

THE PEACE CORPS WELCOMES YOU TO

# BENIN



A PEACE CORPS PUBLICATION FOR NEW VOLUNTEERS

June 2013 CCD



## A WELCOME LETTER

Greetings Potential Peace Corps Volunteers,

Congratulations! You have been invited to begin the process of becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer. It's challenging, it's not for everyone, but we think it might just be a perfect fit for you. Peace Corps/Benin will help you by leading you through the following steps:

1. *PRE-DEPARTURE DOCUMENTS*: Read through all the materials Peace Corps sends you carefully. Note your questions.
2. *STAGING*: A short event in the U.S. designed to orient you to Peace Corps in general and to your life and work in Peace Corps/Benin.
3. *PRE-SERVICE TRAINING (PST)*: A nine week event outlined in the Bridge to PST that you will receive just before Staging. Here you will begin speaking "franglais" and you will call it "stage"(stahge), which means internship or training in French.
4. *LISTEN and LEARN!* Listen to and learn from the evaluation of your trainers, other staff members and your fellow trainees. Are you moving positively toward becoming a Volunteer?
5. Swearing – In: If your answer to question 4 is YES and you meet all the requirements (competencies and behavior), you will be sworn in To Serve two years as a Volunteer in Benin.

Congratulations on each step you make in this process. We look forward to meeting you upon your arrival.

BONNE ARRIVEE!

Country Director  
Peace Corps/Benin

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# CORE EXPECTATIONS FOR PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

In working toward fulfilling the Peace Corps Mission of promoting world peace and friendship, as a trainee and Volunteer, you are expected to:

1. Prepare your personal and professional life to make a commitment to serve abroad for a full term of 27 months
2. Commit to improving the quality of life of the people with whom you live and work; and, in doing so, share your skills, adapt them, and learn new skills as needed
3. Serve where the Peace Corps asks you to go, under conditions of hardship, if necessary, and with the flexibility needed for effective service
4. Recognize that your successful and sustainable development work is based on the local trust and confidence you build by living in, and respectfully integrating yourself into, your host community and culture
5. Recognize that you are responsible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for your personal conduct and professional performance
6. Engage with host country partners in a spirit of cooperation, mutual learning, and respect
7. Work within the rules and regulations of the Peace Corps and the local and national laws of the country where you serve
8. Exercise judgment and personal responsibility to protect your health, safety, and well-being and that of others
9. Recognize that you will be perceived, in your host country and community, as a representative of the people, cultures, values, and traditions of the United States of America
10. Represent responsibly the people, cultures, values, and traditions of your host country and community to people in the United States both during and following your service

# PEACE CORPS/BENIN

## HISTORY AND PROGRAMS

### History of the Peace Corps in Benin

Since 1968, more than 1,500 Peace Corps Volunteers have served in Benin. The initial program included projects in animal traction, small-farm grain storage, rice production, and secondary English education. From the late 1960s through the mid-1970s, the number of Volunteers in Benin remained at approximately 50. During the late 1970s, Peace Corps/Benin received fewer requests for assistance, and by 1980 only six Volunteers remained in-country. In 1981, the government of Benin (GOB) expressed renewed interest in having Volunteer assistance in implementing its new development plan, particularly in the areas of education, reforestation, and rural development. The Peace Corps responded by developing projects and recruiting Volunteers in those areas.

Currently, about 100 Volunteers work under the direction of the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Promotion of Employment (small enterprise development Volunteers), the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Family and National Solidarity (rural community health Volunteers), the Ministry of Environment (environmental action Volunteers) and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (teaching English as a foreign language Volunteers) to respond to the four national priorities:

- Increased development of small enterprise
- Improved quality of health delivery for rural populations and HIV/AIDS education
- Environmental awareness and protection
- Expanded secondary education opportunities

The education, health, and environmental sectors account for approximately 60 percent of the national budget; and 75 percent of Volunteers serving in Benin work in these sectors.

### History and Future of Peace Corps Programming in Benin

Small enterprise development Volunteers work with rural micro credit unions, small business owners, artisan and professional groups, community cooperatives, producer and transformer organizations, and municipal governments to strengthen management skills and to improve income generating activities.

Volunteers in the teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) program teach in secondary schools.

Volunteers in the rural community health project are assigned to government health centers, government social centers, or local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) where they work closely with host country counterparts to promote improved maternal and child

health care. Environmental action Volunteers assist communities with environmental education, natural resource protection, non-timber forest products, and gardening promotion.

The Peace Corps/Benin program emphasizes full development of a “core training curriculum” for Volunteers to achieve gender and development sensitivity; cross-cultural (American and host country) skills; and safety, language, project design/management, and HIV/AIDS education competencies. In addition, staff seek more interactive engagement with host agencies through clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities, action planning to achieve sustainability, and a mutually agreed-upon exit strategy from each community/agency. As such, each community will only have access to the skills of a Volunteer for a maximum of six years (three rotations) to convey the urgency of capacity building and skills transfer. The post prepares a *Partners’ Manual* for each supervisor. This manual reinforces the mutual expectations of Peace Corps and the agencies to which Volunteers are assigned.

Additionally, Peace Corps/Benin continues to explore more fully innovative opportunities to support Volunteer assignments and secondary activities through partnerships with host country and international agencies.

The AIDS pandemic strikes across all social strata in many Peace Corps countries. The loss of teachers has crippled education systems, while illness and disability drain family income and force governments and donors to redirect limited resources from other priorities. The fear and uncertainty AIDS causes has led to increased domestic violence and stigmatizing of people living with HIV/AIDS, isolating them from friends and family and cutting them off from economic opportunities. As a Peace Corps Volunteer, you will confront these issues on a very personal level. It is important to be aware of the high emotional toll that disease, death, and violence can have on Volunteers. As you strive to integrate into your community, you will develop relationships with local people who might die during your service. Because of the AIDS pandemic, some Volunteers will be regularly meeting with HIV-positive people and working with training staff, office staff, and host family members living with AIDS. Volunteers need to prepare themselves to embrace these relationships in a sensitive and positive manner. Likewise, malaria and malnutrition, motor vehicle accidents and other unintentional injuries, domestic violence, and corporal punishment are problems a Volunteer may confront. You will need to anticipate these situations and utilize supportive resources available throughout your training and service to maintain your own emotional strength so you can continue to be of service to your community.



# **COUNTRY OVERVIEW: BENIN AT A GLANCE**

## **History**

The history of Benin can be described as a succession of 12 kingdoms dating back from the early 1600s to approximately 1900. Following French and Portuguese rule, the territory was named the Colony of Dahomey and its Dependencies and was granted autonomy on June 22, 1894. Dahomey retained its autonomy until October 18, 1904, when it became part of French West Africa. On August 1, 1960, Dahomey became independent. This first independent government was ousted by a military coup on October 28, 1963. Dahomey experienced multiple coups between 1963 and 1972. The coup on October 26, 1972, marked the beginning of a 17-year Marxist-Leninist regime headed by Mathieu Kérékou, who proclaimed Dahomey the People's Republic of Benin in 1975. In 1990, Benin embarked on the process of democratization, and the country has made concerted efforts to implement more liberal political, economic, and administrative reforms.

## **Government**

Benin has experienced 19 years of sustained transition to democratic practices. Legislative and municipal elections have been successfully held. The current government represents a cross-section of political parties and interest groups. In March 2006, Dr. Thomas Boni Yayi was elected president. The peaceful process was a shining light in African democratization.

Porto-Novo is the administrative capital and the seat of the National Assembly. The city of Cotonou is the economic capital and the seat of the presidency and most ministries.

Theoretically, Benin is now divided into 12 administrative departments even though, in actual fact, there are six.

## **Economy**

With an annual gross national product (GNP) per capita of U.S. \$1,100 (est. 2005), Benin ranks among the poorer countries in the world. The economy of Benin remains dependent on subsistence agriculture, cotton production, and regional trade. Growth in real output averaged 4 percent in 2009, but a rapid population rise has offset much of this growth. Inflation has subsided over the past several years. Commercial and transport activities, which make up a large part of the GDP, are vulnerable to developments in Nigeria, particularly fuel shortages. Industry accounts for only a small percentage of the GDP. Fishing and textile industries meet only local consumption needs. The weaknesses in Benin's economy are due to a top-heavy civil service, large-scale smuggling, lack of reliable energy sources and telecommunication infrastructure, and a poor road network.

## People and Culture

The most recent census data for Benin put the population at approximately 7.8 million, with a population growth rate of approximately 3.25 percent. The largest population centers are the southern coastal region near the major port city of Cotonou, the capital city of Porto Novo, Parakou, and the “Royal City” of Abomey. Other major towns are Natitingou, Ouidah, Allada, Grand Popo, Lokossa, Save, Savalou, Djougou, Malanville, and Kandi.

Benin is composed of more than 40 ethnic groups that can be divided into four main ethnolinguistic groups: Fon, Voltaic, Fulani, and Yoruba. While French is the official language, there are more than 50 indigenous languages spoken throughout Benin. Of these, the most prevalent are Fon, Dendi, Bariba, Yoruba, Nago, Fulani, and Mina.

