PEACE CORPS/PANAMA A CASE STUDY OF EFFECTIVE PEACE CORPS PROGRAMS

COMMITMENT TO MISSION AND VISION



OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

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INTRODUCTION

This report is one of nine in the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) Study of Effective Peace Corps Programs. The study consists of nine case studies of Peace Corps programs – three in each region: Africa; Inter-America and Pacific; and Europe, Mediterranean, and Asia. Chosen in consultation with regional management, the posts selected were Niger, Malawi, Mauritania, Panama, Paraguay, Honduras, Georgia, Ukraine, and the Philippines. The purpose of the study was to document what these posts do to effect high quality programs.

We defined high quality programs as:

- Programs that prepare and place Volunteers in sites where they can be productive and are hosted by communities and organizations organized to be their partners in achieving the purpose of their assignment (goal one).
- Programs and assignments that bring Volunteers satisfaction, provide a healthy cross-cultural exchange (goal two), and inspire them to bring the world home (goal three).

The study of these programs was conducted in two phases. In phase I, OIG staff conducted extensive interviews with the staff at each overseas post involved with designing and planning programs; training Volunteers; developing sites; providing technical, medical, emotional, and administrative support to Volunteers; and managing the operational aspects of ensuring that these functions are performing effectively. Initial reports were then drafted and sent to the staff for their review.

In phase II, we spoke with Volunteers, mostly in small groups, about the same subjects: training, site development, site visits, support, and satisfaction with their Volunteer experience. In this phase, we asked Volunteers for their perspective on what the staff described they did in phase I. In three posts, Paraguay, Honduras, and Panama, we also interviewed counterparts during phase II for their viewpoints on implementing an effective Peace Corps program and a mutually beneficial Volunteer site placement and assignment.

The purpose of this study is to describe how some of the agency's best programs are led, managed, and administered: the procedures they use, the management approaches, the staffing assignments, and the programming and administrative details that distinguish one post's operations from another. The objective was to use real life examples as the basis for setting expectations for assessing program effectiveness and as a resource for staff to understand what it takes to run an effective program, as well as to provide some tools and ideas for establishing high-performing programs.

In some of our discussions with Volunteers in phase II, they felt that some of what the staff described to us in Phase I was not actually being done, was not being done effectively, or was not having the intended positive effect. This is not reflected in this

report, because of its focus on describing what the posts do well. But we did we report this information to the staff on an informal basis, and the instances of this type of feedback were not common. In general, the Volunteers' views did not contradict the staff in terms of the principal elements represented in well-run programs that are described here.

In writing these case studies, we decided not to name staff we credit for what we found to work well, but only to make reference to staff position titles. Our intention in doing this was to put the emphasis on the actual accomplishments, rather than who performed them. We do not mean in any way to minimize the credit that many individuals rightfully deserve for their excellent work. What we want to demonstrate is that there are actions that anyone can take or make an effort to initiate that are shown to effect positive Peace Corps program outcomes.

Phase I of the PC/Panama case study was conducted by Senior Evaluator Carlos Torres September 25 - October 2, 2005, who also conducted interviews with counterparts during phase II June 8 - 18, 2006. Senior Evaluator Lynn Khadiagala conducted the Volunteer interviews in phase II June 8 - 18, 2006.

BACKGROUND

Peace Corps Volunteers first arrived in the country in 1963. The program was closed in May 1971 for political and security reasons and was resumed in May 1990. Over 1,500 Volunteers have served in Panama. At the time of our visit, Volunteers were working in four program sectors:

Sustainable Agriculture Systems (SAS): The SAS project complements the Ministry of Agriculture's efforts to expand its rural extension services to farmers and promote agribusiness opportunities in rural communities. Volunteers work with nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and farms to teach about and encourage the use of organic farming techniques and fertilizers.

Community Environmental Conservation (CEC): Volunteers in the CEC project help government agencies, NGOs, and local community leaders to develop their capacity to identify conservation needs and protect high priority watersheds and protected areas. They live in communities that are inside or near protected areas. Volunteers provide technical assistance to promote natural resource management techniques and appropriate technologies. Volunteers also work closely with schools and youth groups to increase conservation awareness and environmental stewardship. Finally, Volunteers support agencies and NGOs to protect Panama's natural resources.

Environmental Health (EH): The EH project works closely with the Ministry of Health and health NGOs to increase community access to safe drinking water. Volunteers train community leaders in developing water committees to maintain potable systems. Volunteers also improve community health through development of sanitation systems

with a focus on composting latrines that create waste management systems for farmers and gardeners. EH Volunteers also act as health educators and trainers regarding hygienic practices and HIV/AIDS prevention.

Community Economic Development (CED): The CED/Coop Volunteers work with cooperatives to identify income generation opportunities and provide financial management training. CED Volunteers also increase youth business skills through a partnership with Junior Achievement. The CED project increases the business skills of youth/adults by supporting the development of community-based information technology centers and training programs. The CED/Tourism Volunteers work with the Ministry of Tourism to promote community-based tourism as an income generating opportunity.

