all the agency's safety and security efforts. Regional safety and security officers are involved with the training and mentoring of safety and security coordinators at each post; collecting and analyzing data related to Volunteer safety; and emergency preparedness planning and training for domestic and overseas operations.

The Peace Corps addresses larger security concerns through country-specific emergency action plans. These plans, developed to address serious events such as natural disasters or civil unrest, set forth the strategies developed by each Peace Corps post to prepare for, respond to, and recover from such crises. The Peace Corps works closely with each country's U.S. embassy to share information, develop strategies, and coordinate communications in a crisis. If a decision is made to evacuate Volunteers from a country, the Peace Corps commits every available resource to safely move them and staff out of harm's way.

Alone and Isolated or an Active Community Member?

One misconception is that Volunteers live by themselves in an isolated village, completely on their own. The reality is quite the opposite. Volunteers are welcomed into communities, working and living with families and communities that become their primary support system. In many cases, the comings and goings of the American Volunteer are an integrated part of community life.

The relationships and friendships Volunteers develop in their host community are the key to their own safety and security. Becoming an active community member is just one of the ways Volunteers take responsibility for their own safety and well-being. When they become a real part of their community, Volunteers are protected like family members and are valued as contributors to development. Obviously, these important relationships can't be developed in a 40-hour workweek, so Volunteers are really on duty all the time.

The Peace Corps, host families, and communities make a determined effort to prevent Volunteers from being alone and isolated. The Peace Corps is very careful in placing Volunteers, selecting sites only after a thorough assessment that considers site history; access to medical, banking, postal, and other essential services; access to communications, transportation, and markets; availability of adequate housing; and the potential for obtaining and maintaining the support of local authorities and the community at-large. Additionally, Peace Corps program managers and medical staff visit Volunteers periodically. If they find that a Volunteer's safety or well-being has been or is at risk of being compromised, they will try to resolve the situation or move the Volunteer to another location.

Another fallacy is that Volunteers are basically left to their own devices if something happens to them; that they are unable to contact the appropriate people in an emergency. While some Volunteers do not have telephones in their homes, most have access to telephones either at work or through a public facility in their community. Instant communications are also part of the Peace Corps. Some Volunteers have cellphones, satellite phones, pagers, and Internet access. However, these systems often are not as reliable as they are in the United States, which can make it difficult to contact a family member. For those very few whose community or entire region is not wired for telephones or computers, there is always access to another means of communication, such as wireless radio, courier, or telegraph.

The Peace Corps requires Volunteers to establish an emergency contact system in their community, to test it to ensure it works, and to keep their contact information up-to-date. Developing the relationships necessary to set up this system helps Volunteers gain acceptance by, and integrate into, their communities. Volunteers are expected to let Peace Corps staff know when they leave their sites and where they are going in case of emergencies.

Civil Unrest

The potential exists for changing political situations in many of the countries the Peace Corps serves. Such civil unrest can vary from a dramatic coup to an orderly strike or demonstration. Likewise, the response of governments varies from the measured and restrained to the harsh and repressive. Naturally, when unrest occurs, Volunteers can be affected by it along with others.

The Peace Corps, in coordination with the U.S. State Department, has instituted measures to manage a wide variety of crises. These measures begin with thoroughly training Volunteers on what to do in an emergency. The Peace Corps has also developed an emergency action plan for each country that includes a system for coordinating communications and a plan for full-scale evacuation in the event of unusual danger. Staff and Volunteers in each country test these emergency action plans regularly and revise them as experience or conditions warrant. For example, during the Gulf War and after September 11, 2001, the Peace Corps evacuated Volunteers from several countries, largely as a precaution. It has also evacuated Volunteers from countries because of civil unrest.

A Volunteer's special status as the only American in a community offers a certain degree of protection. Indeed, stories are common of local people going out of their way to look after a Volunteer, whom they consider one of their own. Civil unrest is most likely to occur in a country's capital and Volunteers are generally posted outside the capital.

The News Is Not the Norm

Often, the only time families see or read something about the Volunteer's country of service is when something extraordinary occurs, like political upheaval or a natural disaster. These rare glimpses via the media may leave an impression that the country is in regular turmoil, when the situation is probably isolated or infrequent.

Family members are encouraged to contact the Office of Special Services (OSS) whenever they have concerns. OSS has up-to-date information from in-country staff on Volunteer whereabouts and safety. The Peace Corps also posts updates on its website during crises overseas. Contact information for OSS and the website address are at the end of this handbook.

Natural Disasters

Floods, earthquakes, typhoons, and hurricanes usually warrant headline news in the United States. Although safety in a natural disaster is never guaranteed, Volunteers can protect themselves and are thoroughly trained on what to do in a natural disaster. These events rarely occur without warning, which means that Volunteers usually have enough time to get to a safe place or to make the place where they are as safe as possible. In-country Peace Corps staff confirms the whereabouts and safety of all Volunteers and provides instructions and information that is then made available to OSS at Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, DC.

