

**Benin**

**VOLUNTEER ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION**

**Rural Community Health (RCH)**



Since 1961.

**Program:** Rural Community Health

**Job Title:** Community Health Advisor

**Dates of Service:** December 15, 2016 – December 12, 2018

**Staging Dates:** September 20-21, 2016

**(in the USA)**

**Pre-Service Training**

**(in Benin)** September 22, 2016 – December 15, 2016

\*dates subject to change



This document is intended to give an overview of the project you are invited to work on in the Peace Corps. For more detailed information about Benin and living there, please read the Welcome Book via the link included with your invitation and check out the related Web sites referenced in the welcome book.

For further information about serving as a Community Economic Development Advisor in Benin, contact the Country Desk Officer for Benin at Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C., (9AM to 5PM, EST):

Toll-free: 1-855-855-1961, press 1, then extension 2850;  
or directly at (202) 692-2850  
or via email at [BENIN@peacecorps.gov](mailto:BENIN@peacecorps.gov)

## A NOTE FROM THE PROGRAM MANAGER

Dear Prospective RCH Volunteer,

Congratulations on being selected to serve in Benin! We, the staff of the Rural Community Health (RCH) Program, are looking forward to meeting you. Our main job is to provide you with the support necessary to function in your assigned role as a Community Health Worker in Benin. We are here to help with all of your job related matters, technical issues and personal concerns.

Some of you will be replacing RCH Volunteers who will be finishing their two years of service. Others will be the first RCH Volunteers in your villages. Health Volunteers serving in Benin work in maternal and child health, with a particular emphasis on nutrition. They also work on disease prevention and treatment for malaria, diarrheal disease and HIV/AIDS and promotion of reproductive health for adolescents and youth.

Peace Corps service is the experience of a lifetime. You will make new friends, learn new languages, explore an exciting and vibrant culture and participate in Beninese life.

We look forward to working with you.

A bientôt,

*Christian Alokpo, Health Program Manager*

*Marthe Kpakpo, Health Programming & Training Assistant*

## PEACE CORPS BENIN HISTORY

Peace Corps Volunteers have worked in Benin since 1968 at the request of the Government of Benin. The first Volunteers worked in the sectors of Agriculture and Education. Since then, the country program has grown to include Health, Environmental Action, and Community Economic Development.

Approximately 10 Volunteers are currently serving in Benin as teachers, community economic development advisors, rural health agents, and environment advisors.

Benin is classified by the United Nations as one of the world's least developed countries. Poor nutrition, sanitation and hygiene, high infant mortality rates, limited access to education and health care, and a lack of economic opportunity for whole sectors of the population are constant challenges to the reduction of poverty. Well-intentioned, but misguided, development efforts beginning in the colonial period and continuing to this day have disempowered the very people for whom those efforts were conceived.

The Beninese Ministry of Family and Social Protection, through a network of sub-regional community social service centers, provides outreach services to disadvantaged populations (primarily women, children, handicapped, and at-risk youth). These services include infant growth monitoring and training in health, nutrition and domestic economics. Due to a lack of funding, the centers are typically grossly understaffed, given their scope of work. Much of the slack is picked up by largely untrained community volunteers.

In 1986, the Ministry requested Peace Corps Volunteers to help improve and extend the level of services in the social service centers. In 1987, the first group of Volunteers arrived for the Rural Community Development project. Volunteer activities included nutritional counseling and health promotion, income generating projects and various gardening and agricultural initiatives. In response to the needs of communities, the program was refocused in 2000 to address health promotion and disease prevention, and the name was changed to Rural Community Health. An additional partnership was developed with the Ministry of Public Health, enabling Volunteers to collaborate not only with social service centers, but also with community health centers located in more rural areas. The RCH project was most recently redesigned in 2013, to focus project goals and activities and ensure alignment with national development priorities.

## YOUR PRIMARY DUTIES

The purpose of the Rural Community Health Program is **to assist Beninese individuals and communities in improving their overall health and wellbeing through disease prevention and health promotion activities.** This program focuses on two main goals:

- 1) Maternal, neonatal and child health, with a focus on nutrition;
- 2) Disease prevention and healthy practices – specifically hygiene and sanitation, malaria, HIV/AIDS, and promotion of reproductive health with adolescents and youth.

All Health Volunteers are expected to conduct the following activities during their two years of service; while these activities are required, Volunteers are encouraged to work with their community partners to tailor the activities to the needs of the community:

- Developing community support groups to address specific community health issues by identifying, training, and following up leader mothers; and
- Implementing the peer education curriculum *Amour & Vie* (Love & Life) in developed by international NGO PSI to address youth health issues.

