

**PEACE CORPS  
A CASE STUDY OF EFFECTIVE  
PEACE CORPS PROGRAMS**

**THE COUNTERPARTS' PERSPECTIVE  
IN HONDURAS, PANAMA, AND PARAGUAY**



**OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL**

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September 2006



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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.

Senior Evaluator Carlos Torres conducted the interviews with counterparts in Honduras May 29 – June 7, 2006; in Panama June 8 -18, 2006; and in Paraguay June 19 – 29, 2006.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We conducted face-to-face interviews with counterparts selected as among the best by the Peace Corps staff in Honduras, Panama, and Paraguay. We interviewed fifty-six counterparts: 20 in Panama, 20 in Honduras, and 16 in Paraguay. Sixteen of them were female. Interviews lasted between an hour and two hours. The criteria for selection included:

- An understanding of the Peace Corps and of the goals and objectives of the partnership.
- Ability to work with Volunteers.
- Involvement with the Volunteer in non-work activities.
- Support provided to the Volunteer.
- Experience working with Volunteers.

Counterparts were from many occupations: a dentist, indigenous tribal chiefs, cooperative managers, teachers, farmers, school principals, youth leaders, and engineers. They represented public and private organizations: municipal water departments, municipal mayors' offices, non-profit organizations, farmers' cooperatives, tribal governing bodies,<sup>1</sup> school systems, and international development organizations. All the sectors in which Volunteers work in these three countries were represented in almost equal proportions.

Some interviews were with groups of people involved with a Volunteer in a project. These occurred when counterparts arrived for the interview in the company of other community leaders or when others joined later on in the interview. These more informal

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<sup>1</sup> Tribal chiefs as counterparts are exclusive to PC/Panama.

counterparts and colleagues working with Volunteers in their projects contributed important details and comments about the experience of having a Volunteer in their communities. Usually these invitees were part of a larger committee overseeing an activity the Volunteer was involved with and had good knowledge about the Volunteer and the Peace Corps.

The communities where the interviews took place and where Volunteers were working also represented a broad variety in terms of economic development: Chiriqui, Panama, the wealthiest region in Panama; San Luis, Panama, a region struggling to find water for its residents; Darien, Panama, a tropical forest region with one of the highest precipitations per year on earth; San Lorenzo, Paraguay, a municipality in the margins of Asuncion, Paraguay's capital, struggling with all the issues of a growing community with inadequate education and health services; and La Ceiba, Honduras, one of Honduras' most economically developed areas.

## FINDINGS

### COUNTERPART CHARACTERISTICS

We found the counterparts selected by the staff for our interviews to share these characteristics:

- **They have high stature in their communities or organizations.** Interviewees self-reported high status in their communities—a fact that was corroborated by Peace Corps staff, Volunteers, community and organization members, and our observations. For example, one counterpart, a Panamanian chief, has direct influence over 649 other tribesmen and presides over the tribe's general council. Another counterpart in Panama heads his tribe's 1500-strong council.
- **They play multiple roles in the community.** Their strength derives from leadership in community work—some since their teen years—and participation in varied community activities. For example, a counterpart in Paraguay is a former teacher and historical society member, who founded the town's fire department, a boy scout troop, and a children's symphony orchestra. Another counterpart we interviewed in Honduras is a school teacher, belongs to a cooperative of organic coffee growers, is a member of the rural bank board of directors, and is a member of the town's committee of disaster prevention.

We observed how people waited, especially in rural areas, outside the counterpart's house to talk to him/her and seek their advice or consent. One Volunteer commented that she did not have to go knocking on doors and introduce herself to people in the community, because most people were coming to see her counterpart when she was working with him.

- **They are administrative, political, or social leaders.** In the case of tribal counterpart leaders in Panama's native-American communities, the counterpart typically was the tribes' chief. Tribal chiefs have been elected to their offices through free elections, and the nature of the leadership role in the tribal community gives the chief power and influence in the community, a fact that benefits the Volunteer.

In business organizations like cooperatives, the counterpart was typically the president of the board of directors or the top manager in the administrative area within the organization where the Volunteer was assigned. These organizations are also well-known and funded by external means. For example, one counterpart's organization, PRORENA in Panama, is sponsored in part by the Smithsonian Institution and Yale University.

