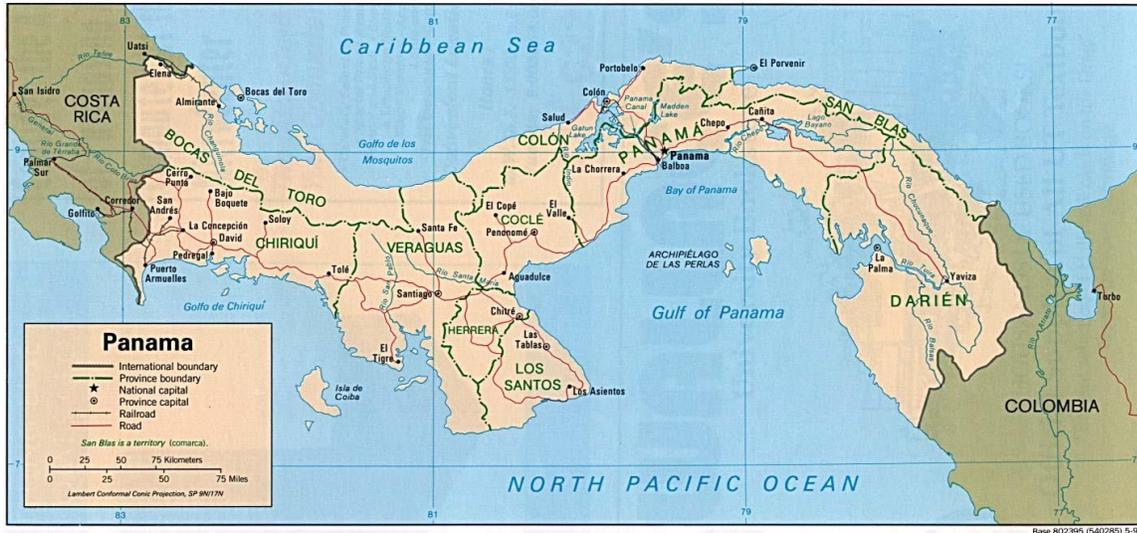


THE PEACE CORPS WELCOMES YOU TO PANAMA



A PEACE CORPS PUBLICATION FOR NEW VOLUNTEERS
February 2016

MAP OF PANAMA



WELCOME LETTER

Dear Panama Invitee:

Congratulations on your invitation to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Panama. If you accept this invitation, you will be joining 200 Peace Corps Volunteers, más o menos (more or less), working throughout the country to promote sustainable agriculture, environmental conservation, environmental health, and teaching English.

Panama is a stunningly beautiful country with a fascinating history and diverse culture. Volunteers quickly fall in love with the people and natural beauty, but also come to realize that there is much work to be done throughout the country, as more than 65 percent of Panama's rural population and 95 percent of the indigenous population live in poverty.

Peace Corps/Panama works closely with government agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and community partners to improve the lives of Panamanians—especially those living in rural and indigenous areas. We try to place a significant majority of Volunteers in communities in with high concentrations of poverty. At least 30 percent of Volunteers are placed with traditionally underserved indigenous groups, including the Ngäbe, Buglé, Emberá, and Wounaan. These Volunteers learn the language of the indigenous group in addition to Spanish. Others work with traditional Latino communities throughout the country.

Once you arrive you will spend your first 10 weeks in training—a fun, intense, challenging, and rewarding experience. You will have innumerable opportunities to learn about yourself, Panama, and its people. I ask each of you to come with an open mind. Bring your sense of adventure and your sense of humor. Be prepared to work hard. I know from my own experience as a Volunteer in Bolivia that you will be enlightened and humbled by your Volunteer experience.

Serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer is not an easy job. We expect you to arrive with a commitment to work professionally with your community partners and to be a role model and positive influence, earning the respect of both community members and Volunteer peers.

Check out the website of returned Panama Volunteers at panamapcv.net; you may want to contact some returned Volunteers to learn more about service in Panama.

I look forward to your arrival and working with you in Panama.

¡Saludos y nos vemos pronto!

Diane Carazas
Country Director

TABLE OF CONTENTS

welcome Letter.....	3
Core Expectations for Peace Corps Volunteers	6
Peace Corps/Panama History and Programs	7
History of the Peace Corps in Panama	7
Peace Corps Programming in Panama.....	7
Country Overview: Panama at a Glance	8
History	8
Government	8
Economy	8
People and Culture.....	9
Resources for Further Information.....	10
General Information About Panama.....	10
Connect With Returned Volunteers and Other Invitees	11
Online Articles/Current News Sites About Panama	11
International Development Sites About Panama.....	11
Recommended Books	12
Books About the History of the Peace Corps.....	12
Books on the Volunteer Experience	12
Books About Panama	12
Living Conditions and Volunteer Lifestyle	13
Communications.....	13
Housing and Site Location	13
Living Allowance and Money Management	14
Food and Diet	14
Transportation.....	15
Social Activities.....	15
Professionalism, Dress, and Behavior	16
Personal Safety	16
Rewards and Frustrations	17
Peace Corps Training.....	18
Overview of Pre-Service Training.....	18
Qualifying for Service	18
Technical Training.....	19
Language Training.....	19
Cross-Cultural Training.....	19
Health Training.....	20

Safety and Security Training	20
Additional Trainings During Volunteer Service.....	20
Your Health Care in Panama	21
Health Issues in Panama	21
Helping You Stay Healthy.....	21
Maintaining Your Health.....	21
Women’s Health Information.....	22
Your Peace Corps Medical Kit.....	22
Before You Leave: A Medical Checklist.....	23
Safety and Security in Depth	25
Factors that Contribute to Volunteer Risk	25
Staying Safe: Don’t Be a Target for Crime	26
Support from Staff.....	27
Office of Victim Advocacy	27
Crime Data for Panama	27
Volunteer Safety Support in Panama.....	28
Diversity and Inclusion Overview	29
Diversity and Inclusion at Your Site	29
Cross-Cultural Considerations.....	30
What Might a Volunteer Face?.....	30
Possible Gender Role Issues	30
Possible Issues for Volunteers of Color	31
Possible Issues for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning/Queer, Ally (LGBTQA) Volunteers	33
Possible Issues for Volunteers with Disabilities	34
Possible Issues for Volunteer Couples	34
Possible Religious Issues for Volunteers	36
Possible Issues for 50+ Volunteers	36
Frequently Asked Questions	38
Welcome Letters from Panama Volunteers	40
Packing List	46
What Not to Bring.....	48
Pre-Departure Checklist.....	50
Contacting Peace Corps Headquarters.....	52

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 do the following:

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/PANAMA HISTORY AND PROGRAMS

History of the Peace Corps in Panama

The Peace Corps has a long history in Panama. The first Volunteers began work in 1963 and continued serving in Panama until May 1971. In February 1990, the Panamanian government asked the Peace Corps to return, and the program has continued without interruption ever since.