Many Volunteers also conduct the following activities in conjunction with their support groups and *Amour & Vie* groups:

- Working with health care professionals to better define and promote balanced nutrition among pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and children under the age of five;
- Providing malaria education to young people and influential community members so that they will initiate local action aimed at behavior change;
- Assisting with the organization of village-based immunization and baby-weighing sessions;
- Providing health education focused on nutrition and disease prevention (HIV/AIDS, malaria and diarrhea);
- Assisting your community with better use of water and sanitation tools and promoting behavior change;
- Working with local groups to create or improve gardens, providing increased sources of nutrition;
- Working with NGOs to develop sustainable projects in the community.

One of the exciting parts of your professional work is to participate in the Peace Corps monitoring, reporting, and evaluation (MRE) process. All Volunteers receive training on the Peace Corps MRE tracking and reporting system. Each Volunteer regularly reports MRE information and this information is summarized to describe overall progress of the project. This important MRE system helps Peace Corps improve its programming and reporting its accomplishments. The opportunity to learn and practice professional monitoring and evaluation skills are some of the many valued benefits of Peace Corps service.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR SECONDARY/ COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Peace Corps/Benin has three technical focus areas (food security, hygiene & sanitation, and malaria). We expect Volunteers in all four sectors to conduct activities related to their primary sectors to address the focus areas. Health Volunteers address food security through nutrition activities, encouraging proper utilization of available foods and encouraging proper nursing, and complementary feeding practices for infants. During pre-service and in-service trainings, you will receive training to help you implement these types of activities.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, you will also be equipped to play a key role in Peace Corps' malaria initiative and the food security initiatives to contribute to eradicating malaria in Benin and help improve food and nutrition security in the country.

You will be serving in one of the countries participating in an important agency initiative promoting gender awareness and girls' education and empowerment called Let Girls Learn (LGL). All Volunteers in your country will receive in-depth training on incorporating methods of gender analysis into community

assessment and development efforts. You will be encouraged to find culturally appropriate ways to incorporate gender awareness and the promotion of youth into your work and projects as appropriate and report on these efforts and their impact. You will learn more about this initiative during your staging event, as well as during pre-service training.

You will also be encouraged to participate in the many activities of Benin's Gender and Development program, especially as related to your sector. As an RCH Volunteer, you might conduct a practical wellbeing and leadership curriculum called Life Skills in a girls or boys club, address cultural practices linked to gender that affect complementary feeding practices and exclusive breastfeeding, and conduct "Men As Partners" activities to promote positive family planning and hygiene & sanitation behaviors.

## WORKING CONDITIONS

### **Available Resources:**

During training, Rural Community Health Volunteers are provided with an "RCH Toolkit" or technical guide compiling project information, tools for community assessment and planning, activity examples and other resources specific to your work. This toolkit has been developed by Peace Corps Volunteers and staff. You will also have access to technical books and computers available in the Volunteer regional offices called workstations. In addition, further training will be offered during your Peace Corps service to help with project design, management and technical skills.

WiFi is available in the four Volunteer workstations Peace Corps operates around the country, although the speed may be slower than what you are used to using. Volunteers recommend bringing a laptop or netbook if you can, in order to be more independent when working on projects, reports, and staying in communication with family and friends at home. However, many Volunteer's assigned communities do not have internet connectivity or electricity so each Volunteer needs to develop site-specific strategies to keep their laptop batteries charged.

In order to promote sustainability, your work projects should be financed by local community resources. When this is not possible, various funding sources are available, such as the US Embassy Self-Help Fund, Peace Corps Partnership, and Small Project Assistance grants. You will learn more about these resources during your training.

Please be aware that resources available to support your work are limited. As a Peace Corps Volunteer, you are expected to adapt to working within the same resource parameters as your counterparts.

You will be provided with an all-terrain bicycle in order to travel and work in the villages in your immediate area.

### **Location of Job:**

Rural Community Health Volunteers are assigned to work in rural towns or village communities. While RCH Volunteers are paired with government or NGO (non-government organization) counterpart

structures, most do not have individual offices. Rather, RCH Volunteers spend their time between their host organization and the community, working with individuals, women's groups, schools, small businesses, NGOs, and health centers on various health promotion activities.