Table 1. Volunteers by Project

Project	Sustainable Agriculture Systems	Community Environmental Conservation	Environmental Health	Community Economic Development
Number of Volunteers	27	40	38	32

Source: FY 2005 Project Status Reports.

COMMITMENT TO MISSION AND VISION

Entering the Peace Corps office in Panama, one immediately sees two posters depicting the mission and vision of the post in large letters (see Box 1). The posters make clear to the Volunteers, staff, and partner agencies that PC/Panama is committed to being an effective partner in development. The post's focus on real jobs for Volunteers is manifest to the Volunteers and to the agencies and communities with which they work.

Box 1. Mission, Vision, and Values of PC/Panama.

Mission

We work in partnership with others to promote sustainable solutions in the areas of health, sanitation, agriculture, environment and small business as we promote the dignity of people and their capacity to improve their own lives.

Vision

We will be recognized as a development leader and partner of choice committed to eradicating poverty, promoting social justice and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Values

Professionalism • Teamwork • Accountability • Trust • Transparency • Diversity • Effective Communication • Respect for Cultural Differences This is not empty rhetoric. Staff understand and apply the post's vision and mission in their work. Staff know which bus to take. They know where they are going, not just in numbers and project activities, but in the spirit and meaning of what Peace Corps is doing in Panama and their shared commitment to fulfill that vision. The vision and mission were articulated during a senior staff strategic planning retreat in April 2003, revised in March 2004 during the annual planning retreat, and shared with PC/Panama's partner agencies and community leaders.

The country director refers to the vision and mission statements often—when he talks to Trainees, Volunteers, staff, and counterparts (in both large and small groups and in one-on-one conversations). See Box 2. He refers to it in the quarterly newsletter (*La Vaina*), as do staff and Volunteers when they write articles about their Peace Corps work. The vision and mission is in the post's fact sheets and brochures and is

Box 2.

"One of the things I like to do in Panama is to encourage the Volunteers and staff to continue the development dialogue that begins in PST. As Volunteers and staff gain more experience, their view and understanding of their role in development evolves. I often call on both staff and Volunteers to challenge the assumptions behind our vision and mission and test it against their reality in the field."

--Country Director

described at the beginning of all of their presentations about PC/Panama.

The statement of the vision and mission is so well embedded in the staff's minds that a senior staff member was able to recount word by word a section of the mission statement when called by the country director. The anecdote goes like this:

One late night the staff member received an unexpected call from the country director. The country director was writing a document and needed to reference the mission statement, which he did not have at hand, so he opted to call a staff member in the hope that he would be able to dictate the mission statement. The staff recited it word by word from his daily exposure to the banners.

REAL JOBS WITH EFFECTIVE PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

PC/Panama uses the expression 'getting the right people on the bus' to describe what the post does and how they do it. For the program, this metaphor means:

- Knowing where you are going (vision and mission).
- Partnering with the right organizations.
- Hiring the right staff to manage and support projects.
- Training and supporting the Volunteers based on an understanding of what the Volunteers do and what it takes to be a Volunteer.

To "get the right person on the bus," you have to plan "where to go." This means making sure the site selected for the Volunteer has work opportunities. The post develops real jobs for the Volunteers by selecting host agencies as partners, rather than

communities. Volunteers in Panama work with communities, but as representatives of the agencies to which they were assigned.

The country director believes that the success of this strategy requires the post to find an appropriate place along the Peace Corps' continuum of Volunteer assignments. At one end of the continuum are Volunteers working strictly within the structure of a host agency as quasi-employees, helping to build the capacity of the agency to fulfill their functions. At the other end of the continuum are Volunteers trained in Participatory Analysis for Community Action (PACA) with instructions to identify community needs and develop projects. PC/Panama equips Volunteers with PACA tools, but as a means of getting to know their communities and not for identifying and developing their primary assignment.

In the site selection process, the post verifies that the partner agency has already determined what the needs are, identified the beneficiaries, and laid out a strategy to meet those needs. When PC/Panama places well-trained Volunteers in agencies with these elements in place, they believe that the Volunteer is "on the right bus," meaning he is headed directly to where he needs to go, a seat has been assigned to him by identifying the work he will do, and his bag is packed by preparing him with the skills to do the work expected of him when he gets there. The Volunteer departs for his site with a brief description of the site, how to get there, contact information, and a list of expected primary and secondary assignments. One program manager described the sheet as "...a guide and framework to get the Volunteer started and so they can see why it is we put them there in the first place."

The post knows from experience the failure of a system that places the responsibility of finding work on the Volunteer. The post accepts that it is their responsibility to develop the Volunteer's primary job (see Box 3). The country director observed that when a project design relies on secondary projects, "We do ourselves a disservice, because we cannot train for that. We want to train the Volunteers for what they are going to do."