- **They are experienced in their current roles.** Tenure in their offices or community leadership role ranged from a minimum of three years to a maximum of 35 years.
- **They have a genuine interest in the well-being of their community.** One Volunteer commented when asked about her counterpart, "*They are great to work with because they are genuinely interested in bettering the community. They are not selfishly motivated.*" Through all the conversations with counterparts, we experienced being with people who truly care about their communities and did not expect any self gain. Their involvement in many projects and long history of their own volunteer service to the community can be considered indicators of their genuine interest.

## COUNTERPARTS' PERSPECTIVE ON BEING A COUNTERPART

The counterparts shared the following as predictors of a successful relationship with a Volunteer.

- **Good counterparts have previous experience working with Volunteers.** Counterparts participating in the interviews had worked with at least two Volunteers. In Paraguay, most of the counterparts had worked with three Volunteers, and some of them talked about having known Volunteers since their childhood. These long-time relations with Volunteers helped the counterparts to understand the Peace Corps and the Volunteers. Some of them talked about "phases of Volunteer service" when referring to the first 90 days or first year of service and how difficult it is for the Volunteer during those first months and how important it is for the counterpart to be attentive to support needs in all areas at that time.
- **Good counterparts are proactive in telling the Volunteer "what we need to learn."** The counterparts we interviewed wanted the Volunteer to know quite

rapidly what they themselves or the community needed to learn specifically. For example, a counterpart in Panama and another counterpart in Paraguay told their Volunteer very early in their service what specific skills they needed to solve problems. A counterpart in Panama and his cooperative wanted to learn about managing the cooperative funds more efficiently, and a counterpart in Paraguay wanted to know how to improve farmland that had been slashed and burned several times, making the growing of crops quite difficult.

- **Good counterparts interact with Volunteers in many ways unrelated to the assignment.** Counterparts' involvement takes many forms. They help Volunteers focus their project activities; develop training materials; invite people to attend Volunteer workshops; introduce the Volunteer to other organizations, offices, families, and nearby villages; find work resources; work together with the Volunteer; and serve as an information bridge to new Volunteers by explaining what activities were done by a previous Volunteer in the community.

For example, in the community of El Chepo, Santa Fe, Panama, the president of the local farmers association explained to the new Volunteer (third generation) the overall goal of the community with regard to a computer center. The first Volunteer helped to seek funds for the computer center infrastructure. The second assisted with finding an institution to donate some of the computers and with basic training to community users. The third was expected to expand that knowledge.

"My relationship with them is everything," said one counterpart in summarizing the many roles he plays. Counterparts are supervisor, friend, parent, supporter, and family. The head of a farmers cooperative, in La Mesa, Panama, summarized in the following way the main work-related activities he does for the Volunteer. His list typifies most of the activities done by other counterparts we interviewed.

*"The community needs to have patience and understanding... People want to have project executions right away... People think that they [Volunteers] were going to come with lots of money."*

*A counterpart in Panama*

1. Presents the Volunteer to the community and clarifies expectations about the Volunteer and his service.
2. Encourages the community to work with the Volunteer.
3. Introduces the Volunteer to the local school, police, mayor's office, and other organizations in the community that may help directly or indirectly.
4. Introduces the Volunteer to the information center in the locality.
5. Helps the Volunteer find housing.
6. Gets together on a regular basis with the Volunteer to plan work.

#### **COUNTERPARTS' PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR ASSOCIATION WITH THE PEACE CORPS**

- **They became associated with the Peace Corps through contact with Volunteers.** Surprisingly, the great majority of the counterparts entered into a



relationship with the Peace Corps because of contact with a Volunteer rather than as a result of a systematic search for counterparts by the Peace Corps. The most common occurrence was of Volunteers noticing some need in the community, letting a community leader know that Peace Corps was able to help meet the need, and then guiding the leader in the process to contact and request a Volunteer. An alternate way for the counterparts to know about the Peace Corps was for the leaders to attend a meeting or a community activity where a Volunteer was involved, notice the impact of the Volunteer's work, seek out the Volunteer, and ask how his community or organization could get a Volunteer to come and help. One Panamanian chief recounted how his community requested a Volunteer, "We realized that in the community of Periatí there was a Peace Corps Volunteer and that his work was helping the community. We felt that it would also be good for us, so we sent a note to Peace Corps." Very few counterparts mentioned an APCD coming to their communities and looking for their support to assist a Volunteer.