You will be assigned to work with the director of one of the social service organizations, community health centers, or local or international NGOs. A few centers have additional paid staff, while most rely on community volunteers to assist with health promotion and community outreach services. Peace Corps will have developed a scope of work for you, to include the RCH project's focus areas such as addressing maternal health, nutrition, malaria, and hygiene and sanitation using care groups and other community-centered interventions. **Please note: A Volunteer's job requires a great deal of personal initiative, self-motivation and patience. Generally, your counterpart and host country agency will provide you with guidance and feedback, but little supervision. Therefore, it is essential that you be proactive and disciplined in the day-to-day activities of your work.**

You will also likely have opportunities to collaborate on projects with volunteers from other sectors who are located close to your community.

### **Working Hours:**

Please be aware that your work-day will not be structured as is typical in the United States. It will be your responsibility to learn how best to integrate into the rhythm of work in the village and the workings of the social services, NGO or health center. This will probably be among the most challenging and rewarding aspects of your work and day-to-day life in Benin. Life here, especially in the rural areas, follows complex rhythms associated with agriculture, religion, the phase of the moon, local markets, and the time of day. These rhythms directly affect the practicality of seemingly very simple things, such as when you can expect anyone to attend a meeting, or what subject should be addressed in these meetings or in discussions with young mothers, or what day-to-day activities you can participate in with the members of your community.

### **Cultural Attitudes and Customs in the Workplace:**

You will find that your acceptance into the community will depend a great deal on your willingness to experience Beninese lifestyles. **The most successful Volunteers are those who are well-integrated into their communities and make a commitment to stay in their communities.** They eat the local food, speak the local languages and attend important village ceremonies.

Expect a slow pace of life, both professionally and socially. The people of Benin have a strong work ethic, though work style is often different from that of the US. Our collective objective is not to teach American values or sense of time to Beninese. Our objective is to help Beninese help themselves within their own cultural framework.

In Benin, respect tends to come with age and experience, as well as with the way you dress and comport yourself. Younger Volunteers sometimes experience initial difficulties gaining respect from supervisors, counterparts, and other audiences. Your professional appearance and work habits, along with the respect you demonstrate for your Beninese counterparts, will go a long way towards helping you gain respect in your community and in the workplace.

All Volunteers have to make many cross-cultural adjustments during their service in Benin. Volunteers who are older, of different religions, gay or lesbian, or of an American minority ethnic group, may find that they have even more or less freedom to "be themselves" than they do in the United States. For example, being an African-American or an older Volunteer in Benin may provide greater freedom or serve as a hindrance depending on your personality and approach to your service.

Cultural responses to age, gender, class, color and sexual orientation will be different from the U.S. We cite the following as illustrations: A carpenter named Jean will be called "carpenter" instead of Jean. A foreigner will be called "foreigner" instead of by his/her name. If your complexion is different from that of the population, people may think you are wealthy. Asian and/or African-American Volunteers will be asked if indeed they are American. Please be aware that American notions of political correctness do not apply here. For example, people will ask Asian-American Volunteers if they are Chinese and know kung-fu.

While Benin is generally tolerant, values and mores concerning sexual orientation and gender identity may be different from those in the U.S. Volunteers will need to be mindful of cultural norms, and use their judgement to determine the best way to approach sexual orientation and gender identity in their communities. Staff and currently serving Volunteers will address this topic during pre-service training, and identify support mechanisms for incoming trainees. Please know that whatever the challenges of ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, age, etc., all Trainees and Volunteers will have the support of Peace Corps Staff and the Volunteer Support Network. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you need to do so.

### **Dress Code:**

Being neat and cleanly dressed in a culturally appropriate manner is a sign of respect and pride. Long pants, blouses/shirts, skirts (below the knee) and dresses are appropriate attire for work. Particularly in the north where there is a sizeable Muslim population, dress is very conservative. If dress is inappropriate (shorts, halters, short skirts, form fitting blouses or low cut blouses, spaghetti straps, dirty or torn clothing), you will not be readily accepted in your job, and for women, inappropriate dress and behavior will attract unwanted attention.

Your personal and professional success will depend on integrating yourself into your school and community, making friends there, and participating as much as possible in the daily and cultural life of the community. You should also keep in mind that your own sensitivity and behavior will serve as a model by which Beninese in your village perceive and ultimately judge citizens of your own country as well as the Peace Corps in Benin.