Benin is the birthplace of *Vodun* (also known as voodoo), a Diaspora-wide religion that blends medicine, justice, art, dance, music, and ritual. *Vodun* is generally conceived as a way of life as much as a religion. Followers of *Vodun* often blend their practices with other religions, and offshoots throughout the world, such as Santeria, have developed. *Vodun* is celebrated on January 10, which is “Traditional Religion Day.”

## Environment

Benin is located in the “Dahomey Gap,” which is a gap of about 200 kilometers between the West African tropical forest block and the Central African tropical forest block. Thus, in spite of its tropical position, Benin is largely dominated by savanna ecosystems and open forests. These savanna ecosystems can generally be subdivided into several categories based on density: clear forest, woodland savanna, tree savanna, and shrub savanna. In addition, there are the riparian (gallery) forests surrounding the water courses, which are dense, closed-canopy forests extending just 50 to 100 meters from the river banks. Benin is estimated to have about 3000 species of flora, with over one-third of these being found just in the narrow strips of gallery forests surrounding the water courses.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Following is a list of websites for additional information about the Peace Corps, Benin, and to connect you to returned Volunteers and other invitees. Please keep in mind that although we try to make sure all these links are active and current, we cannot guarantee it. If you do not have access to the Internet, visit your local library. Libraries offer free Internet usage and often let you print information to take home.

A note of caution: As you surf the Internet, be aware that you may find bulletin boards and chat rooms in which people are free to express opinions about the Peace Corps based on their own experience, including comments by those who were unhappy with their choice to serve in the Peace Corps. These opinions are not those of the Peace Corps or the U.S. government, and we hope you will keep in mind that no two people experience their service in the same way.

### General Information About Benin

#### **[www.countrywatch.com](http://www.countrywatch.com)**

On this site, you can learn anything from what time it is in the capital of Benin to how to convert from the dollar to the Benin currency. Just click on Benin and go from there.

#### **[www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations)**

Visit this site for general travel advice about almost any country in the world.

#### **[www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)**

The State Department's website issues background notes periodically about countries around the world. Find Benin and learn more about its social and political history. You can also go to the site's international travel section to check on conditions that may affect your safety.

#### **[www.psr.keele.ac.uk/official.htm](http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/official.htm)**

This includes links to all the official sites for governments worldwide.

#### **[www.geography.about.com/library/maps/blindex.htm](http://www.geography.about.com/library/maps/blindex.htm)**

This online world atlas includes maps and geographical information, and each country page contains links to other sites, such as the Library of Congress, that contain comprehensive historical, social, and political background.

#### **[www.cyberschoolbus.un.org/infonation/info.asp](http://www.cyberschoolbus.un.org/infonation/info.asp)**

This United Nations site allows you to search for statistical information for member states of the U.N.

**[www.worldinformation.com](http://www.worldinformation.com)**

This site provides an additional source of current and historical information about countries around the world.

## **Connect With Returned Volunteers and Other Invitees**

**[www.rpcv.org](http://www.rpcv.org)**

This is the site of the National Peace Corps Association, made up of returned Volunteers. On this site you can find links to all the Web pages of the “Friends of” groups for most countries of service, comprised of former Volunteers who served in those countries. There are also regional groups that frequently get together for social events and local volunteer activities. Or go straight to the Friends of Benin site: **<http://friendsofbenin.org/>**.

**[www.PeaceCorpsWorldwide.org](http://www.PeaceCorpsWorldwide.org)**

This site is hosted by a group of returned Volunteer writers. It is a monthly online publication of essays and Volunteer accounts of their Peace Corps service.

## **Online Articles/Current News Sites About Benin**

**[www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)**

Go to National Public Radio’s website and type “Benin” into the search window. There are several audio and video links there containing cultural programs about Benin.

**<http://allafrica.com/benin/>**

Benin news articles

## **International Development Sites About Benin**

**[www.worldbank.org/benin](http://www.worldbank.org/benin)**

Information on the World Bank’s projects in Benin

**<http://www.gouv.bj/>**

Republic of Benin government website (French)

**[http://www.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan\\_africa/countries/benin/index.html](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan_africa/countries/benin/index.html)**

U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) work in Benin

[www.ndi.org/worldwide/cewa/benin/benin.asp](http://www.ndi.org/worldwide/cewa/benin/benin.asp)

National Democratic Institute for International Affairs

<http://www.afdb.org/>

African Development Bank

<http://www.undp.org.bj/>

United Nations Development Programme in Benin (French)

## Recommended Books

- Ben-Amos, Paula. *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth Century Benin*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999
- French, Howard W. *Benin's Cultural Bounty*. *Africa Report*, 57. January/February, 1993
- Kane, Hamidou. *Ambiguous Adventure*. 1969. This novel is set in Guinea but is recommended by in-country staff for its handling of West African cross-cultural issues and Muslim culture.

Check one of the popular online bookstores and do a search for Benin. You will discover hundreds of entries. Search by genre (travel, art, Peace Corps authors, religion, development, politics, etc.) and read the reviews. You are sure to find a book that looks interesting to you and suits your interests!

## Books About the History of the Peace Corps

- Hoffman, Elizabeth Cobbs. *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Rice, Gerald T. *The Bold Experiment: JFK's Peace Corps*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985.
- Stossel, Scott. *Sarge: The Life and Times of Sargent Shriver*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2004.
- Meisler, Stanley. *When the World Calls: The Inside Story of the Peace Corps and its First 50 Years*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2011.

## Books on the Volunteer Experience

- Dirlam, Sharon. *Beyond Siberia: Two Years in a Forgotten Place*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: McSeas Books, 2004.
- Casebolt, Marjorie DeMoss. *Margarita: A Guatemalan Peace Corps Experience*. Gig Harbor, Wash.: Red Apple Publishing, 2000.
- Erdman, Sarah. *Nine Hills to Nambonkaha: Two Years in the Heart of an African Village*. New York, N.Y.: Picador, 2003.
- Hessler, Peter. *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*. New York, N.Y.: Perennial, 2001.
- Kennedy, Geraldine ed. *From the Center of the Earth: Stories out of the Peace Corps*. Santa Monica, Calif.: Clover Park Press, 1991.
- Thompsen, Moritz. *Living Poor: A Peace Corps Chronicle*. Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1997 (reprint).



# LIVING CONDITIONS AND VOLUNTEER LIFESTYLE

## Communications

### Mail

Few countries in the world offer the level of service we consider normal in the U.S. If you come to Benin expecting U.S. standards for mail service, you will be in for some frustration. We do not want to sound discouraging, but when we are thousands of miles from our families and friends, communication becomes a very sensitive issue. We would prefer you be forewarned so as to decide what is important to you.

We strongly encourage you to write to your family regularly. Family members typically become worried when they do not hear from you, so please advise your parents, relatives, and friends that mail is sporadic and they shouldn't worry if they don't receive your letters regularly. If a serious problem were to occur, Peace Corps/Benin would notify the Office of Special Services at Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C., and your family members would be contacted.

Similarly, in the event of an emergency at home, your family could contact the Peace Corps at 800.424.8580 and messages would be transmitted to us to deliver to you.

Mail generally takes two weeks to one month to get from the U.S. to Cotonou. Some Volunteers rent post office boxes in their villages; others have mail sent to the Peace Corps office in Cotonou where they pick it up or it is periodically delivered to sites near the Volunteers' posts. Airmail is received several times a week, via France. Surface mail arrives approximately once every five weeks. Some mail may simply not arrive (fortunately, this is not a frequent occurrence, but it does happen). Some letters may arrive with clipped edges because someone has tried to see the contents (again, this is rare, but it does happen). Ninety percent of all packages sent to Benin arrive (sometimes a few months late). Padded envelopes are a better bet than boxes because you don't have to pay duty. Don't ask people to send valuables to you. Items such as Walkman speakers, food, and clothing have usually arrived with no problem.

Number your letters, and advise your family and friends to number their letters as well and to write "Air Mail" and "Par Avion" on their envelopes. Your address during training will be:

"Your Name", PCT (PCV after you've sworn in as a Volunteer)  
Corps de la Paix Americain  
01 B.P. 971  
Cotonou, Benin  
Afrique de l'Ouest (West Africa)

Once you have been sworn-in as a Volunteer and are at your post, you will have your mail sent directly to your new address there. However, many Volunteers continue to receive packages in Cotonou since in-country delivery of mail is usually unpredictable

## **Telephones**

Regular and long-distance communication via telephone is available but expensive. If you are calling from outside the capital city, it may take longer to get a line. You can generally arrange for your family to call you in Benin, depending on your location in-country. You can tell your family how to call once you learn where you will be posted. Remember that there is a six-hour time difference (five hours during daylight saving time) between Benin and the East Coast of the U.S.

Cell phone coverage is becoming more prevalent throughout Benin. Many Volunteers buy cell phones once they arrive, which facilitates contact with family and friends back home, as well as with Peace Corps staff in-country. The Peace Corps does not supply cell phones to Volunteers.