Box 3. Key elements of a good assignment are:

- The Volunteer's tasks are clearly defined from the outset.
- The partner organizations are motivated and can support the Volunteer.
- The partner organizations express a clear need for a Volunteer.
- The partner organization has infrastructure, personnel, technicians, a budget, and regulations.

Program managers look for NGOs and smaller government agencies that have been in the field for sufficient time to know the needs of the community. Program managers are there to meet a specific and articulated need with a strategy to address it and have the experience, motivation, infrastructure, manpower, funds, organizational skills and acceptance in the community for the Volunteer to participate in and contribute to an existing or identified project. Program managers understand that a productive Volunteer is a satisfied Volunteer. A program manager expressed it this way:

When I came, Volunteers were placed in good communities: [a] friendly, good environment, but not productive; they were feeling that their abilities were not fully used. So we decided to change that situation. I started to say that productivity was the key to happiness. So that's when I started to find specific jobs for Volunteers, partnering them to work with the cooperatives in the sites.

The implication of this strategy for site development is that the program manager is not talking to community leaders or meeting with community members to identify communities that have needs a Volunteer might help them address. The post's goal in site development is to place the Volunteer with an organization that has tangible and clear tasks and objectives for the Volunteer and has sufficient resources, e.g., facilities and supplies, to enhance the prospects of the Volunteer to have a productive service (see Box 3 for characteristics of a good site assignment). Instead, in the words of a program manager: "When I do site development, I don't talk to the community; I talk to the organization I believe is the place that needs the Volunteer to do work."

Another program manager explained that,

Not a lot of communities would solicit an agriculture Volunteer, as they do not see an immediate need for improved agriculture. If we let them [the communities] drive site development, we would be placing Volunteers in communities to build roads and community centers. This is what was happening before I got here, and only about 5% of Volunteers were actually working on agriculture projects and the rest just doing whatever. Small farmers, especially subsistence farmers, may not see the long-term benefits of the techniques we are introducing, and therefore do not see the need for agriculture Volunteers. This takes a lot of years of education and trial and error to see any effects. So by pairing with agencies and having them drive the site selection, we are bypassing this process, as we are pairing with folks who are already having some success and helping them to make their success more sustainable.

Working with their partner organizations, the program staff develop structured job descriptions for the Volunteers, and at the same time, encourage the Volunteer to use their knowledge of PACA to learn about the community and meet people, especially for the purpose of developing and implementing secondary projects.

The sustainable agriculture project exemplifies PC/Panama's agency-driven approach to site development. The post partners with *Proyecto de Reforestaction con Especies Nativas* (PRORENA), an NGO that works on restoring the diverse native forest that used to cover extensive areas of Panama and to demonstrate that large-scale ecological restoration in the tropics is technically feasible, socially attractive, and financially viable. While PRORENA's target population is the small farmer, the placement of the agriculture Volunteers is driven by the work needs of the partnering agency and not the community's.

To ensure that Volunteers will have work, the project manager meets with PRORENA's director about nine months before pre-service training (PST) to identify communities where the Volunteers can most contribute to PRORENA's project. One product of the meeting is a list of potential PRORENA regional offices where Volunteers could be effectively used. The program manager passes this list to a Volunteer Regional Leader¹ to do an initial investigation about the possibilities of real work. Based on the feedback of the regional leaders, the program manager pursues placements in specific communities, meeting with PRORENA staff of the regional offices, potential counterparts, and community members. Finally, the project manager meets with the selected offices to explain the role each participant will play, clarifies expectations, and makes sure the participants understand that the Volunteer will be working primarily with PRORENA, but will be interested in working as well with individual farmers.

As the arrival of Trainees nears, the program manager has final meetings with the regional leaders about the sites and with PRORENA to clarify further the prospective job of the Volunteer. The program manager also prepares the two-page site information sheet that is given to Trainees when sites are announced. Included in the information sheet is the feedback received in the community meetings.

EXPERIENCING THE VOLUNTEERS' WORK ENVIRONMENT

Getting the right people on the bus is not just an expression. Effective program support rests on the staff's understanding of Volunteer life in the field. The bus, in this case, is the means for staff to "Vamos al Campo" (Let's Go to the Country), a strategy to assure that staff experience firsthand what it takes to be a Volunteer, so that their expectations of Volunteers are grounded in realism.

PC/Panama has an innovative approach to ensure that the program and administrative support staff understand the Volunteers' activities, the skills required, their living conditions, and the challenges of their sites. Like the Volunteers, the support staff get on the right bus—the same buses the Volunteers take—and *Vamos Al Campo* (go to the country). Staff spend a day or more at a site to see where Volunteers live, how they live, and what their challenges are. These site visits, according to a staff member we interviewed, help them to really understand what it takes to be a Volunteer. "Our expectations and support to them is grounded in those realities that we would not have known otherwise if we have not taken the trip the way they do it." Staff also perceive that the experience helps them to understand better their jobs and get closer to the Volunteers.