## **TRAINING FOR YOUR JOB**

Satisfying the goal of providing technical assistance to the Beninese people is the number one priority of Peace Corps/Benin. To meet this goal, we want to provide you with the best possible technical, language, and cross-culture training. Peace Corps/Benin implements a multi-phased training model:

### **1. Pre-Service Training**

- Core Training: five weeks of language, cross-culture, safety & security and personal health training, including two week of language immersion;
  - On-the-Job Training I: two weeks spent at your post completing tasks and setting stage for community entry study you will undertake during first three months of service
  - Intensive Technical Training I: five weeks of classroom based sessions with community-based practical applications;
  - On-the-Job Training II: three months spent conducting an “Etude du Milieu” to gather information about your school and community;
  - Technical Training II: one week of technical training expanding on training received during PST; this technical training takes place after the three month on-the-job period.
2. In-Service Trainings: Throughout your service, advanced technical training on specific topics will be offered. You will have the opportunity to apply for a spot in one or several of these trainings which will further your technical knowledge on a specific technical topic linked to one of Peace Corps Benin’s focus areas.

## LIVING CONDITIONS

Volunteers serving in Benin are assigned to sites throughout the country, in a variety of setting – i.e. semi-urban centers, rural towns, or rural villages – with a variety of living accommodations depending on the sector. Some Volunteer sites are very remote where few people speak French and life is lived at a very basic level, i.e. mud house with no running water or electricity. Other volunteers may be placed in a rural town and live in a cement structure with electricity and running water. Sites and living accommodations depend on the needs and resources of your community. **You must be prepared to accept the living conditions to which you are assigned** as you will be living under the same conditions as the people with and for whom you work.

As a Rural Community Health volunteer your house will be constructed of either cement or mud brick with separate bathing and pit latrine structures. Your roof will likely be either tin or thatch (straw). You may not have running water or electricity. Water may be drawn from an open well thus requiring boiling and filtering. A kerosene lantern will provide lighting where there is no electricity.

Access to Western foods may be very limited and you will have to adapt your diet to local foods such as locally produced rice or "pâte" (sort of a stiff porridge made from corn, sorghum, millet or yams) with various leaf sauces, local vegetables such as okra, eggplant, tomatoes and various kinds of meat. Vegetables and fruit may only be seasonally available. You will do your shopping at the local market every few days.

Traveling is difficult and many of the roads and means of public transportation are in poor condition. Most rural roads are unpaved and for much of the year will be either muddy and rutted or dusty and bumpy, depending on the season. However, travel from larger towns to the capital of Cotonou can be done using a good busing system. However traveling to and from these larger towns from rural communities can be difficult as many of the roads and means of public transportation are in poor condition. Most rural roads (those that will take you in and out of your community) are unpaved and for much of the year will be either muddy and rutted or dusty and wash-boarded, depending on the season. Travel around the country is mostly by small buses called “bush taxis” or by moped/motorcycle taxis called “Zemis”. Peace Corps provides you with a motorcycle helmet that must be worn when riding

Zemis. Peace Corps also provides you with a mountain bike, which will be your principal means of transportation around your work zone. As other modes of transport in your community will most likely be infrequent, you will probably do a fair share of your traveling on this bike. Since this will require considerable physical exertion on your part, you should be in reasonably good shape or at least willing to improve your physical fitness to meet this work demand.

You will need to take appropriate common sense safety precautions in larger cities and towns as you travel, as well as at your site. As in the United States, there are always some individuals looking to take advantage of others, especially strangers. Just as in the United States, your awareness and common sense, such as not walking alone at night and not overtly displaying expensive goods or carrying large sums of cash, will go a long way in helping you avoid situations which put you at risk. The crime rate in Benin is low relative to other West African countries, but each year some Volunteers experience incidents of pick pocketing, burglary, robbery, or assault. Peace Corps will help you reinforce in yourself behavior which reduces your exposure to risk. There are no substitutes, however, for common sense and the knowledge you will gain in observing and mimicking the prudent behavior of your Beninese neighbors.

Organizing your living situation is one of the first tasks that you will have during your first month or two in your community. Fortunately, it will also be one of the most instructive things you can do. You will learn new vocabulary, discover hidden corners of the market, observe skilled and unskilled laborers at work, and learn to cope (patiently, preferably) with the inevitable delays and obstructions of virtually any project.

Keep in mind also that village life offers few of the amenities you may be accustomed to. Still, you will be learning so much about yourself and your community that this will more than compensate for anything you lack from the U.S.

**Married couples:** Peace Corps Benin welcomes married couples. If you and your spouse serve in different projects then you will likely live with separate homestay families in separate (but nearby villages) during training. You will have opportunities to see each other every week, and you will live together during your two years of service after provisionally swearing in as Peace Corps Volunteers in December 2016.