## **Computer, Internet, and Email Access**

If your sponsoring agency or counterpart owns a computer, you might be able to arrange access for work or personal use. The resource center in the Peace Corps office and the four workstations located in Cotonou, Parakou, Natitingou, and Kandi all have computers for work-related use. Internet access is available at all of these workstations, with WiFi access in Cotonou. Internet access may not be available in rural areas where most Volunteers are placed. In most cities, Volunteers have been able to access email at private businesses or at Internet cafés; access to the Internet averages about \$1 per hour, though the connection and speed are best in major cities and much slower in rural areas. Please let your family and friends know that it may be one to two months between times when you can check your email, depending on where you are posted. Email should not be considered by family and friends as your main avenue of communication

## **Housing and Site Location**

Peace Corps staff, in collaboration with the ministry for which you will work, will decide your post according to the needs of the country and the competencies of the Volunteers. This happens after Peace Corps staff reviews all sites for appropriateness, safety, and security and takes time to get to know each trainee during pre-service training. You may not know where you will be assigned until the last few weeks of your training program.

## **Living Allowance and Money Management**

As a Volunteer in Benin, you will receive four types of allowances: living allowance, leave allowance, in-country travel allowance (ICT) and a settling-in allowance.

Your living allowance is meant to cover your basic expenses (i.e., food, utilities, household supplies, clothing, recreation and entertainment, transportation not related to work, reading materials, and other incidentals). The allowance is reviewed at least once a year through a market survey to ensure that it is adequate. Currently, the living allowance in Benin is paid in local currency and is equivalent to approximately \$200 a month. It is directly deposited monthly into your local bank account, which will be opened for you during training.

Additionally, you'll receive a one-time settling-in allowance paid in local currency and currently equivalent to \$280 to buy basic household items when you move to your site. This is also paid into your local bank account and available to you after swearing in as Volunteers.

You earn your vacation allowance at the rate of \$24 per month and it is added to your living allowance each month.

You will also have funds to travel from your post to the capital for work purposes. The amount you receive will depend on your geographical posting—Volunteers living in the north get money for transportation and per diem for one round trip per quarter while Volunteers in the south get funds for two round trips per quarter.

If you are requested by the Peace Corps to travel, you will be reimbursed funds for transportation and per diem through your local bank account. This amount is based on the costs of transportation and lodging.

Most Volunteers find they can live comfortably in Benin with these four allowances, although many Volunteers bring money (in U.S. currency; cash or traveler's checks) for out-of-country travel. You are strongly discouraged from supplementing your income with money brought from home. The living allowance is adequate, and Volunteers should be living at the same economic level as their neighbors and colleagues.

Credit cards can be used at a few hotels in the capital. Traveler's checks can be cashed for a fee. You will not find many retail places that accept credit cards or traveler's checks.

Your American ATM cards can also be used to withdraw cash in local currency at limited places in the capital.

## **Food and Diet**

Most foods are available at local markets in regional centers and in Cotonou. In some regional centers, there is a sufficient variety of meats, and local green vegetables are in abundant supply and variety when in season. Most tropical fruits can be found year-round. Fresh milk is not available, but powdered milk can generally be found throughout the country. In some villages, fruits and vegetables are rare, and Volunteers must travel to larger towns to obtain them. There are several supermarkets in Cotonou that cater to

European and American tastes. Almost everything is available, but items are typically imported and, therefore, expensive. Basic fresh foodstuffs available in almost all markets include beans, corn, rice, tomatoes, yams, hot peppers, garlic, onions, and spices.

## **Transportation**

Volunteers are not allowed to own or drive cars or motorcycles. There are few vehicle taxis for intracity transport, and they are expensive and located only in Cotonou. Instead, you will be issued a bicycle and a bicycle helmet. All Volunteers must also be prepared to ride on zemi-jahns (motor scooters operated by “zemi” drivers). Zemis provide a principal source of transportation throughout Benin.

You must wear a Peace Corps-provided motorcycle helmet when riding one of these, and you must wear the bicycle helmet when riding your bike. Violation of this policy will result in administrative separation.

Most Volunteers travel throughout the country in “bush taxis,” which are generally in less-than-optimum condition and unregulated for safety standards. There are frequent road traffic accidents due to fast driving and poor road conditions.

We strongly urge that you pay careful attention during the training sessions on selecting public transportation and ask other Volunteers to assist in identifying safe drivers. You should avoid traveling at night whenever possible and use the bus lines when feasible.

## **Geography and Climate**

Benin has a hot and humid climate in the south. There are four distinct seasons in most of the country: a long rainy season from April to July; a short dry season from August to September; a short rainy season from October to November; and a long dry season from December to March.

In contrast, the north has two seasons: a dry season from November to the beginning of May and a rainy season from May to October. The north is also marked by extreme daily temperature fluctuations, especially during the Harmattan (a dry sand-carrying wind from the desert during the dry season months of November, December, and January).

## **Social Activities**

Social activities will vary depending on your interests and where you are located. They may include taking part in various festivities, parties, storytelling, and local dances. We encourage all Volunteers to remain at their sites and to explore their regions to accomplish the second Peace Corps goal of cultural exchange.

A few larger towns may have more entertainment venues and an assortment of buvettes (bars) with live music and dancing, but for the most part it will be incumbent upon you to entertain yourself. The most successful Volunteers are those who make friends in their

villages and organize their lives around activities that take place there. There are many religious and traditional ceremonies during the year that provide opportunities for you to participate and immerse yourself in the cultural life of your village or town. Much of life revolves around food and Volunteers go to other people's homes to relax and enjoy a meal and conversation.

### **Professionalism, Dress, and Behavior**

Your social and public behavior as a Volunteer is of critical importance to you. Peace Corps Volunteers have social responsibilities that are more complex than those of private citizens. The Volunteer is often the most identifiable (and frequently the only) American in the community; hence, in addition to the responsibility for personal conduct that resides with every individual, Volunteers have a responsibility to conduct themselves in a manner reflecting credit on the Peace Corps and on the United States. Your hosts will inevitably see you as an example of American culture and customs. You will receive an orientation to appropriate behavior and cultural sensitivity during your training. As a Volunteer, you have the status of an invited guest, and thus you should be sensitive to the culture and customs of your hosts and other Americans who may have a culture different from your own.

Being neat and cleanly dressed is a sign of respect and pride. Trousers (for men, and women in some regions), blouses/shirts, skirts (below the knee), and dresses are appropriate wear for work. Particularly in the Muslim north, dress is very conservative. If dress is inappropriate—shorts, halter tops, short skirts, form-fitting or low-cut blouses, dirty or torn clothing—you will not be readily accepted in your job. Moreover, for women, inappropriate dress and behavior will attract unwanted attention. Beninese may not directly comment on your dress, but they most likely will think that you either don't know what is culturally acceptable or that you don't care and are disrespectful. Beginning in pre-service training, staff will require you to appear appropriately dressed and will ask you to leave the training site if you are not dressed properly.

### **Personal Safety**

More detailed information about the Peace Corps' approach to safety is contained in the "Health Care and Safety" chapter, but it is an important issue and cannot be overemphasized. As stated in the Volunteer Handbook, becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer entails certain safety risks. Living and traveling in an unfamiliar environment (oftentimes alone), having a limited understanding of local language and culture, and being perceived as well-off are some of the factors that can put a Volunteer at risk. Many Volunteers experience varying degrees of unwanted attention and harassment. Petty thefts and burglaries are not uncommon, and incidents of physical and sexual assault do occur, although most Benin Volunteers complete their two years of service without incident. The Peace Corps has established procedures and policies designed to help you reduce your risks and enhance your safety and security. These procedures and policies, in addition to safety

training, will be provided once you arrive in Benin. Using these tools, you are expected to take responsibility for your safety and well-being.

Each staff member at the Peace Corps is committed to providing Volunteers with the support they need to successfully meet the challenges they will face to have a safe, healthy, and productive service. We encourage Volunteers and families to look at our safety and security information on the Peace Corps website at [www.peacecorps.gov/safety](http://www.peacecorps.gov/safety).

Information on these pages gives messages on Volunteer health and Volunteer safety. There is a section titled “Safety and Security – Our Partnership.” Among topics addressed are the risks of serving as a Volunteer, posts’ safety support systems, and emergency planning and communications.

Harassment in public is an issue that you will encounter. Examples include being called yovo (foreigner) by children or adults on the street, being accused of not being American if you are of Asiatic origin, or being criticized because you are African American and cannot eat hot pepper. Staff and peer support Volunteers will help you develop strategies to cope. Your success and effectiveness in doing so will depend largely on your personality. Perhaps for the first time in your life, you will learn what it means to be “different” or a member of the “minority” or you will find that even though you resemble the majority, you feel different. If you are uncomfortable with being perceived as, or feeling, different all the time, Peace Corps service is not for you.

Petty thefts and burglaries are not uncommon, and incidents of physical assault do occur, although most Volunteers complete their two years of service without personal safety problems. The Peace Corps has established procedures and policies designed to help Volunteers reduce their risks and enhance their safety and security. At the same time, Volunteers are expected to take responsibility for their safety and well-being by exercising common sense and by following the policies and procedures developed from the experience of staff and Volunteers who have come before you.

These procedures and policies, in addition to safety training, will be provided once you arrive in Benin.

### **Rewards and Frustrations**

Although the potential for job satisfaction is quite high, like all Volunteers, you will encounter numerous frustrations. For example, the pace of work and life is slower in Benin than most Americans are accustomed to. People change practices and traditions that are centuries old only when it seems sensible and beneficial for them to do so. Also, due to financial or other challenges, collaborating agencies do not always provide the support promised. The Peace Corps experience is often described as a series of emotional peaks and valleys that occur while you adapt to a new culture and environment.