The central goal of Peace Corps/Panama is to promote sustainable community development, in partnership with Panamanian agencies and NGOs, in Panama's poorest and most marginalized regions. Each project has sector-specific goals related to this commitment. Peace Corps/Panama's vision is to be recognized as a development leader and partner of choice that is committed to eradicating poverty, promoting social justice, and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Peace Corps/Panama works in partnership with others to promote sustainable solutions in the areas of health, sanitation, agriculture, environment, and teaching English, promoting the dignity of people and their capacity to improve their own lives.

Panama came to a critical juncture in its history when the Panama Canal transferred to Panamanian authority and control in 1999. Though the country has enjoyed a robust economy during the past few years due to development and an economic boom in Panama City, the gains are not widely shared by Panama's interior, where 65 percent of the population continues to live in poverty. In these rural areas, Volunteers work with communities and partner agencies to meet the challenges of poverty. By helping communities and local agencies gain access to resources, Volunteers facilitate a more efficient coordination and impact that can last well after the Volunteers have left.

Peace Corps Programming in Panama

Approximately 750 Peace Corps Volunteers served in Panama from 1963–71. More than 750 Volunteers have served since 1990 and about 200 are currently in service. Volunteers are assigned to one of four projects: community environmental conservation (CEC), sustainable agriculture systems (SAS), environmental health (EH), and teaching English (TE).

Peace Corps/Panama projects often overlap so Volunteers can best meet the needs of their communities (i.e. a CEC Volunteer may teach English). In many situations, it is both helpful and necessary for Volunteers to be versed in topics outside their sector. The groundwork for such integration is accomplished during the training period and subsequent in-service training sessions.

Peace Corps/Panama works to meet the growing needs of rural Panamanians. Cross-sector programming supports HIV/AIDS education, information technology development, youth development, energy poverty, and gender equity.

COUNTRY OVERVIEW: PANAMA AT A GLANCE

History

Panama's early history was shaped by the ambitions of European powers. In 1501, Rodrigo de Bastidas of Spain conducted the first European exploration of Panama. One year later, Christopher Columbus visited Panama and established a settlement in the Darien province. In 1513, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa discovered that the isthmus was indeed the path between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Panama quickly became the crossroads of Spain's empire in the New World, serving as the transfer point for gold and silver being shipped from South America and Spain.

Modern Panamanian history has been shaped by the construction of a trans-isthmus canal, which had been envisioned since the beginning of Spanish colonization. From 1880 to 1900, a French company under Ferdinand de Lesseps attempted, unsuccessfully, to construct a sea-level canal on the site of the present Panama Canal. In November 1903, with U.S. encouragement and French financial support, Panama proclaimed its independence and signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty with the United States.

The treaty granted rights to the United States in a zone roughly 10 miles wide and 50 miles long, wherein the United States would build a canal; then administer, fortify, and defend it "in perpetuity." In 1914, the United States completed the existing 50-mile (83-kilometer) lock canal, one of the world's greatest engineering triumphs. The early 1960s marked the beginning of sustained pressure in Panama for renegotiation of this treaty. In 1977, U.S. President Jimmy Carter signed a new treaty with Panamanian President General Omar Torrijos in which control of the canal reverted to the Panamanian people on December 31, 1999.

Government

Panama is a representative democracy with three branches of government. The 71 members of the unicameral Legislative Assembly are elected by direct, secret vote for five-year terms. The executive branch includes a president and vice president, who also are elected for five-year terms. In May 2014, Panama elected its current president, Juan Carlos Varela. The independent, appointed judiciary consists of a Supreme Court, tribunals, and municipal courts. An autonomous electoral tribunal supervises voter registration, the election process, and various political party activities. The dominant political parties have historically been the Democratic Revolutionary Party and the Panameñista (Arnulfista) Party.

The indigenous reservations in Panama maintain a degree of political autonomy. Although their governmental structures vary somewhat, each maintains a tribal hierarchy.

Economy

Panama's economy is heavily reliant on the service industries, such as the Panama Canal, banking, transportation, insurance, warehousing, and the Colón Free Zone (the world's second-largest free-trade zone after Hong Kong). These services account for nearly 70 percent of gross domestic product. Manufacturing and construction industries contribute about 14 percent to GDP, while agriculture contributes only 6 percent. As these figures might suggest, most of Panama's wealth is generated in urban regions, where more than half of its 3.3 million citizens live.

The Panama Canal, a major focus of business activity, contributes about 5 percent to the nation's income. Owned and operated by the United States since its inauguration in 1914, the canal became the sole property of Panama in December 1999. With the transfer of the canal, U.S. military bases were closed. A public Panamanian corporation now operates the canal. Port and Panama Canal-related activities, along with mining, construction, tourism, petroleum refining, brewing, and sugar milling, are projected sources of future growth.

A recent United Nations report highlighted progress in poverty reduction from 2001–07; overall poverty fell from 37 percent to 29 percent, and extreme poverty fell from 19 percent to 12 percent. However, Panama still has one of the most unequal income distributions in Latin America.

People and Culture

Panama has long served as a crossroads between oceans and continents, and its indigenous populations have witnessed the arrival of immigrants from all over the world. The population consists of mestizo (mixed European and indigenous), Spanish, indigenous, Chinese, and West Indian groups. Although the culture, customs, and language of Panamanians are predominantly Caribbean and Spanish, cultural norms in Panama vary from region to region and among social classes. Spanish is the official and dominant language, but English is a common second language among those of West Indian ancestry. Additional languages, spoken by indigenous populations, include Emberá, Guna, Wounaan, Ngäbe, Buglé, and Teribe or Nasos. Most of the country is Roman Catholic; however, Evangelicals, Jews, Buddhists, and other religious communities exist in and around Panama City.

As its diversity might suggest, Panama is rich in folklore and popular traditions. In areas where Spanish roots run deep, women wear the national dress, called a pollera, during local festivals and for traditional folk dances like the tamborito. Expressions of indigenous culture range from Guna textiles called molas to the traditional Ngäbe dress, the nagua. The Emberá people are also well-known for their crafts, which include intricate tagua nut carvings, and for their traditional dance, called endi sacar. Along the Caribbean coast, where Afro-Antillean influences dominate, a mix of cultures is displayed in the Afro-colonial congo dances.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Following is a list of websites for additional information about the Peace Corps and Panama and to connect you to returned Volunteers and other invitees. Please keep in mind that although the Peace Corps tries to make sure all these links are active and current, the Peace Corps 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 experiences, 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 please keep in mind that no two people experience their service in the same way.

General Information About Panama

State.gov

The Department of State's website issues background notes periodically about countries around the world. Find Panama 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.

Gpo.gov/libraries/public/

The U.S. Government Publishing Office publishes country studies intermittently.

lweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html

The Library of Congress provides historical and sociological data on numerous countries.

http://unstats.un.org/unsd/pocketbook/World_Statistics_Pocketbook_2013_edition.pdf

United Nations resource book with 2013 statistical country data

Data.un.org

United Nations site with links to data from U.N. member countries

Wikipedia.org

Search for Panama to find encyclopedia-type information. Note: As Wikipedia content is user-generated, information may be biased and/or not verified.