The strategy has been in place for at least four years and is mandatory for all support staff. Once a year, during the dry season, the administrative officer runs a lottery for staff to get their assigned site to visit. The lottery was established to counteract any preferences from staff members to select sites that were convenient or appealing as

¹ This position in PC/Panama is equivalent to what most posts call a Volunteer Leader.

tourism destinations. An example of the challenges and outcomes of such a "trip to the country" is the one recounted by the medical assistant:

I went to Bocas del Toro in the Atlantic, near the border with Costa Rica. I went there with the Associate Peace Corps Director (APCD) for agriculture. After seven hours of traveling by car we arrived in Chiriqui to sleep. Early next day we drove to Punta Alegra to get a boat to the final destination. We were in that boat for another two hours and in the rain. Once we got there, the Volunteer arranged for us a place on the floor to sleep because there were no hotels. We not only visited that Volunteer but held a meeting with all the Volunteers in the area, and we talked to counterparts. I feel that those experiences are very important. They are the only way to really know how Volunteers live, the quality of the pharmacies in their areas, how the mail operates, and where the mail collection points are. As a result of the trip I not only understood how the Volunteers live and their challenges, but I opened a credit account with a pharmacy for the Volunteers so they can go directly to them and get what they need right away instead of waiting for our shipment. We also opened a credit account with a hotel in the area for the Volunteer to use in case of need. In addition, traveling with the project manager was a good opportunity to converse about the project and the Volunteers, since there is not much time in the office to do that.

PC/Panama enables the program managers, as well, to "Vamos Al Campo" by encouraging and supporting them to be in the field as much as possible, either with the Volunteers or on site development trips. On average, program managers are in the field more than 100 days a year.

QUALIFIED AND DEDICATED STAFF

Just as the Volunteers have to get on the right bus with adequate skills, preparation, and attitude, the staff who prepare their assignments and sites and who will board the same buses also need to have the right mix of skills and dedication. PC/Panama country directors have been careful to hire competent individuals to manage the projects and Volunteers. Country directors have let go individuals who do not meet performance standards. The post staff are attentive to make sure that only the right people get on the bus.

PC/Panama's staff are relatively young in tenure, highly qualified in education and experience for their jobs, and passionate about their work. They believe in what they are doing and in what the Volunteers are doing. Staff selection and qualifications are pivotal to the success of the program. Management understands that the vision and mission are only as effective as the staff charged with making them real. High staff performance is demanded.

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

The country director was once a Volunteer in Honduras, speaks Spanish, is familiar with the local culture, and has experience as a programming and training officer (PTO). The program managers have been trainers for the Peace Corps, and they each have advanced educational training directly related to the programming sectors in which they work.

Like programming, training is headed and staffed with a well educated and experienced group of people. The training director has been with PC/Panama for over five years, has a B.S. in computer science and a double Master's degree in higher education and in human resource management. Before becoming the training director, he served as the APCD/Community Economic Development for two years and served as a project assistant with the U.S. Agency for International Development's Small Development project in Panama. He manages a training staff of 14. The Spanish language trainers have been with PC/Panama between seven and ten years, one technical trainer for over six years, and the other three are new trainers. Language trainers tend to have a longer tenure, because they are employed during PST and also conduct training sessions during Reconnect, Project Design and Management (PDM). Four of the language trainers have a B.A. in Spanish. The technical trainers have Bachelor of Science degrees.

PROBLEM SOLVING THROUGH COLLABORATION

The staff attributed their ability to work as effective project teams to several factors. Overall, the working environment of PC/Panama fosters staff collaboration. Staff are comfortable expressing their views and suggesting fresh approaches. The staff feel that they bring to PC/Panama a variety of complementary skills that contribute to the mission and vision of the post. They have developed projects with specific goals and created clearly defined structures for the work of the Volunteers. They share a mutual sense of accountability and see team effectiveness as a responsibility to be shared by everyone. Finally, they make collective decisions.

The result of these characteristics is an ability of staff to find solutions to problems or come up with more efficient ways of doing things. For example, a project manager and several Volunteers worked on developing an electronic version of the Quarterly Report for collecting data on primary and secondary Volunteer activities and feedback from counterparts. They set up an excel spreadsheet (see Appendix A) that Volunteers and counterparts can use to report their activities. This new approach has increased Volunteer compliance for submission of quarterly reports, and has also expedited the work of the staff in pulling the statistics and information together for the project status reviews.

FERVOR FOR THE ASSIGNMENT

The enthusiasm of the staff when asked to describe their accomplishments and any challenges they face demonstrated the fervor they have for their work. The hours the staff devote to Peace Corps often exceed the 40-hour work week, and the three weeks of

every month they spend in the field with the Volunteers or developing new sites are days they are not with their families.

Much of their time is devoted to site visits with their Volunteers. Because the post is committed to supporting the Volunteers, the post makes sure that sufficient resources are allocated to this function. As a result, program staff are able to make longer, and more meaningful visits to their Volunteers. For example, one APCD typically starts his visit to the Volunteer early in the afternoon of day one and ends it the next day late in the morning. This gives ample time for the APCD to "...unhurriedly walk together with the Volunteer visiting counterparts, friends and project work activities." It enables the APCD to better understand the Volunteers' support needs, talk over a meal, and get to know them personally. It also allows the Volunteers time to share in detail their concerns.