You will find yourself in work situations that require an ability to motivate yourself and your counterparts with little guidance from supervisors. You may work for months without seeing any visible impact and without receiving feedback on your work.

Development is a slow ongoing process. You must possess the self-confidence, patience, and vision to continue working toward long-term goals without seeing immediate results.

To approach and overcome these difficulties, you will need maturity, flexibility, open-mindedness, and resourcefulness. Beninese are a hospitable, friendly, and warm people. The Peace Corps staff, your co-workers, and fellow Volunteers will support you during times of challenge, as well as in moments of success. If you are able to make the commitment to integrate into your community and work hard, you will be a successful Volunteer.



CPFRD-302/24471-2/31

# PEACE CORPS TRAINING

## Pre-Service Training

The Peace Corps employs a community-based model during pre-service training. It is based on adult learning methods that emphasize individual responsibility for developing the competencies to function independently as a Volunteer. You will live with a family, take care of your own needs, and work either independently or in small groups to accomplish tasks that build your skill levels. Beninese facilitators will help you learn the necessary language skills to accomplish your living and work tasks.

You cannot be sworn-in to Peace Corps service until you have clearly demonstrated the attributes and skills necessary to meet the needs of your assignment. You can monitor and demonstrate your own progress through self-evaluation, consistent feedback from staff and facilitators, and participation in daily activities.

Your success in this learning period—and your success as a Volunteer—depend on your maturity, self-discipline and motivation. Success requires full participation and some measure of sacrifice in terms of time and personal comfort. Investment of effort during this time will be well worth the rewards of satisfaction and well-being you will experience as a Volunteer.

## Technical Training

Technical training will prepare you to work in Benin by building on the skills you already have and helping you develop new skills in a manner appropriate to the needs of the country. The Peace Corps staff, Benin experts, and current Volunteers will conduct the training program. Training places great emphasis on learning how to transfer the skills you have to the community in which you will serve as a Volunteer.

Technical training will include sessions on the general economic and political environment in Benin and strategies for working within such a framework. You will review your technical sector's goals and will meet with the Benin agencies and organizations that invited the Peace Corps to assist them. You will be supported and evaluated throughout the training to build the confidence and skills you need to undertake your project activities and be a productive member of your community.

## Language Training

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, you will find that language skills are key to personal and professional satisfaction during your service. These skills are critical to your job performance, they help you integrate into your community, and they can ease your personal adaptation to the new surroundings. Therefore, language training is at the heart of the training program. You must successfully meet minimum language requirements to

complete training and become a Volunteer. Benin language instructors teach formal language classes five days a week in small groups of four to five people.

Your language training will incorporate a community-based approach. In addition to classroom time, you will be given assignments to work on outside of the classroom and with your host family. The goal is to get you to a point of basic social communication skills so you can practice and develop language skills further once you are at your site. Prior to being sworn in as a Volunteer, you will work on strategies to continue language studies during your service.

### **Cross-Cultural Training**

As part of your pre-service training, you will live with a Benin host family. This experience is designed to ease your transition to life at your site. Families go through an orientation conducted by Peace Corps staff to explain the purpose of pre-service training and to assist them in helping you adapt to living in Benin. Many Volunteers form strong and lasting friendships with their host families.

Cross-cultural and community development training will help you improve your communication skills and understand your role as a facilitator of development. You will be exposed to topics such as community mobilization, conflict resolution, gender and development, non-formal and adult education strategies, and political structures.

### **Health Training**

During pre-service training, you will be given basic medical training and information. You will be expected to practice preventive health care and to take responsibility for your own health by adhering to all medical policies. Trainees are required to attend all medical sessions. The topics include preventive health measures and minor and major medical issues that you might encounter while in Benin. Nutrition, mental health, setting up a safe living compound, and how to avoid HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are also covered.

### **Safety Training**

During the safety training sessions, you will learn how to adopt a lifestyle that reduces your risks at home, at work, and during your travels. You will also learn appropriate, effective strategies for coping with unwanted attention and about your individual responsibility for promoting safety throughout your service.

### **Additional Trainings During Volunteer Service**

In its commitment to institutionalize quality training, the Peace Corps has implemented a training system that provides Volunteers with continual opportunities to examine their commitment to Peace Corps service while increasing their technical and cross-cultural

skills. During service, there are usually three training events. The titles and objectives for those trainings are as follows:

- **In-service training:** Provides an opportunity for Volunteers to upgrade their technical, language, and project development skills while sharing their experiences and reaffirming their commitment after having served for three to six months.
- **Midterm conference** (done in conjunction with technical sector in-service): Assists Volunteers in reviewing their first year, reassessing their personal and project objectives, and planning for their second year of service.
- **Close-of-service conference:** Prepares Volunteers for the future after Peace Corps service and reviews their respective projects and personal experiences.

The number, length, and design of these trainings are adapted to country-specific needs and conditions. The key to the training system is that training events are integrated and interrelated, from the pre-departure orientation through the end of your service, and are planned, implemented, and evaluated cooperatively by the training staff, Peace Corps staff, and Volunteers.



## **YOUR HEALTH CARE AND SAFETY IN BENIN**

The Peace Corps' highest priority is maintaining the good health and safety of every Volunteer. Peace Corps medical programs emphasize the preventive, rather than the curative, approach to disease. The Peace Corps in Benin maintains a clinic with a full-time medical officer, who takes care of Volunteers' primary health care needs. Additional medical services, such as testing and basic treatment, are also available in Benin at local hospitals. If you become seriously ill, you will be transported either to an American-standard medical facility in the region or to the United States.

### **Health Issues in Benin**

The most common minor health problems here are similar to those found in the United States, such as colds, diarrhea, constipation, skin infections, sinus infections, headaches, dental problems, minor injuries, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), adjustment disorders, emotional problems, and alcohol abuse. These common problems may be somewhat more frequent or compounded by life in Benin due to a host of environmental factors that raise the risk and/or exacerbate the severity of illness and injuries.

Major health problems among Peace Corps Volunteers in Benin are rare and often the result of a Volunteer not taking preventive measures to stay healthy. The major health concerns here are malaria, amoebic dysentery, hepatitis, and HIV/AIDS.

Because malaria is endemic in Benin, anti-malarial pills are required. You will also be vaccinated against yellow fever; hepatitis B and A; meningitis A, C, Y, W135; tetanus/diphtheria; typhoid; and rabies.

Amoebic dysentery can be avoided by thoroughly washing and drying fruits and vegetables and by only drinking boiled and filtered water. You will receive a thorough orientation to food and water preparation during your pre-service training.

### **Helping You Stay Healthy**

The Peace Corps will provide you with all the necessary inoculations, medications, and information to stay healthy. Upon your arrival in Benin, you will receive a medical handbook. At the end of training, you will receive a medical kit with supplies to take care of mild illnesses and first aid needs. The contents of the kit are listed later in this chapter.

During pre-service training, you will have access to basic medical supplies through the medical officer. However, you will be responsible for your own supply of prescription drugs and any other specific medical supplies you require, as the Peace Corps will not order these items during training. Please bring a three-month supply of any prescription drugs you use, since they may not be available here and it may take several months for shipments to arrive.

You will have physicals at mid-service and at the end of your service. If you develop a serious medical problem during your service, the medical officer in Benin will consult with the Office of Medical Services in Washington, D.C. If it is determined that your condition cannot be treated in Benin, you may be sent out of the country for further evaluation and care.

### **Maintaining Your Health**

As a Volunteer, you must accept considerable responsibility for your own health. Proper precautions will significantly reduce your risk of serious illness or injury. The adage “An ounce of prevention ...” becomes extremely important in areas where diagnostic and treatment facilities are not up to the standards of the United States. The most important of your responsibilities in Benin is to take the following preventive measures:

Many illnesses that afflict Volunteers worldwide are entirely preventable if proper food and water precautions are taken. These illnesses include food poisoning, parasitic infections, hepatitis A, dysentery, Guinea worms, tapeworms, and typhoid fever. Your medical officer will discuss specific standards for water and food preparation in Benin during pre-service training.

Abstinence is the only certain choice for preventing infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. You are taking risks if you choose to be sexually active. To lessen risk, use a condom every time you have sex. Whether your partner is a host country citizen, a fellow Volunteer, or anyone else, do not assume this person is free of HIV/AIDS or other STDs. You will receive more information from the medical officer about this important issue.

Volunteers are expected to adhere to an effective means of birth control to prevent an unplanned pregnancy. Your medical officer can help you decide on the most appropriate method to suit your individual needs. Contraceptive methods are available without charge from the medical officer.

It is critical to your health that you promptly report to the medical office or other designated facility for scheduled immunizations, and that you let the medical officer know immediately of significant illnesses and injuries.

### **Women’s Health Information**

Pregnancy is treated in the same manner as other Volunteer health conditions that require medical attention but also have programmatic ramifications. The Peace Corps is responsible for determining the medical risk and the availability of appropriate medical care if the Volunteer remains in-country. Given the circumstances under which Volunteers live and work in Peace Corps countries, it is rare that the Peace Corps’ medical and programmatic standards for continued service during pregnancy can be met.