Crime

Crime poses a more common threat to Volunteers' safety. Crime has increased worldwide since the Peace Corps was founded in 1961, and Volunteers can be more vulnerable to crime than the citizens of a host country, particularly when outside of their own communities. Even though Volunteers live modestly by U.S. standards, they often live relatively well by host country standards and they may be considered rich. The material things Volunteers bring with them from

home—like new clothes and shoes, wristwatches, radios, CD players, cameras, and laptop computers—are often a source of wonder and temptation. Regardless of how Volunteers really live in-country, they are still Americans and are perceived to have means.

The Peace Corps has responded vigorously to the potential crime overseas by instituting programs and policies that promote the safety and security of its Volunteers. Although these measures do not guarantee safety, they keep Volunteers from exposing themselves to avoidable risks. During their training, Volunteers learn local languages and cultural norms and behavior that reduce risk. However, at the same time, Volunteers are expected to take responsibility for their own safety and well-being. They can significantly reduce their risk by being sensitive to their surroundings, culture, and environment; by modifying some habits and behavior; and by using common sense.

In some countries, female Volunteers can be at increased risk of sexual harassment and assault. The greater freedom women have in the United States compared to women in many Peace Corps countries makes adjustment difficult but critical. During pre-service training, Volunteers learn about different gender role expectations and strategies for dealing with unwanted attention.

Volunteers are expected to contact Peace Corps staff immediately if a theft, assault, or any other kind of incident occurs that threatens their safety. This enables the Peace Corps to respond quickly to help the Volunteer and to mitigate the situation.

Health Matters

Families are concerned about the health of loved ones serving in the Peace Corps. They are concerned the Volunteer may get sick or have poor access to proper medical care. It is true that Volunteers are exposed to greater health risks because of poor sanitation in many countries and diseases that do not exist or are largely uncommon in America, such as malaria, schistosomiasis, and cholera. Frequently, illness among Volunteers comes from their lack of resistance to diseases that are new to them. Environmental health hazards also exist in some countries, and there are higher rates of HIV/AIDS in many countries where Volunteers serve than in the United States.

The absence of a proper diet is rarely the cause of illness for Volunteers. While certain vegetables and fruits are not available in some countries, Volunteers should be able to get what they need to stay healthy, even if the foods do not always conform to U.S. tastes.

Another factor that can lead to illness is the stress of adapting to a new lifestyle. Any kind of change is stressful—even when it is positive—and people under stress tend to get sick more often. New Volunteers leave behind family and friends, a job or school, and a familiar city; move at least two times in three months; make new friends during training and then leave them behind; learn to live alone or with other people; and so on. It is normal to react to these changes by getting mildly anxious or even ill.

Their illnesses rarely result in long-term or life-threatening health problems. Volunteers' most common complaint, stomach ailments, are certainly a nuisance, but they do not pose a serious health risk. In most cases, they resolve of their own accord without any treatment or require only a brief course of medication. This is not to say that such illnesses are not painful or annoying. But they are not dangerous if they are diagnosed and treated in a timely manner.

An Ounce of Prevention...

The heart of the Peace Corps' health system is prevention. Its strenuous efforts to keep Volunteers from getting sick and ensure their health include:

- Learning as much as possible about each Volunteer's health history prior to service and trying to accommodate those with special health needs.
- Requiring and administering regular immunizations and medications against local endemic diseases. These include malaria, hepatitis, tetanus, and cholera.
- Conducting physical and dental exams for all Volunteers during the middle and at the end of their service.
- Providing up to 30 hours of health education as part of the three-month pre-service training for every trainee. This education covers disease prevention, safety procedures, stress management, and dietary requirements.
- Providing every Volunteer with a medical kit tailored to the health conditions of the country of assignment.

- Supplying ongoing healthcare and education through in-service training, visits by the Peace Corps medical officer to Volunteers' sites, and medical newsletters.

...A Pound of Cure

Many countries served by the Peace Corps have one or more medical facilities, usually in the capital, which are appropriate for short-term care. The Peace Corps contracts with U.S. and host country national doctors and nurses (called Peace Corps medical officers) to provide additional healthcare to Volunteers in all countries. When possible, the agency also contracts with in-country medical specialists (e.g., psychiatrists, OB-GYN, etc.) for services on a case-by-case basis. If a Volunteer's condition is not serious, the Volunteer is asked to call, radio, or otherwise contact a Peace Corps medical officer. In most cases, the medical officer prescribes a treatment that solves the problem.