TRAINING

The Volunteers gave technical training highly favorable ratings in the OIG survey. When asked to rate how well their technical training prepared them, 61% of the Volunteers said that technical training prepared them "well" or "very well." The post schedules 125 hours for technical training, which the training director considers an adequate amount of time in which to train the Volunteers. ISTs reinforce the Volunteers' technical skills, usually held three or four months after the conclusion of PST.

When asked about the strengths of PC/Panama's training program, the training director listed them in the following sequential manner:

- 1. The training experience of the training staff.
- 2. The training staff's willingness to cover other training-related needs, such as helping to find host families for Trainees.
- 3. The integration of the training team with programming. The training director attends a weekly meeting with the post's management and program managers. APCDs take part in training by presenting a session on project planning, holding question and answer sessions, interviewing Volunteers, and observing training.
- 4. A cohesive atmosphere, meaning everyone speaks the same language, "It's not like trainers say one thing and programming staff says another." According to the training director, the main issue confronted by Trainees and Volunteers is cultural adaptation, especially the lack of privacy and changes in diet. The training staff help Volunteers to adapt by visiting the Volunteers and their host families frequently. In these visits, they converse with the families and try to enlist their assistance in helping the Volunteer. For example, to deal with the issue of excessively oily meals, trainers ask the Volunteer to prepare a meal for their host family and educate them about the benefit of meals low in oil.

5. The use of "real" people to help train the Volunteers. The training staff are proud of the fact that they have a farmer, who owns his own farm and makes a living from it, as one of their trainers. As one staff member observed, "he explains the theory and then immediately does a demonstration that works."

PHASE II: THE VOLUNTEERS' PERSPECTIVE

We met with 27 Volunteers in six focus groups in Darien, Colon, Cocle, Veraguas, Comarca Ngobe Bugle, and Chiriqui from June 8-18, 2006. The focus groups included seven Environmental Health, nine Sustainable Agriculture Systems, eight Community Economic Development, and three Community Environmental Conservation Volunteers.

VISION, MISSION, AND PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The vision of PC/Panama as a "partner in development" is wholeheartedly embraced by the Volunteers as an organizing framework for their service. It was evident from discussions with Volunteers that they have pondered what development means, asked what factors drive change, and questioned their role in the process. In contrast to the staff's focus on building organizational capacity as an engine of development, Volunteers viewed development as a community-driven process. At their sites, they saw the power of local people motivated to complete a project (see Box 4). They identified more with their communities than with their partner organizations and saw their role more as building bridges between communities and government agencies or organizations than as employees of the host organization.

Box 4. An Ideal Community

A Volunteer was working with a water committee of seven men, all donating their time on the committee, to raise money to build a new aqueduct for the community of 250 people. The committee worked eight-hour days, six days a week to plan the system, set up a billing schedule to finance repairs, and undergo training so that they could maintain it. On their day off, they went door to door asking for food donations for the workers building the system and collecting money from those who were not providing labor. The Volunteer called their dedication "inspiring."

The Volunteers with productive working relationships with their NGOs or government agencies identified five key characteristics of an effective host agency:

- Their mission is congruent with the needs of the communities.
- They understand the mission of Peace Corps.
- out the work of the organization and to support the Volunteers
- The staff are dedicated to the work of the organization and have the skills to perform their jobs.
- They had work ready for Volunteers or were open to new ideas from Volunteers and supported and participated in the Volunteers' projects.

One site, selected for a Community Environmental Conservation Volunteer, was considered by other Volunteers to be a nearly perfect situation. Her site is near a protected area that has four types of turtles that are of interest to the science community, the eco-tourism industry, the government, and conservation NGOs. An international conservation project was getting underway in the protected area, guaranteeing the Volunteer ample and relevant work throughout her service.

The Volunteers appreciated the consideration they were shown in site placement. Several cited the APCD/Environmental Health's approach (see Box 5). Many of the Volunteers were either assigned or had found counterparts with whom they had developed productive and satisfying working relationships. When asked what made these relationships strong, the Volunteers said that the counterpart's enthusiasm and work ethic were important. Several Volunteers were inspired by the dedication of their counterparts to improving the living conditions in their communities.

Based on their experiences, the Volunteers offered the following characteristics of a good counterpart:

Box 5. Environmental Health Project's Site Matching Tool

The program manager puts up a piece of paper with two lines—one parallel and one horizontal—that intersect in the middle to create four quadrants: one quadrant is urban, one is rural, one is developed, and one is poor. Volunteers place pins with flags that have their names on them in the quadrants that best represent their preferences. Volunteers who have no preference or are unwilling to decide put their pin in the middle.

Volunteers recommend this method for matching sites because it strikes a balance between giving them an opportunity to indicate their preferences and letting the staff make a decision based on their experience and knowledge of the Volunteer. Only one Volunteer in a cohort of twenty had terminated service early.