Worldbank.org

The World Bank Group's mission is to fight poverty and improve the living standards of people in the developing world. It is a development bank that provides loans, policy advice, technical assistance, and knowledge-sharing services to developing countries to reduce poverty. This site contains a lot of information and resources regarding development.

Data.worldbank.org/country

Provides information on development indicators on countries, including population, gender, financial, and education, and climate change statistics.

Connect With Returned Volunteers and Other Invitees

[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 Panama site: <http://www.panamapcv.net/>

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

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

Online Articles/Current News Sites About Panama

[UN.org/News/](http://www.un.org/news/)

The United Nations news service provides coverage of its member states and information about the international peacekeeping organization’s actions and positions.

[VOAnews.com](http://www.voanews.com)

Voice of America, the U.S. government’s multimedia broadcaster, features coverage of news around the world.

[thepanamanews.com](http://www.thepanamanews.com)

The Panama News is an online newspaper (in English).

[latinnews.com](http://www.latinnews.com)

Website for Latin American news, which provides economic and political information on Latin America (in English).

[countryreports.org/country.aspx?countryid=189&countryName=Panama](http://www.countryreports.org/country.aspx?countryid=189&countryName=Panama)

Website providing details on Panama’s history.

[panamainfo.com](http://www.panamainfo.com)

A guide to tourism, business, and life in Panama

[laht.com](http://www.laht.com)

The Latin American Herald Tribune provides news from the Western Hemisphere, including frequent articles related to Panama.

[laestrella.com.pa](http://www.laestrella.com.pa)

One of several Panamanian newspapers available online (in Spanish)

www.prensa.com

Panamanian newspaper available online (in Spanish)

International Development Sites About Panama

[usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/)

U.S. Agency for International Development

[undp.org.pa/pnudpanama/](http://www.undp.org.pa/pnudpanama/)

United Nations Development Programme (Spanish)

ifad.org

International Fund for Agricultural Development

imf.org/external/country/PAN

International Monetary Fund

Recommended Books

Books About the History of the Peace Corps

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

Books on the Volunteer Experience

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

Books About Panama

1. Labrut, Michele. "Getting to Know Panama." El Dorado, Republic of Panama: Focus Publications, 1997.
2. McCullough, David. "The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal: 1870-1914." NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004.
3. St. Regis, Louis. "Lonely Planet Panama." Footscray, Victoria; London: Lonely Planet Publications, 2004.
4. Woodward, Bob. "The Commanders." N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2002.

LIVING CONDITIONS AND VOLUNTEER LIFESTYLE

Communications

Mail

For the first nine weeks in-country (pre-service training), relatives and friends can mail you at the address below.

CUERPO DE PAZ
Edificio 240, 3er Piso
Calle Víctor Iglesias
Ciudad del Saber, Clayton
Corregimiento de Ancón
Panama, Rep. De Panama

ATTENTION: “YOUR NAME”

Once you have been assigned to a site and sworn in as a Volunteer, you can send your new address to friends and family. It’s a good idea to establish a regular pattern of communication with friends and relatives in the United States, since they may become concerned if they do not hear from you for an extended period of time. Mail service to or from Panama is fairly unpredictable: It can take 10 days to more than a month for a letter or package to arrive.

Telephones

International phone service to and from Panama is good compared to many countries. Virtually all large cities have reliable phone service, and many small towns have public phones from which residents can make and receive calls for a fee. All Volunteers have a cellphone and some opt for a smartphone. Cellular phones are also widely available and reasonably priced, but *we recommend that the Volunteer wait until site announcement to buy a cellphone*, as coverage depends on the provider. Also, it is more expensive to reprogram a cellphone from the U.S. than to purchase one in Panama. Rates are about \$1 for a 30-minute phone call to the United States. Signal is spreading throughout the country but some Volunteers, mainly environmental health and sustainable agriculture, may face issues with making calls from their communities.

The phone number of the Peace Corps/Panama office in Panama City is 011.507.317.3300; the fax number is 011.507.317.3344.

Computer, Internet, and Email Access

Internet access in Panama is spreading. All provincial capitals and many other large towns have Internet cafes. Connection speeds tend to be slow, but the service is reasonably priced and otherwise reliable. Internet access for Volunteers is available free at the Peace Corps/Panama office. Almost all Volunteers bring a computer or tablet. (As a note, Volunteers are required to submit a report twice a year that must be submitted via a Windows or Mac computer.) Some sites will not have electricity but solar panels can be purchased in Panama or a community member or the local store may offer charging at a price. Generally, you will not know if your site will have electricity until later on, during pre-service training. Should you choose to bring electronics, it is your responsibility to maintain and insure them.

Housing and Site Location

The small and medium-sized communities (populations of 100 to 10,000) in which Volunteers live and work are located from one to 16 hours from Panama City. Like most Panamanians, Volunteers live in

simple concrete block houses with cement floors and corrugated tin roofs or wooden huts with dirt floors and palm thatch roofs, depending on the location of their site. Since living with a family provides special insight into Panamanian culture, improves language skills, and facilitates integration into the community, you must live with a host family during training and your first three months at your site. After that, you may choose to live alone.

Indigenous communities generally have the most rustic living conditions, and they can be remote. Sometimes getting to a community may require at least an hour and a half walk or a ride in a dugout canoe. Most houses in urban and highly populated areas have running water inside or outside the house. In some cases, it is necessary to boil water and add chlorine to make it safe to drink (as a general rule, boiling water will be the safest and most reliable way to disinfect your water). In some rural sites, and in many indigenous communities, water must be obtained from springs or streams. Many homes have a simple pit latrine, but latrine construction is often one of a Volunteer's first activities. Electricity also varies depending on the site. You must be flexible in your housing and site expectations and willing to adapt to the discomforts that come with rural living.

Living Allowance and Money Management

Volunteers receive a monthly allowance in local currency—Balboa—(U.S. dollars are used in Panama as well) that is sufficient to live at the level of the local people. The allowance covers food, housing, household supplies, clothing, transportation to and from work, utilities, recreation and entertainment, and incidental expenses. Peace Corps Volunteers are expected to live at a level that is comparable with that of their host country counterparts. The Peace Corps discourages Volunteers from supplementing their living allowance with funds from home.

During your first three months in Panama you will receive a weekly allowance to cover the limited costs you will incur in your training community.

By the time you finish training and are sworn in as a Volunteer, Peace Corps/Panama will open a bank account for you and deposit your monthly living allowance in Balboa, the local currency, which is equivalent to the U.S. dollars, into this account.

Volunteers are expected to live at the same economic level as the people in their community so they should not rely on funds kept at a U.S. bank account or supplement their incomes while in-country. Note that while Panama is inexpensive relative to the United States, it is expensive compared with many of its Central American neighbors. Prices in Panama City are comparable to those in the United States.

When a Volunteer ends his or her service, the Peace Corps will deposit the transition fund in the Volunteer's U.S. bank account. Volunteers will provide a U.S. bank account number to the Peace Corps prior to departure for service through a secure portal.