- **They appreciate support from the Peace Corps.** Most of the counterparts interviewed have attended Peace Corps training, e.g., Counterpart Day and/or project development and management (PDM) training. Ninety percent of the counterparts participating in the study attended Counterpart Day and at least one additional training event. Typically, the other training event was a PDM workshop.

For example, PC/Paraguay has put aside one and one-half days during PST for Counterpart Day. During the Counterpart Day, counterparts and Volunteers addressed:

1. Peace Corps goals.
2. The training the Volunteers receive.
3. The role of the counterpart.
4. Primary Volunteer assignments.
5. Volunteer/counterpart teamwork.
6. Safety and security.

In Paraguay, Project Development and Management occurs during the sixth and seventh month of Volunteer service. It is a three-day training that addresses:

1. Small community project design.
2. Identification and formulation of project objectives.
3. Resource identification.
4. Community participation in project design, execution, project monitoring, and evaluation.

Although the standard counterpart training across the three countries visited is Counterpart Day and PDM, there are exceptions. Some counterparts also participate in what is the Volunteers' third training after PST and the initial IST. It takes place

during the eighth or ninth month of service and is purely a technical training session that lasts a day-and-a-half. The main objective is to resolve technical deficiencies in the Volunteers' primary and secondary projects.

Individual counterparts also reported special training they had received. Counterparts in Panama were trained in accounting, and one attended two health seminars. A community leader in Panama attended a workshop on coffee production management sponsored by PC/Panama and with the assistance of PC/Panama, attended a coffee conference in Seattle, Washington.

APCDs in Honduras and Paraguay put time aside during Counterpart Day to further clarify expectations for both Volunteer and counterpart, not only about their roles but about work. For example, an activity during Counterpart Day in Paraguay known as "Towards the Best Team," in which both the Volunteer and counterpart devoted time to talk about community needs and priorities. They also talked about the feasibility of solving issues with existing constraints of time and resources.

### **THE COUNTERPARTS' PERSPECTIVE ON COUNTERPART SELECTION**

Though counterpart selection was not an item in our interview protocol, the issue was brought into the conversation frequently. The following are the main suggestions conveyed by counterparts on how to best select a counterpart.

- **Select counterparts with community input.** Ask people to point you to community leaders, and then approach them with the proposition. Make sure the leader has the patience and time to support the Volunteer for two years.
- **Prepare the counterpart for the support the Volunteer will need in the first ninety days.** The counterparts interviewed who had worked with at least two Volunteers noted the challenges of supporting the Volunteer in those first months.

### **COUNTERPARTS' PERSPECTIVE ON A VOLUNTEER'S SERVICE**

The counterparts we interviewed mostly had been a counterpart to several Volunteers and identified requirements for a Volunteer to be successful that included:

- **The Volunteer's assignment needs to be clear and mutually understood.** Regardless of the time of service of their current Volunteer, all the counterparts gave a concrete answer to the question: why is the Volunteer here? Not only were they clear in responding to why the Volunteer was there, but the follow-up question on what the Volunteer was actually doing paralleled the answer to the first question. Volunteers were engaged in the work for which they had been requested. A farmer in Paraguay gave the following advice to a nearby community contemplating the request of a Volunteer, *"Make sure you know what you are requesting the Volunteer for."*

Most counterparts talked about the importance of having a clear purpose for their Volunteers. They felt that clarity of purpose was the most important step in successful Volunteer service. A counterpart in Santa Fe, Panama reported presenting work plans to the Volunteer. *“Here are the plans, I said. Here are the activities each committee needs support with...and we ranked them in order of importance for the Volunteer. For example, in 2005, the first three months we wanted to focus on reforestation, so we asked the Volunteer, how can you help us on that?”*

Although some counterparts who felt clear about what the Volunteer was to do and what was expected of them did not feel that a formal Memorandum of Understanding governing the Volunteer’s assignment was necessary, most felt an MOU to be helpful in several respects:

1. To govern their working relationship with the Volunteer and clarify such secondary issues as whether the Volunteer may work on projects other than their assigned project.
  2. To govern their supervisory relationship, such as expectations for the Volunteer to notify the counterpart if leaving the site.
  3. To assure the Volunteer’s safety. What is expected? Does the host organization have any responsibility or liability? If the Volunteer is injured, what are they to do?
- **Volunteers need community support for what they will do.** Counterparts listed community support and a clear work assignment as the two principal factors helping a Volunteer to succeed. Counterparts talked about the two as going in tandem. They felt that as long as the community understood why the Volunteer was with them, it was easier for him/her to rally support. Several counterparts commented that the request for a Volunteer was preceded by discussion among community members in a special forum. Some counterparts called special community meetings to discuss whether or not to request a Volunteer, and when the decision was positive, they required the attendees to sign a document agreeing to the request. Many counterparts also talked of having had a document approving the request for the Volunteer signed by community members.
  - **Volunteers need a local support network to help them with community integration and to help facilitate their work.** The counterparts recognized their importance and that of their organizations in being a “bridge” to other organizations and to the resources the Volunteer needs to carry out his/her assignment. The staff in the teacher training school in Eusebio Ayala, Paraguay, introduced the Volunteer to other schools in the State; consequently, the Volunteer was able to present his school library blueprints to many other schools. The popularity of the blueprint ended up being adopted by the Ministry of Education. The blueprint advocates an open library as opposed to a closed one.

Host organizations associated with the counterpart being interviewed assigned the Volunteer office space and a seat on the board of directors. They also, when feasible, have provided Volunteers with space to meet with another counterpart agency or hold a community meeting. That is the case of the Cooperative Renacimiento in the Province of Chiriqui in Panama. The Volunteer has been given physical space in the cooperatives' building, so she can conduct meetings with Panama Verde (Green Panama), one of the Volunteer's other host agencies.

The host organization can also provide additional technical training to the Volunteer, if needed. For example, the water sanitation office of El Chepo, Panama, has been training the Volunteer assigned to them in water systems installation.

- **Volunteers' personal attributes play an important role in their ability to accomplish their assignment.** The counterparts pointed to work ethic, cultural adaptation, initiative, and communications skills as the main ingredients in a successful Volunteer. Counterparts stressed the importance of constant communication between them and the Volunteer, and between the Volunteer and the community.

The counterparts we interviewed readily cited specific accomplishments of Volunteers, such as a tax property database or epidemiological surveillance system, or the creation of a group association to assist a town's library. But they fondly remembered the personal qualities as even more important: punctuality, efficiency, honesty, "straight talk", self-problem solving, voluntarism, and dedication among many others. A counterpart in Panama said that she will remember, *"that she[the Volunteer] helped us with the store, the plants that we planted together and seeing her in that little house..."* In Honduras, a counterpart commented that his community was astonished to see the Volunteer (female) getting up around four in the morning, joining other farmers, and walking more than an hour to a field to start the day's crop planting work.

- **Volunteers in technical projects need appropriate skills.** Technical knowledge was cited by counterparts whose projects required it. For example, a counterpart that works for PRORENA<sup>2</sup> in Panama, commented on the importance of the Volunteer having *"...good technical knowledge on ecology and forest management."* Technical skill was also mentioned by counterparts in moderately technical organizations and projects, such as water projects, cooperatives' finance departments, and reforestation projects. For example, a counterpart and a community leader managing coffee production commented, *"people continue to work the way they were trained by the Peace Corps volunteer. For example, ...[the Volunteer] taught us how to store the coffee in optimum places, how to separate the grains more efficiently and to identify marketable coffee beans by color, size, flavor and odor...he taught us that the best grain should be pure*

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<sup>2</sup> PRORENA is a technically-oriented organization assisting farmers in reforestation projects.

*green, with a very peculiar aroma and that the toaster runs more efficiently if the grain is small.”*

- **Volunteers with local language skills have increased effectiveness.** In Panama, counterparts thought that local language skills are critical to effective Volunteer service. They made the assertion based on their experience with two Volunteers. The first one spoke the tribe's language and the second did not. They regarded the first Volunteer as having been more effective in her service.
- **Volunteers need to be open to living and working in a different culture.** Another counterpart in Panama commented, *“The Volunteers should be able to share their knowledge with the cooperative members taking into account the little formal information that they [the local people] have.”* Accepting local culture is important to having ideas and initiatives accepted. *“She was even eating monkey,”* reported a counterpart in Panama.
- **Volunteers need to be accessible to the community and engaged in their work.** The Volunteer has to be at site and must be perceived to have personal interest in the project and in the people affected.
- **Volunteers should ask for help.** The Volunteer should not be afraid to go to homes and offices or individuals and ask for their help. Communities take great pleasure, the counterparts say, in helping the Volunteer, and by doing so, they feel closer to him/her.
- **The Volunteer needs to walk-the-walk and talk-the-talk to be credible.** The Volunteer needs to demonstrate to the community that the garden is a good idea, because his is growing and producing. *“The farmer needs to trust the Volunteer.”* The Volunteer needs to have the skill required by the assignment in which they are placed. Two counterparts commented that the most important legacy left behind by the Volunteers were tangible products: a water system in El Chepo, Panama, a system that was named after Peace Corps, and a trail in a natural park, also in Panama, that Volunteers helped build and which also carries the name of Peace Corps.
- **Volunteers with good communication skills are more successful.** Counterparts overwhelmingly appeared to be outgoing, social people. They like to talk and remember most fondly those Volunteers they regarded as ‘good talkers.’ By that, they meant Volunteers who were constantly seeking conversation and interaction with people in their communities. Another counterpart in Panama commented when asked about the single most important factor to help a Volunteer succeed, *“Communication--not only with a few people, but with the whole community ... She (the Volunteer) is not a person that comes with bags of money, so she needs the support of the community.”*