- Has a strong work ethic, is available to the Volunteer, and is dedicated to the work and community.
- Plays a key role in helping the Volunteer integrate into the community and in getting situated and able to function (set up housing, shop, cook, etc.).
- Provides the Volunteer with key knowledge about the community and identifies needs of the community and potential projects.
- Has good ideas and initiative.
- Helps with cultural differences how to become a Panamanian so as to get things done.

SUPPORT

PC/PANAMA AND LEADERSHIP

Volunteers identified several sources of support, one of which was PC/Panama as an organization. Many of them recognized that the medical, financial, and logistical support that Peace Corps provides makes it possible for them to focus full-time on their projects. They know that they will receive their living allowances on time, that staff are attentive to safety issues, and that they have access to excellent medical care when they need it.

The Volunteers credited the leadership with making PC/Panama a strong and effective organization. They felt that the ability of the country director to articulate a clear vision for the Peace Corps, make tough decisions, and run a tight ship was important to sustaining Volunteers' confidence in the management of PC/Panama as an organization. They appreciated that the country director took input from the Volunteers seriously and responded promptly to their concerns. Many of the Volunteers felt that the mutual respect and trust that staff and Volunteers have for each other create a good working environment. One Volunteer characterized the philosophy of the staff toward the Volunteers as "tough-minded optimism." The staff imposed enough discipline to remind Volunteers of their professional responsibilities but at the same time maintained an amiable and welcoming environment.

The Volunteers also felt that leadership and the high quality of staff contributed to the good reputation that Peace Corps has in Panama. Several Volunteers said that their service had been positively affected by the reputation of the agency, the widespread knowledge that people have about PC/Panama, and its contributions to the country.

PROGRAM STAFF

The following are specific examples from the Volunteers of how the staff support them and leads the post.

- 1. **Project Design and Implementation:** Volunteers said that they feel more effective when a project design balances clarity in project goals with a flexibility for fitting those goals to the needs of the communities. Volunteers want to work on projects that have tangible outcomes and that fulfill critical needs in the community. They find projects with many goals and objectives overwhelming.
- 2. *Site Visits:* One of the strengths of the staff that Volunteers appreciate is their rapport with communities and partner organizations. Volunteers loved having their program managers or other Peace Corps staff attend meetings with their communities and host organizations, because they know how to "work the crowd." Staff are an authoritative presence in the field and can be great "cheerleaders" for the Volunteers, their counterparts, and community members.

3. Reporting Requirements and Feedback: Volunteers crave substantive feedback on their work from staff. They are not, however, as enthusiastic about the numerous reports they have to write. PC/Panama offers two approaches to making reports useful to the Volunteers. The first is used by the program manager for the environmental health project. He designed a report format that, according to the Volunteers, helps them evaluate their current work and plan future projects (see Appendix B). The Volunteers liked the organization of the report around specific categories and details. One Volunteer summarized their views, observing that the report reminded him of his program manager's expectations and kept him focused on project goals without infringing on his flexibility to fit goals to the needs of the community. He used the report to refine his current work, but also to think about what other activities his community might undertake. In short, the report format served as a check on the Volunteers' current work and a drawing board for new ideas.

Another program manager requests monthly reports, as well as the required quarterly reports, from the Volunteers. The monthly reports are to be short and informal. The Volunteers said that these short reports helped them to develop a working relationship with the program manager, and the program manager felt that by being informed about the Volunteers' work, he was better able to help guide their projects. The informal and unstructured format of these monthly reports allowed the Volunteers to report what they saw as their most significant achievements, rather than being constrained by the quarterly reports.

4. *Foster and sustain a collegial spirit among the Volunteers*: Volunteers said that their program managers help to foster and sustain a spirit of cooperation among the Volunteers by encouraging them to share information. The program manager for environmental health said that this tone was set during PST by the trainers and sustained by the program managers who know their Volunteers and their work. When they call him with questions, he sometimes refers them to Volunteers with similar experiences who might give them guidance and help.

CLUSTERS: PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

According to the Volunteers, they frequently turn to their fellow Volunteers for technical and emotional support. Clusters, strategically located groups of Volunteers from different projects, provide the Volunteers with a peer support network through which they collaborate on projects, receive feedback from peers, share successes, and exchange technical and emotional support.

Volunteers provided a few examples of how their clusters benefit them. One cluster had formed an ecological group that travels around Panama to talk about environmental conservation. They hoped to have additional Volunteers assigned to their cluster so that they would have full representation from all sectors. At the time we met them, they were thinking about projects that would allow them to capitalize on everyone's skill sets within a single project. This cluster felt that they worked together particularly well, because they all reported to the same supervisor at a government agency. Under the leadership of

this supervisor, they met regularly to plan projects and figure out how the agency can support the Volunteers.