Food and Diet

The Panamanian diet varies according to the region and the ethnic makeup of the population but most often consists of rice, beans, bananas or plantains, yuca (cassava), and corn. Rice and beans (kidney beans, lentils, black-eyed peas) is the staple dish. Corn is served in many guises but is usually ground, boiled, or fried. Sancocho is a traditional dish (somewhere between a soup and a stew) prepared with a variety of vegetables and chicken. In season in most rural areas, an array of fruits is available, including mangoes, papayas, pineapples, avocados, oranges, and guanavanas (soursops). The availability of garden vegetables, such as tomatoes, sweet peppers, and cucumbers, varies according to the region and the season. Many Volunteers start a garden to supplement what they find in food stores. The most common meats are chicken and beef, which are often deep-fried or stewed. These meats, when served to Volunteers, are often intended to express appreciation for their friendship or work. The rural poor rarely

eat chicken and beef, and indigenous communities in particular customarily have a more limited diet, which may consist primarily of boiled green bananas and root vegetables, such as yuca. Fish is available sporadically in coastal regions and riverside communities.

Most larger towns and cities have at least one restaurant that will be familiar, such as McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hut, Subway, or Dairy Queen. Most also have supermarkets where you can buy a wide variety of foods and imported goods.

Some Volunteers are vegetarians, but few Panamanians follow these diets. Volunteers generally must make do with the food available at their sites, but they sometimes can buy food in Panama City or a provincial capital.

Transportation

Most sites are served by regular public transportation, but Volunteers assigned to indigenous or very rural communities may also travel by boat, *chiva* (minibus or truck), horseback, or foot. Chiva transportation is generally reliable in the dry season but may be more limited in the rainy season. When muddy road conditions limit access by chiva, some Volunteers have to walk for one or two hours to get to their sites.

For recreational travel, bus service is available from Panama City to almost all domestic destinations and places to the north through Costa Rica. However, no roads pass south from Panama to Colombia due to the heavily forested Darien Gap. Tourist destinations in Panama that are not reachable by bus are accessible by plane. International flights leave from Panama City and David.

Geography and Climate

Panama is located on the narrowest and lowest part of Central America. At 29,300 square miles (77,082 square kilometers), the S-shaped isthmus is slightly smaller than South Carolina. Panama has two coastlines, along the Caribbean Sea to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the south, and borders Colombia to the east and Costa Rica to the west. The country is divided into 10 provinces, plus the indigenous reservations of Emberá-Wounaan, Guna-Yala, Madugandi, Ngäbe-Buglé, and Wargandi.

Panama has a tropical climate with temperatures ranging from 70–90 degrees Fahrenheit. While there is little seasonal variation, there is a dry season from January through March and a rainy season from April through December. Thunderstorms are common during the rainy season, but the country is outside the hurricane track. Areas at higher altitudes are cooler and usually receive more precipitation than the lowlands.

Panama's landscape varies from province to province, and each province has its own beauty. The tropical environment supports a large variety of flora and fauna, including orchids, bromeliads, fabulous quetzals, over 100 varieties of hummingbirds, conejos pintados (large nocturnal rodents), and armadillos. Forests cover 40 percent of the land. The dominant topographical feature is the central spine of highlands called the Cordillera Central that forms the continental divide. The highest elevation is the Baru volcano, located near the border with Costa Rica, which rises to almost 11,550 feet (3,500 meters). The coastal areas are large plain with gently sloping hills. Panama has nearly 500 rivers, most of them not navigable. The Chagres is one of the longest and most vital of the approximately 150 rivers that flow into the Caribbean.

Social Activities

The most popular social activities in Latino areas usually are dances (bailes) with traditional típico music. Larger towns periodically invite bands to play and gather over two or three days to watch a bullfight (much less bloody than the Spanish version) or cantadera (a freestyle singing battle) and reconvene at night for a dance. Because of Panamanians' willingness to share their culture, even Volunteers with no talent for dancing are likely to leave Panama knowing how to dance to típico. A common way to bring the community together in rural sites is a junta, in which people complete an activity such as build a bamboo

or wooden house or harvest rice. Food and drinks are provided to the participants, and festivities can last well into the night. In Afro-Antillean areas, dances also are popular, though the styles of music are much more diverse. Probably the most popular date on every Panamanian calendar is Carnival, the equivalent of Mardi Gras. For the four days leading up to Ash Wednesday, Panamanians gather in certain cities to celebrate under the sun and watch elaborate floats parade through the streets at night.

Formal social activities are less frequent in indigenous communities than in Latino areas. Elaborate dances are rare, and dancing is usually reserved for important community functions. Spontaneous get-togethers at people's homes are probably the most common activity. Often, community meetings are the only occasion for which an entire community convenes.

Volunteers are encouraged to spend the majority of their time in their communities, working and socializing with Panamanians. The Peace Corps attempts to place Volunteers near one another for technical and emotional support. Beautiful beaches are plentiful, and outdoor activities are available almost everywhere. When visiting Panama City, Volunteers have numerous opportunities for diversion, such as movie theaters, coffee bars, restaurants, public basketball courts, and dance clubs.

Professionalism, Dress, and Behavior

Wearing proper attire in Panama helps establish your professional credibility and reflects your respect for the customs and lifestyles of the people with whom you live and work. It will also help distinguish you from tourists just passing through. Remember that you will be judged by your appearance. Neatness and cleanliness are very important in Panamanian culture. Although they may not tell you outright, Panamanians may be offended by an untidy appearance. Dress is less formal in rural areas than in the capital, but it is important to remember that you are a representative of the United States. It is especially important to dress appropriately on the job and when you meet with government or other officials. Leisure clothing can be worn in the privacy of your own home, but should not be worn for work or travel. When doing physical labor, you will need sturdy shoes and clothes that protect you from scratches and insect bites. For more specific clothing recommendations, refer to the packing list later in this book.

During all training activities and Volunteer service in Panama, you will be expected to observe Peace Corps/Panama's guidelines for dress. Shirts and shoes must be worn at all times, and shorts may not be worn in professional settings, including the Peace Corps office. While dressy sandals for women are appropriate, men should not wear sandals during professional or formal occasions, in accordance with local custom. Flip-flops should generally not be worn outside the home.

You will likely not need to change your entire wardrobe, but you should realize that U.S. citizens almost always stand out. Because of Panamanians' views of tattoos and body piercings, keeping any tattoos and piercings out of sight will allow you to establish host family and counterpart relationships more easily (earrings for women are OK). Men with long hair may be met with suspicion, so it is advisable for male Volunteers to keep their hair relatively short. As a result of the previous U.S. military presence in Panama, camouflage and military-style pants, jackets, backpacks, and so forth are not acceptable and should not be brought in-country. All Volunteers will need work-specific clothing, as well as casual clothing. Casual clothing will be the same for all Volunteers, but work clothing may vary by project sector.

See the packing list section for more information regarding packing for each sector.