## COUNTERPARTS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF THE PEACE CORPS IN SUCCESSFUL VOLUNTEER ASSIGNMENTS

The counterparts we interviewed stressed the need for the agency to monitor the work and progress of the Volunteers.

- **They recognize the need for accountability.** Counterparts were unanimous in reporting that an important factor in the Volunteers' success was the Peace Corps' monitoring of their work and holding them to high standards of performance. They felt this was also a necessary input for them to be successful as counterparts in helping the Volunteer to accomplish the work of their assignment.
- **They value APCD site visits.**<sup>3</sup> Counterparts see APCDs' visits as Peace Corps' most important action of support and care. In Paraguay, counterparts reported to have been visited by an APCD three times per year. In Panama, APCDs are expected to spend 60 hours per month visiting Volunteers and counterparts. One counterpart said *"He (the APCD) has come twice in the last six months, and we have gone around (the community) together finding out about community needs."* The quantity and quality of site visits and follow-up are key to the Volunteer and the counterpart having a sense that the Peace Corps cares about their projects. Counterparts felt that it is very important for the community to literally observe with regularity someone from the Peace Corps coming to visit the Volunteer and the counterpart. Visits legitimize the Volunteer and his/her work. The Volunteer's project is benefited when the community sees that he/she is backed up by an organization that has a plan and has the means to support its people.

## CONCLUSION: THE COUNTERPARTS' PERSPECTIVE

The counterparts play key roles in the lives and work of the Volunteers. Good counterparts see their role, not so much to learn from the Volunteer, but rather to enable the Volunteers by introducing them to people and by lending the Volunteers validity and credibility in the community and within the host organization. Counterparts are often responsible for Volunteers' safety, physical and mental health, and cultural integration. This is a difficult and demanding role. At the same time, counterparts may hesitate to offer suggestions to Peace Corps or speak up when problems arise. While this report reflects the voices and views of counterparts in only three countries, we think the message is universal. Finding good counterparts, supervisors, and colleagues is challenging, but worth the effort that it takes to find the right people. Every Volunteer and every Volunteer project or assignment benefits from a local human partnership.

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<sup>3</sup> PC/Paraguay's site interview protocol specifically includes questions the APCD is to ask of counterparts. See Appendix A.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **PC/Paraguay's Site Visit Interview Protocols**

### **Interview Protocol: First Visit to Counterpart and Volunteer**

#### **Community Contact (CC)<sup>4</sup> / Host Family / Partners**

CC met with:

Host family(ies) met with:

Other Community Partners met with:

1. How is the PCV adjusting to the community? Any concerns? Suggestions?  
How often does the Volunteer leave the community?
2. Does CC/host family have any concerns or questions about PCV's future house?
1. Does host family and/or CC feel the PCV is appropriately managing their personal safety?
4. Is communication between the PCV and CC/partners satisfactory?
5. In what activities has the PCV been involved? Other activities that could be suggested to PCV?

### **Interview protocol: Second Visit to Counterpart and Volunteer**

#### **Community Contact (CC) / Host Family / Partners**

CC met with:

Host family (ies) met with:

Other Community Partners met with

1. How is the PCV integrated into the community? Is someone informed about the reason and time of absence when the PCV departs from the community?
2. How is the PCV helping in their work? What is going well? What else is needed?
3. Is CC/ community partner satisfied with the communication and collaboration with PCV?

Questions, observations, unresolved issues, concerns, other comments?

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<sup>4</sup> Community contact is the equivalent to counterpart.