ALL VOLUNTEER CONFERENCE

Volunteers spoke highly about the All Volunteer Conferences (AVC). Two months after the new group of Volunteers have arrived at their sites, PC/Panama staff and Volunteers organize a four-day All Volunteer Conference (AVC). The four days are divided between two days of technical support in sector-specific meetings and two days where they focus on a general theme. In 2006, the general theme was HIV/AIDS.

According to the Volunteers, they arrive at these meetings "hungry for new project ideas and strategies." Volunteers circulate through a mini-trade show where other Volunteers have booths demonstrating their projects. This gives them an opportunity to see what other Volunteers are doing in their same sector or in other sectors and investigate opportunities for future collaboration. The four days are intense, but the Volunteers go back to their sites rejuvenated and motivated.

The AVC is also an opportunity for staff and Volunteers to recognize the hard work of the specific individuals, including Volunteer regional leaders. The VAC and other committees, such as WID/GAD, meet during the AVC to elect new leaders.

VOLUNTEER REGIONAL LEADERS

The regional leaders are a pivotal part of the Volunteer support system in Panama. The Volunteer regional leaders live and work in the region where they can easily reach the Volunteers in a relatively short amount of time. Volunteers look to the regional leader to accomplish the following functions:

- 1. Visit the new Volunteers within two months of being posted at their sites. The regional leaders play a significant role in helping the new Volunteers settle into their sites.
- 2. *Liaison with Peace Corps staff*: Volunteers tended to funnel their questions and requests for staff support through the regional leaders. They look to them to sift and sort so as to use scarce staff time more efficiently. Volunteer needs that the regional leaders cannot fulfill get passed on to the appropriate regional manager.
- 3. Support the Volunteers: The regional leaders support the Volunteers in their region in numerous ways. They act as a liaison between the Volunteers and the partner organizations, help Volunteers on their projects, relay messages between Volunteers and contacts when Volunteers are out of cell phone range, and attend workshops and project activities carried out by the Volunteers.
- 4. *Organize quarterly meetings*: The regional leaders organize quarterly regional meetings where they conduct Peace Corps business -- update Volunteers on policy changes, pass on items of interest from the staff, relay outcomes of VAC

meetings – and also provide the Volunteers a chance to exchange experiences. A staff member is usually in attendance.

The quality of the regional leaders and the amount of energy they invest in this role varies. One regional leader received high marks for running well-organized and productive regional meetings. She circulated an agenda that kept everyone focused and discussions moving along. The Volunteers met at a different site each time and used the work of the Volunteer(s) at that site to discuss various aspects of project implementation. The regional leader requires that Volunteers focus on their successes, because it is easy for them to lapse into the negative aspects. She gives people a brief amount of time to talk about their challenges, but emphasizes more their achievements. There is a camaraderie among these Volunteers that spans emotional and professional support. The Volunteers felt that they are able to use this intellectual support network to strengthen their projects.

Volunteers in another region told us that their regional meetings are most productive when the regional leader invites someone from a government agency or NGO to speak to the group on a topic that reinforces what the Volunteers learned in PST. Where several members of a cluster work with the same organization or government agency, they can use the regional meetings to hold planning sessions.

5. *Gather information on new sites*: Volunteers in Panama keep a lookout for new sites that would be good places for a new Volunteer. They feed this information to the regional leaders who make a preliminary visit to gather additional information for staff.

Volunteers felt that they could make valuable contributions to finding new sites. They argued that, in the absence of the Peace Corps vehicle, the Volunteers gather information that is qualitatively different from staff. By interacting more informally with people in the community and not being burdened by official status, they can gauge whether a community truly wants a Volunteer and if they want help getting things done. Volunteers could also, with permission from staff, visit a site for a couple of days or make additional visits.

TRAINING

Volunteers credited PC/Panama with providing them technical training that matched the needs of their site. The environmental health Volunteers, who build aqueducts and composting latrines, went on field trips to see examples of different water systems shortly after arriving at PST. They understood from the beginning what their end product would look like. The Agriculture Volunteers thought the introduction of "technical weeks" into PST would help the next group of Trainees acquire technical skills for specific projects.

For example, Volunteers who are going to work on coffee production will spend one week learning about coffee.

Some Volunteers have used gaps in knowledge or training—real and fictitious—to their advantage. They were not always comfortable with Peace Corps staff selling them as experts, because communities tended to sit back and wait for the Volunteers to initiate activities. Volunteers fall victim to this tendency, because they want to prove their worth by jumping into a project immediately. The Volunteers have developed a couple of different strategies to meet this challenge. Some Volunteers ask community members to teach them a new skill. Other Volunteers calculate a "division of skills" matrix to figure out who has what expertise that they need for a project. Volunteers felt that both approaches helped to get community members involved in projects.

PROJECT DESIGN MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP

Six months after arriving at site, language facilitators and experienced Volunteers conduct a three-day workshop on project design and management (PDM) for the new Volunteers and their counterparts. The Volunteers rated the workshops as excellent for the training it offers them and their counterparts. They leave the workshop with a budget and calendar for their project that allows the Volunteer to hold the counterpart accountable.