If feminine hygiene products are not available for you to purchase on the local market, the Peace Corps medical officer in Benin will provide them. If you require a specific product, please bring a three-month supply with you.

### **Your Peace Corps Medical Kit**

The Peace Corps medical officer will provide you with a kit that contains basic items necessary to prevent and treat illnesses that may occur during service. Kit items can be periodically restocked at the medical office.

### **Medical Kit Contents**

Ace bandages	Dental floss
Adhesive tape	Diphenhydramine HCL 25 mg (Benadryl)
American Red Cross First Aid & Safety Handbook	Insect repellent stick (Cutter's)
Antacid tablets (Tums)	Iodine tablets (for water purification)
Antibiotic ointment (Bacitracin/Neomycin/Polymycin B)	Lip balm (Chapstick)
Antiseptic antimicrobial skin cleaner (Hibiclens)	Oral rehydration salts
Band-Aids	Oral thermometer (Fahrenheit)
Butterfly closures	Pseudoephedrine HCL 30 mg (Sudafed)
Calamine lotion	Robitussin-DM lozenges (for cough)
Cepacol lozenges	Scissors
Condoms	Sterile gauze pads
	Tetrahydrozoline eyedrops (Visine)
	Tinactin (antifungal cream)
	Tweezers

### **Before You Leave: A Medical Checklist**

If there has been any change in your health – physical, mental, or dental – since you submitted your examination reports to the Peace Corps, you must immediately notify the Office of Medical Services. Failure to disclose new illnesses, injuries, allergies, or pregnancy can endanger your health and may jeopardize your eligibility to serve.

If your dental exam was done more than a year ago, or if your physical exam is more than two years old, contact the Office of Medical Services to find out whether you need to update your records. If your dentist or Peace Corps dental consultant has recommended that you undergo dental treatment or repair, you must complete that work and make sure your dentist sends requested confirmation reports or X-rays to the Office of Medical Services.

If you wish to avoid having duplicate vaccinations, contact your physician's office to obtain a copy of your immunization record and bring it to your pre-departure orientation. If you have any immunizations prior to Peace Corps service, the Peace Corps cannot reimburse you for the cost. The Peace Corps will provide all the immunizations necessary for your

overseas assignment, either at your pre-departure orientation or shortly after you arrive in Benin. You do not need to begin taking malaria medication prior to departure.

Bring a three-month supply of any prescription or over-the-counter medication you use on a regular basis, including birth control pills. Although the Peace Corps cannot reimburse you for this three-month supply, it will order refills during your service. While awaiting shipment – which can take several months – you will be dependent on your own medication supply. The Peace Corps will not pay for herbal or nonprescribed medications, such as St. John's wort, glucosamine, selenium, or antioxidant supplements.

You are encouraged to bring copies of medical prescriptions signed by your physician. This is not a requirement, but they might come in handy if you are questioned in transit about carrying a three-month supply of prescription drugs.

If you wear eyeglasses, bring two pairs with you – a pair and a spare. If a pair breaks, the Peace Corps will replace them, using the information your doctor in the United States provided on the eyeglasses form during your examination. The Peace Corps discourages you from using contact lenses during your service to reduce your risk of developing a serious infection or other eye disease. Most Peace Corps countries do not have appropriate water and sanitation to support eye care with the use of contact lenses. The Peace Corps will not supply or replace contact lenses or associated solutions unless an ophthalmologist has recommended their use for a specific medical condition and the Peace Corps' Office of Medical Services has given approval.

If you are eligible for Medicare, are over 50 years of age, or have a health condition that may restrict your future participation in health care plans, you may wish to consult an insurance specialist about unique coverage needs before your departure. The Peace Corps will provide all necessary health care from the time you leave for your pre-departure orientation until you complete your service. When you finish, you will be entitled to the post-service health care benefits described in the Peace Corps Volunteer Handbook. You may wish to consider keeping an existing health plan in effect during your service if you think age or pre-existing conditions might prevent you from re-enrolling in your current plan when you return home.



## **SAFETY AND SECURITY: OUR PARTNERSHIP**

Serving as a Volunteer overseas entails certain safety and security risks. Living and traveling in an unfamiliar environment, a limited understanding of the local language and culture, and the perception of being a wealthy American are some of the factors that can put a Volunteer at risk. Property theft and burglaries are not uncommon. Incidents of physical and sexual assault do occur, although almost all Volunteers complete their two years of service without serious personal safety problems.

Beyond knowing that Peace Corps approaches safety and security as a partnership with you, it might be helpful to see how this partnership works. Peace Corps has policies, procedures, and training in place to promote your safety. We depend on you to follow those policies and to put into practice what you have learned. An example of how this works in practice – in this case to help manage the risk of burglary – is:

- Peace Corps assesses the security environment where you will live and work
- Peace Corps inspects the house where you will live according to established security criteria
- Peace Corps provides you with resources to take measures such as installing new locks
- Peace Corps ensures you are welcomed by host country authorities in your new community
- Peace Corps responds to security concerns that you raise
- You lock your doors and windows
- You adopt a lifestyle appropriate to the community where you live
- You get to know neighbors
- You decide if purchasing personal articles insurance is appropriate for you
- You don't change residences before being authorized by Peace Corps
- You communicate concerns that you have to Peace Corps staff

### **Factors that Contribute to Volunteer Risk**

There are several factors that can heighten a Volunteer's risk, many of which are within the Volunteer's control. By far the most common crime that Volunteers experience is theft. Thefts often occur when Volunteers are away from their sites, in crowded locations (such as markets or on public transportation), and when leaving items unattended.

Before you depart for Benin there are several measures you can take to reduce your risk:

- Leave valuable objects in the U.S.
- Leave copies of important documents and account numbers with someone you trust in the U.S.
- Purchase a hidden money pouch or "dummy" wallet as a decoy
- Purchase personal articles insurance
- After you arrive in Benin, you will receive more detailed information about common crimes, factors that contribute to Volunteer risk, and local strategies to reduce that risk. For example, Volunteers in Benin learn to:
  - Choose safe routes and times for travel, and travel with someone trusted by the community whenever possible
  - Make sure one's personal appearance is respectful of local customs
  - Avoid high-crime areas
  - Know the local language to get help in an emergency
  - Make friends with local people who are respected in the community
  - Limit alcohol consumption

As you can see from this list, you must be willing to work hard and adapt your lifestyle to minimize the potential for being a target for crime. As with anywhere in the world, crime does exist in Benin. You can reduce your risk by avoiding situations that place you at risk and by taking precautions. Crime at the village or town level is less frequent than in the large cities; people know each other and generally are less likely to steal from their neighbors. Tourist attractions in large towns are favorite worksites for pickpockets.

The following are other security concerns in Benin of which you should be aware:

While whistles and exclamations may be fairly common on the street, this behavior can be reduced if you dress conservatively, abide by local cultural norms, and respond according to the training you will receive.

### **Staying Safe: Don't Be a Target for Crime**

You must be prepared to take on a large degree of responsibility for your own safety. You can make yourself less of a target, ensure that your home is secure, and develop relationships in your community that will make you an unlikely victim of crime. While the factors that contribute to your risk in Benin may be different, in many ways you can do what you would do if you moved to a new city anywhere: Be cautious, check things out, ask questions, learn about your neighborhood, know where the more risky locations are, use common sense, and be aware. You can reduce your vulnerability to crime by integrating into your community, learning the local language, acting responsibly, and abiding by Peace

Corps policies and procedures. Serving safely and effectively in Benin will require that you accept some restrictions on your current lifestyle.

## **Support from Staff**

If a trainee or Volunteer is the victim of a safety incident, Peace Corps staff is prepared to provide support. All Peace Corps posts have procedures in place to respond to incidents of crime committed against Volunteers. The first priority for all posts in the aftermath of an incident is to ensure the Volunteer is safe and receiving medical treatment as needed. After assuring the safety of the Volunteer, Peace Corps staff response may include reassessing the Volunteer's worksite and housing arrangements and making any adjustments, as needed. In some cases, the nature of the incident may necessitate a site or housing transfer. Peace Corps staff will also assist Volunteers with preserving their rights to pursue legal sanctions against the perpetrators of the crime. It is very important that Volunteers report incidents as they occur, not only to protect their peer Volunteers, but also to preserve the future right to prosecute. Should Volunteers decide later in the process that they want to proceed with the prosecution of their assailant, this option may no longer exist if the evidence of the event has not been preserved at the time of the incident.

## **Crime Data for Benin**

Crime data and statistics for Benin, which is updated yearly, are available at the following link: <http://www.peacecorps.gov/countrydata/benin>.

Few Peace Corps Volunteers are victims of serious crimes and crimes that do occur overseas are investigated and prosecuted by local authorities through the local courts system. If you are the victim of a crime, you will decide if you wish to pursue prosecution. If you decide to prosecute, Peace Corps will be there to assist you. One of our tasks is to ensure you are fully informed of your options and understand how the local legal process works. Peace Corps will help you ensure your rights are protected to the fullest extent possible under the laws of the country.

If you are the victim of a serious crime, you will learn how to get to a safe location as quickly as possible and contact your Peace Corps office. It's important that you notify Peace Corps as soon as you can so Peace Corps can provide you with the help you need.