If the medical officer cannot make an adequate diagnosis over the phone or the prescribed treatment does not work, the officer will ask the Volunteer to come to the local Peace Corps office for further consultation. At this point, the medical officer may make a diagnosis and prescribe treatment, order some medical tests, or refer the Volunteer to a local specialist. If the symptoms persist and the condition cannot be adequately treated in-country, the medical officer will send the Volunteer to the closest evacuation point abroad (the Peace Corps uses hospitals in Hawaii, Kenya, Panama, South Africa, and Thailand) or to Washington, DC, for further evaluation and care.

What About Emergencies?

While in the Peace Corps, Volunteers have extensive medical coverage. In the event of an accident or illness, there are several levels of response. Sometimes a medical emergency can be handled in-country. If not, the Volunteer is stabilized and then put on the next available commercial flight out of the country. In cases where the Volunteer cannot be stabilized locally, the Peace Corps enlists an air ambulance (a specially staffed and equipped plane that is, in effect, a traveling life-support system) to evacuate the Volunteer to the closest appropriate medical facility.

“But Don’t Worry, I’m Feeling Much Better Now”

Many Volunteers have had little experience with disease, but a serious bout of gastrointestinal illness—especially when it occurs far from home—can be frightening and often provokes dramatic letters home. These letters may worry recipients because the impression is that the host country is an unhealthy place for one’s loved one. While health issues may arise, the vast majority of Volunteers do not get chronically or seriously ill during their service if they take the preventive measures recommended by the Peace Corps.

Medical Confidentiality

When a medical emergency does occur, the Peace Corps does everything it can to keep families informed. However, the Peace Corps is obliged by law to protect the confidentiality of Volunteer’s medical records and, under most circumstances, must get a Volunteer’s permission to release information to anyone else, even a family member.

Volunteer Communication

After health concerns, the most common cause of anxiety for families is when they stop getting letters or phone calls from a Volunteer. When a family is accustomed to getting letters or e-mails every two weeks or so and they suddenly stop, they naturally start to wonder. While some families assume that no news is good news, many infer there must be something wrong. As one family member wrote:

It’s nice to know my mother is probably fine, but it doesn’t explain why I’m not getting any letters. This isn’t like her, you understand. She’s been very good about writing. And she’s never missed my birthday in her life.

Most long gaps between letters from a Volunteer are due to the nature of postal systems around the world or to a change in the Volunteer’s routine. For Americans who take reliable, efficient mail delivery for granted, it is hard to imagine what a letter may go through to get to the United States from the interior of Africa, the mountains of Nepal, or an island in the Pacific. Here are a few possibilities: The stamps may have fallen off and the letter may have been thrown away. There may be a postal strike. The postal jeep may be grounded because of a fuel shortage or roads washed out

by monsoons. Or maybe nothing is wrong, and the letter just sat at each of seven transfer points a day or two longer than usual—which would explain why you might hear nothing for eight weeks and suddenly receive four letters in one day.

Another possible explanation for why a family is not getting letters is that the Volunteer is not writing any. Perhaps the Volunteer is very busy with his or her work assignment, on vacation, or attending a conference. Although the Peace Corps urges Volunteers to communicate with their families regularly, it cannot guarantee that they will do so.

A two-month breakdown in communication can easily occur without anything out of the ordinary to account for it. This probably wouldn't matter to families if they could just call and check in on a Volunteer, but, in many cases, they can't do that and this can be frustrating or worrisome. The Peace Corps advises Volunteers and their families to number their letters to help keep track of correspondence.

When No News Means Bad News

In rare instances, a gap between letters may indicate that something is wrong and a Volunteer is hurt or something serious has happened. When a Volunteer is hurt, it is likely that he or she, a fellow Volunteer, or a community member will contact the Peace Corps office for assistance. Once informed, staff members will take immediate action, often bringing the Volunteer to the capital.

While none of the possible reasons for a Volunteer's being missing is pleasant to contemplate, Volunteers rarely go missing long before the Peace Corps is notified by concerned co-workers, neighbors, or other Volunteers. Volunteer training focuses on how to develop relationships and communication with the people in a Volunteer's community. This not only helps Volunteers be more effective in their work, but it increases their safety. If the Peace Corps is notified about a missing Volunteer, the family is notified as soon as possible. Thus, a family is likely to find out about a missing Volunteer long before a delay in letters is noticed.

What almost always turns out to be the case is that the Volunteer traveled away from his or her site without notifying anyone. When Volunteers go on vacation, work-related trips, or other extended

travel, they are required to get authorization from their host country supervisor and Peace Corps supervisor, and they are asked to submit an itinerary. (There are consequences for Volunteers who do not comply with this policy, including possible administrative separation from the Peace Corps.)

There is the remote but real possibility that the reason a family has not heard from a Volunteer is that something serious has occurred. The Peace Corps encourages family members of Volunteers to contact the Office of Special Services whenever they are concerned. That office follows up on all inquiries by families by contacting the country staff to ask about the Volunteer's welfare and relaying the family's concern.