There are also intangible benefits: the official nature of the workshops gives the Volunteers credibility with their counterparts, who also gain some self-confidence from participating in the workshop. The counterparts do not always have the language or conceptual skills to keep up with the trainers, so staff are thinking about dividing the workshop into two sessions. One session, attended only by the Volunteers, would move at a more rapid pace and address the conceptual issues involved in project design. The second session would involve both counterparts and Volunteers but operate at a more basic level.

CONCLUSION: COMMITMENT TO MISSION AND VISION

PC/Panama has a clear vision of its mission and role in the development of Panama. They transmit this vision to the Volunteers in many ways, but most importantly, they invest considerable effort to ensure that Volunteers have real work by identifying host organizations with ongoing projects with clearly defined tasks that can effectively use the skills of the Volunteers. The post supports the Volunteers through a combination of staff travel to the field, clustering of Volunteers, a system of regional leaders, and an All-Volunteer Conference.

APPENDIX A

Sample Page from Quarterly Report used by Community Economic Development Volunteers

PEACE CORPS PANAMA

Community Economic Development Program
PCV Quarterly Report

Year:	2005	Name:	
Quarter:	3Q April, May, Jun	Site:	Group: 54

Tourism Goal Development # 2

"Assist interested communities in the promotion of tourism through the development of attractions, services infrastructure and Demand."

Objective 2.2

By the end of 2009, Peace Corps Volunteers and their Counterparts will improve, and promote tourism services in 21 communities.

Outcome #1	C.B.Levels	In Progress
100 community members trained in customer service	0	5
	0	7
Outcome #2	C.B.Levels	In Progress
300 in management and development of tourist businesses	No Applicable	15
	No Applicable	23
Outcome #3	C.B.Levels	In Progress
300 trained as local guides with IPAT recognition	o	5
	9	0

Insert description of activities here:

Participated in several excursions to local sites with tourism potential, assisting in evaluation of them for development of tourism packages. Also participated in 2 test visits to local sites with guides, helping them evaluate the logistics of the package for better future success.

Provided english classes with specific attention to using this skill with tourists. Also participated in 2 seminars for artisans on a national scale, where I gave charlas on market analysis, team work and communication skills, helping the participants better manage and develop their businesses.

Do ongoing work with several local aspiring guides, helping them develop their skills as guides as well as their potential as tourism entrepreneurs.

Objective

2.3

By the end of 2009, Peace Corps Volunteers and their Counterparts will raise community awareness of the importance of public goods and tourism infrastructure.

Outcome #1	C.B.Levels	In Progress
800 community members trained to recognize the value of their resources.	4	16
	0	10
Outcome #2	C.B.Levels	In Progress
800 students from the schools trained	#of Boys	No Applicable
to recognize the value of their resources.	#of Girls	No Applicable
Outcome #3	C.B.Levels	In Progress
21 conservation and maintenance	o	3
plans of public goods will be developed.	0	0

Insert description of activities here:

While work was stifled by the teacher's strike at the local school, development of plans is ongoing for the Brigada Ecoturistica, for local elementary school children.

In conjunction with the tourism committee, continued work to install tourism signs indicating location and increasing awareness of local attractions.

Re-initiated work on a Spa grant funded effort to reinforce tourism infrastructure in Santa Fe and beautify the town in anticipation for increasing level of tourism visits. All of these efforts are being planned and executed by the committee to increase civic pride and enhance public

Objective

2.1

By the end of 2009, Peace Corps Volunteers and their Counterparts, Host Country Agencies will have identified and analyzed the tourist attractions in 21 communities.

Outcome #1	C.B.Levels	In Progress
21 tourism committees organized with community participation	7	No applicable
	No applicable	No applicable
Outcome #2	C.B.Levels	In Progress
21 inventory analyses finished by the committees in the communities.	0	No applicable
	No applicable	No applicable
Outcome #3	C.B.Levels	Choose
NO APLICABLE	No applicable	No applicable
	No applicable	No applicable

Insert description of activities here:

With the tourism committee of Santa Fe, continue efforts to integrate individuals from surrounding communities into the tourism committee as well as assist them in recognizing tourism potential in their own, ultimately to establish their own tourism committee to foster the process.

APPENDIX B

Environmental Health Project Report



following questions with as much detail as possible.

This report helps to enhance your communications with your APCD. Please respond to the

Date:

Quarter:

Please summarize your current Environmental Health related work: **Health Education: Latrines: Water Systems:** Please summarize any current secondary work: Under ideal circumstances, What goal would you like to accomplish within the next three months?

What agencies and groups are you currently working with (include contact names):	_
	_ _ _
Please share your work plan for the coming quarter:	
Month:	_
	-
Month:	–
Month:	_
	_ _
Please describe the committees and groups you would like to create:	_
rease describe the committees and groups you would like to create.	-
Are you satisfied with your community? Please explain.	_
	_
Are you satisfied with your work? Please explain.	–
	_