## **Volunteer Safety Support in Benin**

The Peace Corps' approach to safety is a five-pronged plan to help you stay safe during your service and includes the following: information sharing, Volunteer training, site selection criteria, a detailed emergency action plan, and protocols for addressing safety and security incidents. Benin's in-country safety program is outlined below.

The Peace Corps/Benin office will keep you informed of any issues that may impact Volunteer safety through **information sharing**. Regular updates will be provided in Volunteer newsletters and in memorandums from the country director. In the event of a critical situation or emergency, you will be contacted through the emergency communication network. An important component of the capacity of Peace Corps to keep you informed is your buy-in to the partnership concept with the Peace Corps staff. It is expected that you will do your part in ensuring that Peace Corps staff members are kept apprised of your movements in-country so they are able to inform you.

**Volunteer training** will include sessions on specific safety and security issues in Benin. This training will prepare you to adopt a culturally appropriate lifestyle and exercise judgment that promotes safety and reduces risk in your home, at work, and while traveling. Safety training is offered throughout service and is integrated into the language, cross-cultural aspects, health, and other components of training. You will be expected to successfully complete all training competencies in a variety of areas, including safety and security, as a condition of service.

Certain **site selection criteria** are used to determine safe housing for Volunteers before their arrival. The Peace Corps staff works closely with host communities and counterpart agencies to help prepare them for a Volunteer's arrival and to establish expectations of their respective roles in supporting the Volunteer. Each site is inspected before the Volunteer's arrival to ensure placement in appropriate, safe, and secure housing and worksites. Site selection is based, in part, on any relevant site history; access to medical, banking, postal, and other essential services; availability of communications, transportation, and markets; different housing options and living arrangements; and other Volunteer support needs.

You will also learn about Peace Corps/Benin's **detailed emergency action plan**, which is implemented in the event of civil or political unrest or a natural disaster. When you arrive at your site, you will complete and submit a site locator form with your address, contact information, and a map to your house. If there is a security threat, you will gather with other Volunteers in Benin at predetermined locations until the situation is resolved or the Peace Corps decides to evacuate.

Finally, in order for the Peace Corps to be fully responsive to the needs of Volunteers, it is imperative that Volunteers immediately report any security incident to the Peace Corps office. The Peace Corps has established protocols for **addressing safety and security incidents** in a timely and appropriate manner, and it collects and evaluates safety and security data to track trends and develop strategies to minimize risks to future Volunteers.



## DIVERSITY AND CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES

In fulfilling its mandate to share the face of America with host countries, the Peace Corps is making special efforts to assure that all of America's richness is reflected in the Volunteer corps. More Americans of color are serving in today's Peace Corps than at any time in recent history. Differences in race, ethnic background, age, religion, and sexual orientation are expected and welcomed among our Volunteers. Part of the Peace Corps' mission is to help dispel any notion that Americans are all of one origin or race and to establish that each of us is as thoroughly American as the other despite our many differences.

Our diversity helps us accomplish that goal. In other ways, however, it poses challenges. In Benin, as in other Peace Corps host countries, Volunteers' behavior, lifestyle, background, and beliefs are judged in a cultural context very different from their own. Certain personal perspectives or characteristics commonly accepted in the United States may be quite uncommon, unacceptable, or even repressed in Benin.

Outside of Benin's capital, residents of rural communities have had relatively little direct exposure to other cultures, races, religions, and lifestyles. What people view as typical American behavior or norms may be a misconception, such as the belief that all Americans are rich and have blond hair and blue eyes. The people of Benin are justly known for their generous hospitality to foreigners; however, members of the community in which you will live may display a range of reactions to cultural differences that you present.

To ease the transition and adapt to life in Benin, you may need to make some temporary, yet fundamental compromises in how you present yourself as an American and as an individual. For example, female trainees and Volunteers may not be able to exercise the independence available to them in the United States; political discussions need to be handled with great care; and some of your personal beliefs may best remain undisclosed. You will need to develop techniques and personal strategies for coping with these and other limitations. The Peace Corps staff will lead diversity and sensitivity discussions during pre-service training and will be on call to provide support, but the challenge ultimately will be your own.

### **Overview of Diversity in Benin**

The Peace Corps staff in Benin recognizes the adjustment issues that come with diversity and will endeavor to provide support and guidance. During pre-service training, several sessions will be held to discuss diversity and coping mechanisms. We look forward to having male and female Volunteers from a variety of races, ethnic groups, ages, religions, and sexual orientations, and hope that you will become part of a diverse group of Americans who take pride in supporting one another and demonstrating the richness of American culture.

## **What Might a Volunteer Face?**

### **Possible Issues for Female Volunteers**

Benin has a traditional, patriarchal culture. However, at the community level, Beninese are learning to accept women who take professional roles or who live independently of their families. Current Volunteers advise that service is more difficult for female Volunteers due to verbal sexual harassment and the misconceptions that exist concerning male-female relationships. It is important to note that the same challenges exist for Beninese women, particularly in the schools. Peace Corps/Benin has a zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment on the job. Should you encounter harassment on the job, you should inform the country director immediately.

Female Volunteers may find that living alone raises questions about their marital status. Some find that saying they are married helps limit sexual harassment. Others feel that they have to work harder than male Volunteers to gain the respect of host country colleagues.

Females may encounter unwanted attention in public. While we cannot control this, we can help you develop strategies for coping. Do not hesitate to insist on learning strategies during your pre-service training. Some female Volunteers have found they need to keep a low social profile and practice discretion in public (e.g., not smoking in public or drinking in bars) to avoid developing an undesirable reputation in their community.

### **Possible Issues for Volunteers of Color**

In rural sites or villages, Volunteers are usually the only foreign resident and will receive extra attention regardless of their racial or ethnic background. Volunteers of color will encounter a wide range of cross-cultural issues in Benin.

Most Beninese are used to seeing African Americans. Furthermore, because of the country's historical role and involvement in slavery, some Beninese feel some affinity with African Americans and will often joke with them or believe that they come from Benin or another African country. Beninese will sometimes assume you speak a local language because of your skin color. Depending on your personality, you may interpret this assumption as welcome or you may find it distressing. Remember, you will not be able to readily identify the ethnicity of a Beninese by his or her language. Similarly, you should not expect that a Beninese will know that you are American, even though you are a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Like African Americans, Asian-American Volunteers have expressed frustration and disappointment with being asked about their nationality. When they answer "Asian American," some Beninese react with surprise or disbelief, saying they didn't know there were people of Asian descent in America. In Benin, there are Chinese, Indian, and Lebanese communities and Volunteers of Asian heritage may be confused with merchant classes in the eyes of some Beninese, especially in urban areas. Some Asian-American

Volunteers have found that some Beninese will call them “Chinese” no matter their origins. They may be teased by children and asked if they know kung-fu or karate.

### **Possible Issues for Senior Volunteers**

Respect comes with age in Benin. Younger Volunteers might have to work harder than older Volunteers to be accepted as professionals by their Beninese colleagues. Older Volunteers might find that almost too much is expected of them because of their age.

Within the Peace Corps community, older Volunteers may sometimes feel isolated, because most Volunteers in Benin are in their 20s. Older Volunteers may have difficulty finding emotional support among their fellow Volunteers. They may find that younger Volunteers expect older ones to “mother” them. (Some seniors find this a very enjoyable part of their experience, but others choose not to fill this role.)

Older Volunteers who are used to living independent lives may at first feel frustrated by the fact that younger Beninese want to do things for them. However, many seniors come to accept this as a sign of respect and enjoy the role of providing wisdom rather than physical assistance.

### **Possible Issues for Married Couple Volunteers**

Peace Corps/Benin welcomes married couples. Please note however that married couples serving under different project sectors will receive separate training. You will live with the same host family; however, your days will most likely be spent apart.

Married couples have different challenges and rewards than their single colleagues. The rewards include having a constant support network and work partner in your community. Challenges may include different learning curves (e.g., one partner picks up the local language more easily than the other partner), which can cause frustration. Additionally, one spouse may love the Peace Corps experience while the other decides it may not be the right decision.

### **Possible Issues for Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual Volunteers**

Benin’s sexual mores are conservative and you are expected to respect them. Many people in Benin still believe that gay and lesbian relationships are wrong, and that such relationships do not exist in their country. Although you may see signs of physical intimacy among men and women in Benin, this is not necessarily a sign of a gay or lesbian relationship. Engaging in homosexual sex is against the law in Benin. Some gay and lesbian Volunteers in Benin report that they are not able to be open about their sexual orientation. In the past, gay and lesbian Volunteers have formed their own support group.

A recommended resource for support and advice prior to and during your service is the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender U.S. Peace Corps Alumni website at [www.lgbrpcv.org](http://www.lgbrpcv.org).

## **Possible Religious Issues for Volunteers**

Volunteers are frequently asked about their religious affiliation and may be invited to attend a community church. Attending church services is a good way to begin integrating into your community if you feel comfortable doing so. In some circles, there will be a tendency to think that all Americans are Protestants. Volunteers not in the practice of attending church may be challenged to explain their reluctance, but it is possible to politely decline if the church or religious practice is not your choice. Most Volunteers facing these issues have found effective ways to cope with these additional challenges and have come to feel quite at home in Benin.