## **POTENTIAL CHALLENGES & REWARDS** Living and working in Benin will not be easy.

Your challenges will stem in part from the differences between American and Beninese cultural traditions. You are a guest in Benin and you will have to learn to become effective within the Beninese culture. You will need all your technical skills, but more importantly you will need to learn how to adapt those skills to the inter-personal situations that you confront. Sources of frustration are myriad: the inability to communicate effectively in French at first, intellectual or cultural loneliness, the slow pace of change, disinterest or lack of understanding by others as to what you are trying to do, lack of positive reinforcement, and cultural biases. Another source of frustration may be weak support from the agency you are assigned to, which may be underfunded and/or inadequately staffed. **A Volunteer's job requires a great deal of personal initiative and self-motivation and patience.**

However, the rewards can be tremendous as you integrate into a totally different culture, as you grow in appreciation of the hardships endured by the people with and for whom you work, and as you see yourself and others become more confident in abilities to make valuable life changes. You can never know how many lives you have touched, and to what effect.

Most Volunteers come to realize that the most important and lasting achievements of their service are very personal in nature and are realized in the context of relationships of friendship and mutual respect. These achievements are ones which they will carry in their hearts for the rest of their lives. If you enjoy meeting new challenges, you will find the rewards of serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer to be great and life-changing. It is a unique opportunity for personal and professional growth under often difficult conditions, requiring creativity with limited resources, self-motivation, self-discipline, and adaptability.

## COMMENTS FROM VOLUNTEERS

Hey there, I'm Sandy! My service thus far in Benin has been great overall but it can be a roller coaster with high and low days. The two greatest things to keep me inspired are a bag of Oreos and my amazing Care Group! A Care Group is a group of no more than 15 volunteer community health educators known as Leader Mothers who regularly meet with the RCH Volunteer and counterpart (Health Promoter). I meet with the 12 members of my Care Group every other week. Myself and my counterpart train them to each re-teach 10 beneficiary mothers healthy behaviors related to topics such as nutrition, malaria prevention, and hygiene in the household.

In Benin, one has to be educated to at least earn any leadership role in their community. The Leader Mothers in my Care Group are all illiterate and have never had an official role outside of their respective households. Serving as Leader Mothers have helped make them better mothers and role models to all the other [illiterate and non-illiterate] mothers in the village. The time I spend with the Leader Mothers is beyond work related, which is awesome! We share meals together, have dance offs, and occasionally they invite me to do field work alongside them. Getting to this point definitely took work and time! Myself and the RCHers here have prepared a few things to help you get started with your care group once you get situated. No worries!!

Best,

**Sandy Noel, RCH Volunteer 2013-16**

*Amour & Vie* in partnership with Peace Corps Benin works to promote better health practices through peer education among the youth. At its core *Amour & Vie* empowers youth to take a stand in the prevention of communicable diseases. I believe the work that I do in my community with my *Amour & Vie* team will have a long term impact in the self-efficacy of my teammates; HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases; and to better health outcomes of youth in my village.

The process and training of having an *Amour & Vie* team is a unique and eye opening experience. Nowhere else in the Peace Corps service can you spend a week in training with host country national partners speaking about gender, sexuality, hygiene, and a whole gamut of other health related topics.

I've seen in my teammates eyes the "ah-ha" moments--those moments of understanding that burst forth suddenly--that they had the power to change the community for the better through the knowledge they were gaining through training. These moments were greatly satisfying, and redeemed the conviction that I was making difference in Peace Corps service.

A tid-bit of advice to whoever would like to form an *Amour & Vie* team. My team conforms to the traditional model: have two peer educators, a girl and boy who are from the community's high school, and my local language tutor who serves as the supervisor for the team.

To form my team I met with the high school director. He knows the students who are serious about their studies, and he guided me in the selection of candidates for peer educators. A word of caution, and I would be all the better for it, make sure the students speak the local language in your community. If they do not, it will be difficult for them to convey the key messages in the training sessions. Also have a supervisor who is well-respected in the community, which will go a long way towards establishing the legitimacy of the team in village.

All in all, I see *Amour & Vie* playing a crucial role in my community to reduce the incidence of HIV and other STIs among the youth, and also as a means to empower my peer educators--especially the girl. I remember when the *Amour & Vie* representatives came to my village and interviewed the candidates for my team. There was one girl who was extremely timid. Naturally she became part of my team due to this fact. What I believe, based on her behavior and the retention of knowledge she demonstrated during training, is that she will become empowered. She has the knowledge, platform, drive, and support needed to achieve this. *Amour & Vie* will be a force of change and empowerment in my village.

**Jonathan Sloan, RCH Volunteer 2013-2016, Aledjo**