Personal Safety

More detailed information about the Peace Corps' approach to safety is contained in the Safety and Security section, 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 Panama Volunteers complete their two years of service without incident. The Peace Corps has established procedures and policies designed to help reduce the risks and enhance your safety and security. These procedures and policies, in addition to safety training, will be provided once you arrive in Panama. Using these tools, one can be empowered to take responsibility for his or her 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. Volunteers and families are encouraged to look at safety and security information on the Peace Corps website at peacecorps.gov/safety.

Information on these pages gives messages on Volunteer health and safety. There is a section titled Safety and Security in Depth. Among topics addressed are the risks of serving as a Volunteer, posts' safety support systems, and emergency planning and communications.

Rewards and Frustrations

To be a successful Volunteer, you must be willing to commit yourself to two years of service in a foreign country, living in harmony with the local culture. You must also be patient, as change comes very slowly. Many Volunteers have difficulty adjusting to a slower pace of life and work in Panama. You may have to repeatedly explain your role as a development worker. You may encounter a lack of understanding or technical support from your community or agency partners. You may also be annoyed by frequent delays in almost every aspect of your work, by the lack of privacy, and by being perceived as a rich foreigner. You will be thoroughly briefed on these matters during training.

The romance and excitement of working in a developing country can wear off quickly. The obstacles to accomplishing one's goals can be formidable. The key to satisfying work as a Volunteer is the ability to establish successful interpersonal relations at all levels. This requires patience, sensitivity, and a positive, professional attitude. Remember that while you may be full of energy and motivation, you will be here for only two years. Your Panamanian colleagues will continue to work at the same jobs, probably for low pay, after you leave, so they may not have the same level of motivation as you do. Immediate results will be hard to quantify. Much of the impact of the work you do will not become evident until after you leave Panama. Nevertheless, you will be rewarded with a great sense of accomplishment when activities are successful, whether small or large. The successes are well worth the difficulties. Volunteers' presence in Panama is making a difference and has certainly contributed to improving the conditions in rural areas.

PEACE CORPS TRAINING

Overview of Pre-Service Training

The Peace Corps uses a competency-based training approach throughout the continuum of learning, supporting you from arrival in Panama to your departure. Pre-service training (PST) is the first event within this continuum of learning and ensures that you are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively perform your job. Pre-service training is conducted in Panama by Peace Corps staff, most of whom are locally hired trainers. Peace Corps staff measure achievement of learning and determine if you have successfully achieved competencies, including language standards, for swearing-in as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Peace Corps training incorporates widely accepted principles of adult learning and is structured around the experiential learning cycle. Successful training results in competence in various technical, linguistic, cross-cultural, health, and safety and security areas.

Integrating into the community is one of the core competencies you will strive to achieve both in PST and during the first several months of service. Successful sustainable development work is based on the relationships you build by respectfully integrating into the host country community and culture.

You will be prepared for this through a homestay experience, which often requires trainees to live with host families during PST. Integration into the community fosters language and cross-cultural learning and ensures your health, safety, and security.

Qualifying for Service

The pre-service training experience provides an opportunity not only for the Peace Corps to assess a trainee's competence, but for trainees to re-evaluate their commitment to serve for 27 months to improve the quality of life of the people with whom Volunteers live and work and, in doing so, develop new knowledge, skills, and attitudes while adapting existing ones.

Peace Corps/Panama's competencies are designed to be accomplished throughout the Volunteer's 27 months of learning. Trainees may not be able to complete all learning objectives during pre-service training but must show adequate progress toward achieving the competencies to become Volunteers.

Panama's competencies include the following:

Essential Competencies

- Integrate into the Peace Corps organization
- Integrate into the community
- Facilitate participatory community development
- Meet the objectives of the sector project

Sector-Specific Competencies

Community Environmental Conservation (CEC)

- Strengthen environmental education to develop environmental stewardship
- Promote sustainable environmental projects

Environmental Health (EH)

- Promote health and hygiene practices
- Manage water systems
- Manage sanitation systems

Sustainable Agriculture Systems (SAS)

- Improve family standard of living through increased sustainable agriculture production
- Facilitate the training of community promoters

Teaching English (TE)

- Improve Panamanian teachers' English comprehension, curriculum design, and teaching skills
- Enhance Panamanian adults' ability to communicate in English as a means of improving economic opportunities
- Improve Panamanian children and youth's listening, reading, writing, and English speaking skills

Technical Training

Technical training will prepare you to work in Panama 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, Panama 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 Panama and strategies for working within such a framework. You will review your project's goals and objectives and will meet with the Panama agencies and organizations that invited the Peace Corps to assist them. You will be supported and evaluated throughout training to build the confidence and skills you need to undertake your project activities, report your progress, and serve as 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, help you integrate into your community, and 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. Panama language instructors usually teach formal language classes five days a week in small groups.

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 develop strategies to continue studying language during your service.

Cross-Cultural Training

Cross-cultural training will provide opportunities for you to reflect on your own cultural values and how they influence your behavior in Panama. You will also discuss the questions you have about the behaviors and practices you observe in Panama, exploring the underlying reasons for these behaviors and practices.

Cross-cultural and community development training will help you improve your communication skills and understand your role as a facilitator of development. Training will cover topics such as the concept of time, power and hierarchy, gender roles, communication styles, and the concept of self and relationships. Because adjusting to a new culture can be very challenging, you will participate in resiliency training which provides a framework and tools to help with adjustment issues.

The host family experience provides a unique context for cross-cultural learning, and 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 PST and to assist them in helping you adapt to living in Panama. Many Volunteers form strong and lasting friendships with their host families.

Health Training

During pre-service training, you will be trained in health prevention, basic first aid, and treatment of medical illnesses found in Panama. You will be expected to practice preventive health and to take responsibility for your own health by adhering to all medical policies. Trainees are required to attend all medical sessions. Health education topics will nutrition, food and water preparation, emotional health, alcohol awareness, prevention of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and common illnesses, domestic and intimate partner violence, emergencies, and medical policies in Panama.

Safety and Security Training

During the safety and security 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, how to identify safety risks in-country and about Peace Corps' emergency response and support systems.

Additional Trainings During Volunteer Service

The Peace Corps' training system 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.
- **Midservice training** (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 their 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 IN PANAMA

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 Panama maintains a clinic with a full-time medical officer who takes care of Volunteers' primary health-care needs, including evaluation and treatment of most medical conditions. Additional medical services are also available in Panama at local hospitals. If you become seriously ill and cannot receive the care you need in Panama, you will be transported to a Peace Corps-approved regional medical facility. If the Office of Health Services (OHS) determines that the care is not optimal for your condition at the regional facility, you will be transported to the United States.

Health Issues in Panama

Simple medical conditions such as a cut or a skin infection can be complicated by the humidity and heat in Panama due to its tropical weather. Gastrointestinal illnesses are common, and malaria exists in the country. Also present in Panama are tuberculosis, dengue fever, intestinal parasites, hepatitis A and B, STIs, and HIV/AIDS. However frightening these diseases may sound, they can be avoided by using common sense and following basic preventive practices. The Peace Corps medical officers offer many sessions on health maintenance and disease prevention during PST and your two-year tour.