## **Possible Issues for Volunteers With Disabilities**

As part of the medical clearance process, the Peace Corps Office of Medical Services determined that you were physically and emotionally capable, with or without reasonable accommodations, to perform a full tour of Volunteer service in Benin without unreasonable risk of harm to yourself or interruption of service. The Peace Corps/ Benin staff will work with disabled Volunteers to make reasonable accommodations for them in training, housing, jobsites, or other areas to enable them to serve safely and effectively.

That being said, a disabled Volunteer in Benin will face a special set of challenges. In Benin, as in other parts of the world, some people may hold prejudicial attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Benin has virtually no physical infrastructure to accommodate people with disabilities.

Many of the beggars in Benin are disabled people who have no skills. Some organizations provide training for the disabled, but it is usually limited to arts and crafts. Disabled Volunteers would thus face challenges in overcoming negative stereotypes and difficult physical conditions. However, they also have an opportunity to be inspirational role models for disabled Beninese and to encourage changes in attitude and infrastructure in their communities.



## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

This list has been compiled by Volunteers serving in Benin and is based on their experience. Use it as an informal guide in making your own list, bearing in mind that each experience is individual. There is no perfect list! You obviously cannot bring everything on the list, so consider those items that make the most sense to you personally and professionally. You can always have things sent to you later. As you decide what to bring, keep in mind that you have a 100-pound weight limit on baggage. And remember, you can get almost everything you need in Benin.

### **How much luggage am I allowed to bring to Benin?**

Most airlines have baggage size and weight limits and assess charges for transport of baggage that exceeds those limits. The Peace Corps has its own size and weight limits and will not pay the cost of transport for baggage that exceeds these limits. The Peace Corps' allowance is two checked pieces of luggage with combined dimensions of both pieces not to exceed 107 inches (length + width + height) and a carry-on bag with dimensions of no more than 45 inches. Checked baggage should not exceed 100 pounds total with a maximum weight of 50 pounds for any one bag.

Peace Corps Volunteers are not allowed to take pets, weapons, explosives, radio transmitters (shortwave radios are permitted), automobiles, or motorcycles to their overseas assignments. Do not pack flammable materials or liquids such as lighter fluid, cleaning solvents, hair spray, or aerosol containers. This is an important safety precaution.

### **What is the electric current in Benin?**

The electric current in Benin is 220 volts. There are surges and cuts, which can put a strain on voltage converters and appliances. The Peace Corps does not provide transformers.

### **How much money should I bring?**

Volunteers are expected to live at the same level as the people in their community. You will be given a settling-in allowance and a monthly living allowance, which should cover your expenses. Volunteers often wish to bring additional money for vacation travel to other countries. Credit cards and traveler's checks are preferable to cash. If you choose to bring extra money, bring the amount that will suit your own travel plans and needs.

### **When can I take vacation and have people visit me?**

Each Volunteer accrues two vacation days per month of service (excluding training). Leave may not be taken during training, the first three months of service, or the last three months of service, except in conjunction with an authorized emergency leave. Family and friends are welcome to visit you after pre-service training and the first three months of service as long as their stay does not interfere with your work. Extended stays at your site are not

encouraged and may require permission from your country director. The Peace Corps is not able to provide your visitors with visa, medical, or travel assistance.

### **Will my belongings be covered by insurance?**

The Peace Corps does not provide insurance coverage for personal effects; Volunteers are ultimately responsible for the safekeeping of their personal belongings. However, you can purchase personal property insurance before you leave. If you wish, you may contact your own insurance company; additionally, insurance application forms will be provided, and we encourage you to consider them carefully. Volunteers should not ship or take valuable items overseas. Jewelry, watches, radios, cameras, and expensive appliances are subject to loss, theft, and breakage, and in many places, satisfactory maintenance and repair services are not available.

### **Do I need an international driver's license?**

Volunteers in Benin do not need an international driver's license because they are prohibited from operating privately owned motorized vehicles. Most urban travel is by bus or taxi. Rural travel ranges from buses and minibuses to trucks, bicycles, and lots of walking. On very rare occasions, a Volunteer may be asked to drive a sponsor's vehicle, but this can occur only with prior written permission from the country director. Should this occur, the Volunteer may obtain a local driver's license. A U.S. driver's license will facilitate the process, so bring it with you just in case.

### **What should I bring as gifts for Benin friends and my host family?**

This is not a requirement. A token of friendship is sufficient. Some gift suggestions include knickknacks for the house; pictures, books, or calendars of American scenes; souvenirs from your area; hard candies that will not melt or spoil; or photos to give away.

### **Where will my site assignment be when I finish training and how isolated will I be?**

Peace Corps trainees are not assigned to individual sites until after they have completed pre-service training. This gives Peace Corps staff the opportunity to assess each trainee's technical and language skills prior to assigning sites, in addition to finalizing site selections with their ministry counterparts. If feasible, you may have the opportunity to provide input on your site preferences, including geographical location, distance from other Volunteers, and living conditions. However, keep in mind that many factors influence the site selection process and that the Peace Corps cannot guarantee placement where you would ideally like to be. Most Volunteers live in small towns or in rural villages and are usually within one hour from another Volunteer. Please note that some sites require a 10- to 12-hour drive from the capital.

### **How can my family contact me in an emergency?**

The Peace Corps' Office of Special Services (OSS) provides assistance in handling emergencies affecting trainees and Volunteers or their families. Before leaving the United States, instruct your family to notify the Office of Special Services immediately if an emergency arises, such as a serious illness or death of a family member. During normal business hours, the number for the Office of Special Services is 855.855.1961, then select option 2; or directly at 202-692-1470. After normal business hours and on weekends and holidays, the OSS duty officer can be reached at the above number. For non-emergency questions, your family can get information from your Benin desk staff at the Peace Corps by calling 855.855.1961.

### **Can I call home from Benin?**

The international phone service to and from Benin is generally good. The OPT (the government-owned telephone and postal service) has offices in most cities. However, international calls are very expensive.

### **Should I bring a cellular phone with me?**

No, it is better to purchase one here. Differences in technology make many U.S. cellular phones incompatible with service in Benin. There are five main cellular phone service providers in Benin, but service is not available everywhere.

### **Will there be email and Internet access and should I bring my computer?**

More and more businesses and individuals in the capital and the major cities have Internet access and there are more and more Internet cafés in Benin. Because of weaker telephone and electrical infrastructure in outlying areas, Volunteers in rural sites are limited to writing and receiving email on occasional visits to regional capitals. Regardless, many Volunteers find it beneficial to bring their personal computer. If you bring a computer, be advised that you may not have electricity in your town or village and that power surges are common (so bring a good surge protector). You should also obtain personal insurance coverage for your computer because the Peace Corps does not provide insurance for personal items.



## WELCOME LETTERS FROM BENIN VOLUNTEERS

I spent three years in Benin in two posts that have brought me two very unique, yet somehow similar experiences. I worked in a remote village and a big town, in English, French, Bariba and Lokpa. I worked on my own and with lots of people while learning new ways to work, learn and laugh. Helping people learn and work to improve their lives in a material way that I could see over the course of my service has inspired me more than I can say. I'm not the only Volunteer who can say this. I know a lot of people who have made a big difference and everyone has had a wonderful time

—Benjamin Fouty

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Looking back on my Peace Corps service, I know I'll remember not the number of trees planted or mud stoves built, but the personal connections made, the moments of simple joy that life in Africa accords, and the challenges that shaped me into being a stronger person. That will stay with me forever.

—Diane Albrecht

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Although this year has, at times, been painfully stretching, I have also been inspired and encouraged in incredible ways through the genuine hospitality and empathy of those in my community. Villagers are always eager to share a meal with me, laugh at my corny jokes, invite me to do field work alongside them, and even cry with me when I'm having a rough day. I am now realizing that my friends and neighbors are able to empathize and inspire me so thoroughly, because they, too, have experienced much. They sometimes suffer from hunger pangs; they are occasionally without work; they experience injustice daily; they lose loved ones prematurely. But through their kind, exemplary actions, those around me are continually teaching me that the tough times I have faced will help me to better understand others, and thus help me to more fully love and serve our world.

—Jocilyn

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The layers of my growth as a result of serving in Benin are multifaceted and run deep. Being a rural community health Volunteer gave me great public health experience and expanded my understanding of the health issues and challenges the Beninese people face. Since joining Peace Corps I received training on infant nutrition and recuperation, malaria, food and waterborne illnesses, and HIV/AIDS, giving me the tools to become an affective health agent and allowing me to apply this knowledge to help people make a positive

impact on their lives. I value greatly the independence and broader world perspective I have gained from being a Volunteer. Furthermore, I now speak French as a second language. I have built incredible friendships and created memories that will remain with me the rest of my life. Seeing the positive effects of my work and personal interactions is one of the most gratifying aspects of my service. Being a PCV truly is a positive, life-changing experience.

—Anna Skaggs

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By receiving this Welcome Book you are but taking one more step in becoming a member in what is, I can assure you, a wonderfully eclectic family. Two years ago, I came to Benin never having heard of it. I did not speak the language, I didn't know any of the people I would be going over with, and I had no real concept of the work I would be doing. Rural community health—what does that mean? And to top it off, I would be gone for two years. Two Years! That's a lifetime, well only if you're a guppy.