Letters That Cause Alarm

Some of the things Volunteers write to their families can be very upsetting. It is quite common, for example, for Volunteers to confide their negative feelings—especially doubts—and details of uncomfortable illness (primarily gastrointestinal) to sympathetic family members. These may be feelings they are reluctant to share with host country friends or Peace Corps colleagues because they might be offended or might not understand. They may just want to share to feel close and comforted by family members. Volunteers can sometimes sound so unhappy, sick, or desperate that family members become alarmed. However, by the time a family receives the letter, the situation and illness have probably improved and the Volunteer has likely benefited from being able to share difficult feelings with loved ones. Although the Volunteer feels better, the family is left feeling lousy. However, while there may be reason to feel bad for your loved one, remember there is rarely cause for alarm. Volunteers are no more immune to the vicissitudes of life than anyone else.

Volunteer Hardships

Some of what is described in this handbook may not sound like the Peace Corps most families imagine or the one most Volunteers expect. Many families and Volunteers expect many more physical hardships and deprivations than there actually are. They also expect that it will be more difficult to adjust to these hardships than it is. Most former Volunteers would confirm that one adjusts quite

quickly to reading by candlelight, taking cold baths, and doing without television, washing machines, or chocolate chip cookies.

The greater hardships of Peace Corps service tend to be the multiple changes Volunteers must go through. These include loneliness, periodic doubts about the value of what the Volunteer is doing, the frustration of not speaking the local language very well, and the countless little challenges involved in adjusting to how people in another culture think and behave.

Volunteers are more likely to experience difficulties with these issues than with the possibility of inadequate living conditions, political upheavals, or limited healthcare. If Volunteers are not unduly anxious about these issues, then families probably shouldn't be either.



Part III: What Families Can Do

Staying in Touch

It may be the family member who actually serves in the Peace Corps who gets all the glory, but those on the home front play a key role in the Volunteer's experience. Anyone who has ever seen a Volunteer open a letter from home knows how much support the families of Volunteers provide. Nothing boosts morale higher than a letter from home (and nothing undermines it more than the absence of mail). While Volunteers receive a lot of support from friends in their host country, it does not replace the special understanding and acceptance that comes from family.

Thus, the single most important thing families can do is to stay in frequent touch with Volunteers, even when there is no news to report. What you say in letters, e-mails, or tapes is not as important as continuing to send them. For Volunteers, just knowing that family members are thinking about them is what matters.

Families are not passive players in the experience of Volunteers. Their participation in the Peace Corps experience may feel decidedly indirect, but it is nonetheless crucial. During times of loneli-

ness, doubt, and frustration, what sustains Volunteers is usually a mix of factors. These include not only their own strengths, sense of commitment, and fondness for the host country, but also the love and concern of their families back home.

Visiting a Volunteer

Some families want to visit their Volunteer during his or her service and this is always an exciting time for everyone, including the Volunteer's community. Families who want to visit a Volunteer are welcome to do so after training and the first three months of service and before the last three months of service. When making plans, families should work closely with the Volunteer to time a visit. Work schedules can be complex, and Volunteers need to ask their Peace Corps and host country supervisors for vacation days to spend time with visitors.



Part IV: How to Contact the Peace Corps

Office of Special Services

Sometimes families need to contact a Volunteer quickly because of an emergency in the United States. They may even want the Volunteer to return home as soon as possible. The Peace Corps Office of Special Services (OSS), which can be reached 24 hours a day, seven days a week, is the best resource under such circumstances (the phone numbers follow). Families often wonder whether they should tell a Volunteer bad news from home. No matter how upsetting it is, most people would rather be told than be protected from bad news.

OSS can help family members who need help to notify a Volunteer of an emergency or arrange for an emergency leave; who have questions about a Volunteer's status and want the office to make an inquiry; who want an update about civil unrest or a natural disaster in the host country; or have questions about this handbook or the Peace Corps in general.

To contact OSS at Peace Corps headquarters Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Eastern standard time), call 800.424.8580 (extension 1470) or 202.692.1470.

Office of Medical Services

For health-related questions, call the Peace Corps Office of Medical Services at 800.424.8580 (extension 1500) or 202.692.1500.

Note: *In an emergency after hours, please call the Office of Special Services at 800.424.8580 (extension 1470) or 202.692.1470 for further instructions on how to reach the on-call Special Services duty officer or the on-call medical duty officer.*

Peace Corps Website

Another useful resource for families is the Peace Corps website, www.peacecorps.gov, which includes sections for families and friends of Peace Corps Volunteers; the Peace Corps' safety and security plan; recent announcements and press releases; information on returned Volunteer services, the Coverdell World Wise Schools Program, and the Partnership Program; and updates on any crises in the countries where Volunteers serve.



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October 2005