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 Panama, you will receive a country-specific medical handbook. By 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 section.

During pre-service training, you will have access to basic medical supplies through the medical officer. However, during this time, 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 midservice and at the end of your service. If you develop a serious medical problem during your service, the medical officer in Panama will consult with the Office of Health Services in Washington, D.C., or a regional medical officer. If it is determined that your condition cannot be treated in Panama, 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 is worth a pound of cure" 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 Panama is to take the following preventive measures:

1. Treat your drinking water
2. Frequent use of sunscreen, insect repellent, and a mosquito net
3. Keep well hydrated
4. Follow instructions on food preparation techniques
5. Follow hygiene measures thoroughly while in site
6. Keep house surroundings clean to avoid rats visit
7. Take malaria prophylaxis medicine continuously

Many illnesses that afflict Volunteers worldwide are preventable if proper food and water precautions are taken. These illnesses include food poisoning, parasitic infections, hepatitis A, helminthiasis (parasitic worms), dysentery, Guinea worms, tapeworms, and typhoid fever. The most common tropical diseases are dengue fever, Hanta Virus, Leishmaniasis, and malaria. Your medical officer will discuss specific standards for water and food preparation in Panama during pre-service training.

Abstinence is the most effective way to prevent infection with HIV and other STIs. 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 STIs. 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

If feminine hygiene products are not available for you to purchase on the local market, the Peace Corps medical officer in Panama will provide them. If you require a specific product, please bring a three-month supply with you. Many female Volunteers take menstrual cups (The Diva Cup, The Keeper, The Moon Cup, etc.) to avoid potential problems with availability or disposal of feminine hygiene products.

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

The Peace Corps follows the 2012 U.S. Preventive Services Task Force guidelines for screening PAP smears, which recommend women aged 21–29 receive screening PAPs every three years and women aged 30–65 receive screening PAPs every five years. As such, most Volunteers will not receive a PAP during their service, but can use Peace Corps supplied health insurance after service to have an exam.

Your Peace Corps Medical Kit

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

Medical Kit Contents

First Aid Handbook	Antifungal cream
Ace bandages	Antihistamine
Acetaminophen (Tylenol)	Antiseptic antimicrobial skin cleaner
Adhesive tape	Band-Aids
Antacid tablets	Bismuth Subsalicylate (Pepto-Bismol)
Anti-diarrheal (Imodium)	Butterfly closures
Antibiotic ointment	Calagel anti-itch gel

Condoms
Cough lozenges
Decongestant
Dental floss
Gloves
Hydrocortisone cream
Ibuprofen
Insect repellent
Iodine tablets (for water purification)

Lip balm
Oral rehydration salts
Scissors
Sore throat lozenges
Sterile eye drops
Sterile gauze pads
Sunscreen
Thermometer (Temp-a-dots)
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 Health Services (OHS). Failure to disclose new illnesses, injuries, allergies, or pregnancy can endanger your health and may jeopardize your eligibility to serve.

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 Health Services.

If you wish to avoid having duplicate vaccinations, bring a copy of your immunization record to your pre-departure orientation. If you purchase any immunizations prior to Peace Corps service that are not listed as requirement in your Medical Applicant Portal, the Peace Corps cannot reimburse you for the cost. The Peace Corps will provide all the immunizations necessary for your overseas assignment. Volunteers must be willing to get all required vaccinations unless there is a documented medical contraindication. Failure to accept required vaccination is grounds for administrative separation from the Peace Corps. 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 glucosamine, selenium, or antioxidant supplements. Medications supplied may be generic or equivalent to your current medications.

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 (of the current prescription) with you. 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 Office of Health Services strongly discourages Volunteers from wearing contact lenses while overseas unless there is a true medical indication documented by your ophthalmologist. Contact lenses, particularly extended use soft contacts, are associated with a variety of eye infections and other inflammatory problems. One of the most serious of these problems is infectious keratitis which can lead to severe cornea damage which could result in permanent blindness requiring corneal transplantation. These risks of permanent eye damage are exacerbated in the Peace Corps environment where the Volunteer's ability to properly clean the lenses is compromised due to limited access to sterile water as well as decreased effectiveness of cleaning solutions due to prolonged storage in unsatisfactory conditions. In addition, when bacterial eye infections occur, assessment and treatment within hours by a competent ophthalmologist is indicated. This is

virtually impossible in the Peace Corps setting. If you feel that you simply must be able to use your contacts occasionally, please consider using single use, daily disposable lenses which do not require cleaning.

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 IN DEPTH

Ensuring the safety and security of Volunteers is the Peace Corps' highest priority. 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 most Volunteers complete their two years of service without a serious safety and security incident. Together, the Peace Corps and Volunteers can reduce risk, but cannot truly eliminate all risk.

Beyond knowing that the Peace Corps approaches safety and security as a partnership with you, it might be helpful to see how this partnership works. The Peace Corps has policies, procedures, and training in place to promote your safety. The Peace Corps depends 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 and impact of burglary—follows:

- The Peace Corps assesses the security environment where you will live and work.
- The Peace Corps inspects the house where you will live according to established security criteria.
- The Peace Corps ensures you are welcomed by host country counterparts or other community leaders in your new community.
- The 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 your neighbors.
- You decide if purchasing personal articles insurance is appropriate for you.
- You don't change residences before being authorized by the Peace Corps.
- You communicate your concerns to Peace Corps staff.

This welcome book contains sections on Living Conditions and Volunteer Lifestyle, Peace Corps Training, Your Health Care, and Safety and Security, all of which include important safety and security information to help you understand this partnership. The Peace Corps makes every effort to give Volunteers the training and tools they need to function in the safest way possible and prepare for the unexpected, teaching you to identify, reduce, and manage the risks you may encounter.

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 Panama there are several measures you can take to reduce your risk:

- Leave valuable objects in the United States, particularly those that are irreplaceable or have sentimental value
- Leave copies of important documents and account numbers with someone you trust in the States
- Purchase a hidden money pouch or "dummy" wallet as a decoy
- Purchase personal articles insurance (the Peace Corps does not insure Volunteers' belongings)

After you arrive in Panama, 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 Panama learn to do the following:

- 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
- Be careful and conscientious about using electronics (phones, cameras, laptops, iPods, etc.) in public or leaving them unattended
- 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 occurs in Panama. You can reduce the risks 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 Panama of which you should be aware:

- Over the past four years, the most commonly reported security incidents involving Panama Volunteers have been theft and burglary. Female Volunteers comprise a higher percentage of crime victims, reflecting that there are more female Volunteers than males. Statistically, sexual assault is a very small percentage of all crimes but it can happen. The majority of incidents happen, regardless of gender, when Volunteers are out of site.
- While whistles and verbal harassment based on race or gender may be fairly common on the street, this behavior may be reduced if you abide by local cultural norms, dress conservatively, and respond according to the training you will receive.