So here I am two years later and I find myself thinking that somewhere along the line I must have blinked because the two years that I was once so worried about have passed, and I can't help but wonder, where did all the time go? Oh yeah, it was spent learning a new language, one that I am now comfortable enough with that I can use to do any number of things, from ordering a meal, to arranging transportation, to explaining once again that it is perfectly normal that white people change color due to being in the sun too long. Time was spent trying to understand Benin, her people, her religions, her culture and traditions, and ultimately what role I wanted to play in them. Arriving at my new home, it tickled me pink when kids bowed before me when they would stop and say hello. What was I, royalty? Nope. Turns out the only thing I was, was old and that it is a sign of respect when talking to someone older to bow before them.

The majority of my time, though, was consumed with the pursuit of work, as well as fun. As a rural community health advisor I worked with the old and the young, with men and women. I weighed babies, made porridge, taught about HIV/AIDS, held classes to help empower young girls, and painted pictures on the sides of buildings. I, along with my work partner, Safia, worked to improve the general health knowledge of our community and, in the process, became friends.

—Jennifer Morgan

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After three years of teaching in a small village in Benin with no running water or electricity, I'm excited about America and all of the things it offers. But as much as I'm looking forward to hot showers and cold drinks, delicious food and familiar people, I can't help but make a parallel list of things I'm going to miss: students writing silly letters to me

in English, storytelling with my neighbors, eating mangoes fresh from the tree, understanding what someone has said to me in the local language, starry night skies, and the sound of rain on an iron roof. TEFL is one of the most rewarding programs in Peace Corps. As a teacher, you have the opportunity to do so much more than just explain English grammar. You are positioned to have an impact on your students as well as your colleagues by promoting gender equality, encouraging students (both boys and girls) to stay in school, and setting an example of responsible authority. Whenever I saw a shy student gain confidence or a struggling student finally understand, whenever someone came to me and said I was the reason he or she was still in school, whenever students made an extra effort to speak English with me outside of class, I knew that my time here was time well spent.

—Rachel Carter

# PACKING LIST

This list has been compiled by Volunteers serving in Benin and is based on their experience. Use it as an informal guide in making your own list, bearing in mind that each experience is individual. There is no perfect list! You obviously cannot bring everything on the list, so consider those items that make the most sense to you personally and professionally. You can always have things sent to you later. As you decide what to bring, keep in mind that you have an 100-pound weight limit on baggage. And remember, you can get almost everything you need in Benin.

## General Clothing

- Professional clothing in breathable fabrics (two outfits minimum for TEFL Volunteers)
- A few durable cotton T-shirts (many Volunteers prefer dark colors)
- Pants (of lightweight material)
- Blouses/button-down shirts
- Linen/cotton clothing (you can find linen and cotton here and get clothing made; dresses/skirts must be at least knee-length)
- Hats/scarf/bandannas
- Good sturdy bras (bring several because hand washing wears them out)
- Good underwear (bring a two-year supply because hand washing wears them out)  
One bathing suit (conservative for women, preferably a one-piece suit)
- Professional clothing in breathable fabrics (two outfits minimum for TEFL Volunteers)
- A few durable cotton T-shirts (many Volunteers prefer dark colors)
- Pants (of lightweight material)
- Blouses/button-down shirts
- Linen/cotton clothing (you can find linen and cotton here and get clothing made; dresses/skirts must be at least knee-length)
- Hats/scarf/bandannas
- Good sturdy bras (bring several because hand washing wears them out)
- Good underwear (bring a two-year supply because hand washing wears them out)
- Sweatshirt, hoodie, or long-sleeve shirt
- Workout clothes (if you work out)

## Shoes

- Nice comfortable shoes (nice sandals, such as Tevas or Chacos)
- Good pair of tennis shoes

### **Personal Hygiene and Toiletry Items**

- Liquid hand sanitizer and hand wipes
- Oil-free sunscreen (for the face)
- Medical supplies if special medicine is taken or a preference on certain brands
- One good-quality towel
- Aloe-Vera
- Tampons (three-month supply; expensive to buy here; OBs pack well; you can buy generic brands here)
- Hair ties
- Nail clippers, nail file
- Contact lenses and enough solution for two years (Peace Corps does not recommend wearing contacts due to dusty conditions and does not provide solution)
- Deodorant (note that deodorant salt crystals work well and could last your whole service; they're small, too!)
- Shampoo and conditioner
- Basic makeup
- Facial soap
- Sunscreen (Peace Corps provides this but it is not good quality)

### **Miscellaneous**

- Wall calendar
- One set of sheets (in-country sheets are inexpensive)
- iPod or other MP3 player or CD player, depending on preference
- Laptop
- Yoga mat or Therm-a-Rest (for when you or a friend needs to sleep on the floor)
- U.S. stamps (can easily be sent to you by mail)
- Beauty products or pampering things for de-stressing (if you use them)
- Money to change (in large denominations, \$50, \$100, traveler's checks, euros) if you want, but your living allowance is sufficient!
- Your favorite pillow (ones here are not the greatest) or travel pillow, if important

- Spices/spice packets
- Catalogue of clothing (to show to tailor to get copies made)
- Good pens (if they are important to you)
- Good flashlight

## **PRE-DEPARTURE CHECKLIST**

The following list consists of suggestions for you to consider as you prepare to live outside the United States for two years. Not all items will be relevant to everyone, and the list does not include everything you should make arrangements for.

### **Family**

- Notify family that they can call the Peace Corps' Counseling and Outreach Unit at any time if there is a critical illness or death of a family member (24-hour telephone number: 1-855-855-1961, then press 2; or directly at 202-692-1470).
- Give the Peace Corps' On the Home Front handbook to family and friends.

### **Passport/Travel**

- Forward to the Peace Corps travel office all paperwork for the Peace Corps passport and visas.
- Verify that your luggage meets the size and weight limits for international travel.
- Obtain a personal passport if you plan to travel after your service ends. (Your Peace Corps passport will expire three months after you finish your service, so if you plan to travel longer, you will need a regular passport.)

### **Medical/Health**

- Complete any needed dental and medical work.
- If you wear glasses, bring two pairs.
- Arrange to bring a three-month supply of all medications (including birth control pills) you are currently taking.

### **Insurance**

- Make arrangements to maintain life insurance coverage.
- Arrange to maintain supplemental health coverage while you are away. (Even though the Peace Corps is responsible for your health care during Peace Corps service overseas, it is advisable for people who have pre-existing conditions to arrange for the continuation of their supplemental health coverage. If there is a lapse in coverage, it is often difficult and expensive to be reinstated.)

- Arrange to continue Medicare coverage if applicable.

### **Personal Papers**

- Bring a copy of your certificate of marriage or divorce.

### **Voting**

- Register to vote in the state of your home of record. (Many state universities consider voting and payment of state taxes as evidence of residence in that state.)
- Obtain a voter registration card and take it with you overseas.
- Arrange to have an absentee ballot forwarded to you overseas.

### **Personal Effects**

- Purchase personal property insurance to extend from the time you leave your home for service overseas until the time you complete your service and return to the United States.

### **Financial Management**

- Keep a bank account in your name in the U.S.
- Obtain student loan deferment forms from the lender or loan service.
- Execute a Power of Attorney for the management of your property and business.
- Arrange for deductions from your readjustment allowance to pay alimony, child support, and other debts through the Office of Volunteer Financial Operations at 855.855.1961, extension 1770.
- Place all important papers—mortgages, deeds, stocks, and bonds—in a safe deposit box or with an attorney or other caretaker.

## CONTACTING PEACE CORPS HEADQUARTERS

This list of numbers will help connect you with the appropriate office at Peace Corps headquarters to answer various questions. You can use the toll-free number and extension or dial directly using the local numbers provided. Be sure to leave the toll-free number and extensions with your family so they can contact you in the event of an emergency.

**Peace Corps Headquarters Toll-free Number: 855.855.1961, Press 1 or ext. # (see below)**

Peace Corps' Mailing Address: Peace Corps Headquarters  
1111 20th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20526

Questions About:	Staff:	Toll-Free Ext:	Direct/Local #:
Responding to an Invitation	Office of Placement	x1840	202.692.1840
Country Information	Zachary Rosen Desk Officer (Benin & Ghana) zrosen@peacecorps.gov	X1022	202.692.1022
Plane Tickets, Passports, Visas, or other travel matters:	CWT SATO Travel	x1170	202.692.1170
Legal Clearance	Office of Placement	x1840	202.692.1840
Medical Clearance & Forms Processing (includes dental)	Screening Nurse	x1500	202.692.1500
Medical Reimbursements (handled by a subcontractor)	Seven Corners	N/A	202.692.1538 800.335.0611
Loan Deferments, Taxes, Financial Operations	Office Of Volunteer and PSC Financial Services	x1770	202.692.1770
Readjustment Allowance Withdrawals, Power of Attorney, Staging (Pre-Departure Orientation), and Reporting Instructions	Office of Staging <i>Note: You will receive comprehensive information (hotel and flight arrangements) three to five weeks prior to departure. This information is not available sooner.</i>	x1865	202.692.1865
Family Emergencies (to get information to a Volunteer overseas) 24 hours	Office of Special Services	x1470	202.692.1470