Staying Safe: Don't Be a Target for Crime

Because many Volunteer sites are in rural, isolated settings, you must be prepared to take on a large degree of responsibility for your own safety. To reduce the likelihood that you will become a victim of crime, you can take steps to make yourself less of a target such as ensuring your home is secure and developing relationships in your community. While the factors that contribute to your risk in Panama 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 Panama will require that you accept some restrictions on your current lifestyle.

There are very simple measures you can take as a Volunteer to reduce the likelihood of being a victim of a crime.

1. Do not leave all your money in one place (keep it in multiple pockets, for example, or in your backpack and your pocket).
2. When traveling on a bus or taxi, make sure you keep your valuables in site.
3. Do not walk alone at night, particularly in areas with few people around.
4. Do not get drunk.

5. Let your friends and neighbors know where you are going and when you expect to be back. The list is long but the point is that some small precautions can make the difference between being a victim or not.

Support from Staff

If a trainee or Volunteer is the victim of a safety and security 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 support and assist Volunteers who choose to make a formal complaint with local law enforcement. It is very important that a Volunteer reports an incident when it occurs. The reasons for this include obtaining medical care and emotional support, enabling Peace Corps staff to assess the situation to determine if there is an ongoing safety and security concern, protecting peer Volunteers and preserving the right to file a complaint. Should a Volunteer decide later in the process to file a complaint with law enforcement, this option may be compromised if evidence was not preserved at the time of the incident.

Office of Victim Advocacy

The Office of Victim Advocacy (OVA) is a resource to Volunteers who are victims of crime, including sexual assault and stalking. Victim advocates are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to help Volunteers understand their emotional, medical, and legal options so they may make informed decisions to meet their specific needs. The OVA provides a compassionate, coordinated, and supportive response to Volunteers who wish to access Peace Corps support services.

Contact information for the Office of Victim Advocacy

Direct phone number: 202.692.1753

Toll-free: 855.855.1961 ext. 1753

Duty phone: 202.409.2704 (available 24/7, call or text)

Email: victimadvocate@peacecorps.gov

Crime Data for Panama

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

Few Peace Corps Volunteers are victims of serious crimes. Crimes that do occur abroad are investigated and prosecuted by local jurisdictional authorities. If you are the victim of a crime, you will decide if you wish to file a complaint with law enforcement, who will then determine whether to prosecute. If you decide to file a complaint, the Peace Corps will help through the process. The Peace Corps staff will ensure you are fully informed of your options and understand how the local legal process works. Further, the Peace Corps will help you exercise your rights to the fullest extent possible under the laws of your host country.

The Peace Corps will train you on how to respond if you are the victim of a serious crime, including how to get to a safe location quickly and contact your Peace Corps office. It's important that you notify the Peace Corps as soon as you can so Peace Corps staff can provide assistance.

Volunteer Safety Support in Panama

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

The Peace Corps/Panama 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 to ensure 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 Panama. 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 partner 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/Panama'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 Panama 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 safety and security incidents 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 current and future Volunteers.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION OVERVIEW

The Peace Corps mission is to promote world peace and friendship and to improve people’s lives in the communities where Volunteers serve. Instituting policies and practices to support a diverse and inclusive work and Volunteer environment is essential to achieving this mission.

Through inclusive recruitment and retention of staff and Volunteers, the Peace Corps seeks to reflect the rich diversity of the United States and bring diverse perspectives and solutions to development issues. Additionally, ensuring diversity among staff and Volunteers enriches interpersonal relations and communications for the staff work environment, the Volunteer experience, and the communities in which Volunteers serve.

The Peace Corps defines diversity as a “collection of individual attributes that together help agencies pursue organizational objectives efficiently and effectively. These include, but are not limited to, characteristics such as national origin, language, race, color, disability, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, veteran status, and family structures. Diversity also encompasses differences among people concerning where they are from and where they have lived and their differences of thought and life experiences.”

We define inclusion as a “culture that connects each [staff member and Volunteer] to the organization; encourages collaboration, flexibility, and fairness; and leverages diversity throughout the organization so that all individuals are able to participate and contribute to their full potential.” The Peace Corps promotes inclusion throughout the lifecycle of Volunteers and staff. When staff and Volunteers are able to share their rich diversity in an inclusive work environment, the Peace Corps mission is better fulfilled. More information about diversity and inclusion can be found in the Volunteer Handbook.

An inclusive agency is one that seeks input from everyone in an effort to find the best ideas and strategies possible to execute its objectives. When input is solicited, heard, and considered from a rich multitude of individuals the best course of action usually emerges. The Peace Corps seeks to improve its operations and effectiveness by ensuring that all voices and ideas are heard and that all Volunteers and staff feel welcome and appreciated. When each person’s voice is heard, the agency is stronger and the impact of Volunteers is strengthened.

Diversity and Inclusion at Your Site

Once Volunteers arrive at their sites, diversity and inclusion principles remain the same but take on a different shape, in which your host community may share a common culture and you—the Volunteer—are the outsider. You may be in the minority, if not the sole American like you, at your site. You will begin to notice diversity in perspectives, ethnicity, age, depth of conversation, and degree of support you may receive. For example, elders, youth, and middle-aged individuals all have unique points of views on topics you may discuss, from perspectives on work, new projects, and social engagements to the way community issues are addressed.

Peace Corps staff in your host country recognize the additional adjustment issues that come with living and working in new environments and will provide support and guidance to Volunteers. During pre-service training, a session will be held to discuss diversity and inclusion and how you can serve as an ally for your peers, honoring diversity, seeking inclusion, challenging prejudice and exclusion, exploring your own biases, and learning mechanisms to cope with these adjustment issues. The Peace Corps looks forward to having Volunteers from varied backgrounds that include a variety of races, ethnic groups, ages, religions, sexual orientations and gender identities. The agency expects you to work collaboratively to create an inclusive environment that transcends differences and finds common ground.

Cross-Cultural Considerations

Outside of Panama's capital, residents of rural communities might have had little direct exposure to other cultures, races, religions, and lifestyles. What people view as typical U.S. 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 Panama are known for their generous hospitality to foreigners; however, members of the community where you will live may display a range of reactions to cultural differences that you present.

As a Volunteer and representative of the United States, you are responsible not only for sharing the diversity of U.S. culture (to include your individual culture and the culture of other Americans) with your host country national counterparts, but also for learning from the diversity of your host country. An important aspect of this cultural exchange will be to demonstrate inclusiveness within your community in a sensitive manner. Additionally, you will share the responsibility of learning about the diversity of your fellow Peace Corps Volunteers and exploring how best to respect differences while serving as supportive allies as you go through this challenging new experience.

To ease the transition and adapt to life in your host country, 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 they have in the United States; male Volunteers may be expected to not perform chores or other tasks ascribed to women; 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 a diversity, inclusion, and sensitivity discussion during pre-service training and will be on call to provide support. This training covers how to adapt personal choices and behavior to be respectful of the host country culture, which can have a direct impact on how Volunteers are viewed and treated by their new communities. The Peace Corps emphasizes professional behavior and cross-cultural sensitivity among volunteers and within their communities to help integrate and be successful during service.

An ideal way to view the pursuit of cross-cultural adaptation and/or cultural integration is to recognize that everything done in your host country has both a specific reason for why it is done and an expected outcome. Trust that your host country counterparts are acting with positive intentions and work to mutually seek understanding and commonality. Language differences may add a communication barrier and lead to misunderstandings. Listen more than you speak and seek clarity. Remember that having the ability to laugh at yourself and at life's little surprises goes a long way—laughter is universal.

What Might a Volunteer Face?

Possible Gender Role Issues

Gender is a set of socially constructed roles, responsibilities, behaviors, and opportunities. Gender differs from sex, which refers specifically to biological and physiological characteristics of males and females. Gender roles and expectations are learned, change over time, and vary within and among cultures. Volunteers are trained in gender awareness as they approach their work in the host country. Gender roles in the United States may differ greatly from those in your country of service. It is important to absorb and to attempt to understand the cultural nuances of gender where you are. For example, in many cultures males are held in higher regard than females and females may manage the households. In some places, females are encouraged to attend school, while in other countries females are discouraged from engaging in such activities and instead work inside or outside of the home.

During the pre-service training, trainees receive an introduction to gender awareness in their country of service, and examine their own thinking about gender roles and how this thinking has impacted them.

They then learn how to analyze development projects using a gender lens to better understand gender roles in their host country and to understand how these gender roles can benefit or limit what females and males may or may not do. During their 27 months of service, Volunteers will further engage in gender trainings to understand better how their gender identity impacts who they are as females or males in the host country and how this perception influences their work and relationships.

Female Volunteers may find it difficult to adapt to Panamá's male-dominated society. They may be verbally harassed or even experience physical harassment. They may not be taken seriously intellectually or in their work. They may not be able to socialize with males without giving the impression that they are flirting, and they may be judged differently than men for behaviors such as smoking, drinking, walking alone, or going out at night. In addition, because they are from the United States, they may be assumed to be sexually promiscuous. Panamanians may consider it strange that female Volunteers do not spend their days cooking, cleaning, and washing.

Volunteer comments:

“My social and professional endeavors as a Volunteer are deeply affected by my sex, which can be both beneficial and frustrating. It is easier for me than my male peers to get the attention and help of local government officials. However, these same officials may not think I am capable of doing hard labor to complete a project and may try to leave me out of the loop while inviting one of my male counterparts to join in. I can gain the confidence and friendship of Panamanian women in my town fairly quickly, but I am likely to lose it just as fast if my outgoing manner appears too flirtatious with men. Therefore, for my own well-being and in an effort to keep from rocking the boat, I have struggled to find a balance between being an independent American woman and being a more laid-back, traditional Panamanian woman.”

“I do take it upon myself to open some Panamanians' eyes and minds to the possibilities women have in life. However, to stay within the realm of acceptable behavior here, I have held on to the most fundamental characteristics that define me as a woman while letting go of less essential acquired traits. No, I do not walk alone at night, nor do I kill snakes, nor do I invite men to my home unaccompanied. Yes, I do live alone, I occasionally drink beer, I do manual labor, and I walk as fast as the men. I am still the same woman. I am the adjusted American-Panamanian version of me. And the challenge of achieving this balance has encouraged me and members of my community to grow, learn, teach, and share as never before.”

“When I learned that Panamanian society is male-dominated I felt bad for my Volunteer counterparts who are women, but I didn't realize that I would have issues as a male Volunteer in a *machismo* culture as well. As a man, many Panamanian men expect you to objectify women. They may speak to you about their extramarital affairs, seeking a high-five and a big-bellied laugh. This can be specifically difficult if you have a good relationship with their spouse. If you respond negatively to their chauvinistic comments about women you may lose their respect. It can sometimes be tough to build personal and work relationships unless you are willing to occasionally set aside your values related to gender equality. While these difficulties are not comparable to those that women face in a *machismo* society, they can definitely take an emotional toll. If you find yourself having issues dealing with gender roles you are expected to fill as a man, you can always look to your fellow Volunteers for support; many of them feel similarly.”

Possible Issues for Volunteers of Color

Volunteers of color sometimes, but not always, have a different Peace Corps experience than white Volunteers. Because of limited exposure, some foreign nationals will expect to see U.S. citizens who are white. Cultures of the world do not typically envision the States as a place of rich diversity with various culturally acceptable perspectives, personalities, and characteristics. Thus, a Volunteer of color may be questioned as about their U.S. citizenship.

In places where American stereotypes and/or caste system dynamics influence perception, Volunteers of color should be mindful of the reasons for these views without creating contentious environments. All too often, host country nationals are simply unaware of the diversity of the United States and require additional information and dialogue. Direct interactions with someone new or something different can take time to get used to, but those who take the time tend to be better off. Although host country nationals may assert that the United States is made up of predominately one race, we know that is not true. If a member of your community knows of compatriots living in the United States or of notable U.S. citizens of color, you can build on this knowledge as a point of reference for discussing diversity within the States.

For Volunteers of color, the range of responses to their skin color may vary from the extremely kind to the very insensitive. In African and Latin American countries, host country nationals may say “welcome home” to African Americans or Hispanic Americans. Sometimes Volunteers expect to be “welcomed home” but are disappointed when they are not. More commonly, if a Volunteer is mistaken for a host-country national citizen, he or she is expected to behave as a male or female in that culture behaves, and to speak the local language fluently. Host country nationals are sometimes frustrated when the Volunteer does not speak the local language with ease. Conversely, some in the same country may call you a “sell out” because they feel the United States has not done enough to help with social issues. These instances can be turned into teachable moments for the Volunteer and the host country national, in which the Volunteer can ask questions surrounding perception and collaborate with respect to issues and projects at hand, while engaging in cross-cultural exchanges. All Volunteers, to include white Volunteers and those of color, should be mindful of the issues of race that are embedded in U.S. culture and within the culture in your country of service. These issues may significantly affect how Volunteers interact with fellow Volunteers and host country nationals. Being open and inclusive to everyone will improve your experience in interacting with fellow Volunteers and members of your host community.

African-American Volunteers may be judged less professionally competent than Caucasian Volunteers. Despite complexion, you may not be considered black (by some Panamanians) because of a perception that U.S. culture is primarily white. African-Americans may also be called *negro* or *chombo* or possibly *moreno* or *mulatto* depending on complexion. These are generally not understood as derogatory terms, rather as the local words used to describe people of color. Some Panamanians may also use these terms to describe different skin tones within Latino populations. Be prepared to work and live with individuals who have no experience of African-American culture, but keep in mind the cross-cultural opportunity to broaden the Panamanian perception of what it means to be “American.” Panama is also home to a vibrant Afro-Caribbean population and culture, and historians estimate that 50 percent of Panamanians may have some African ancestry.

Hispanic-American Volunteers may not be perceived as being North American and may be expected to speak Spanish fluently. You may be labeled *el cubano*, *el mexicano*, etc. because of stereotyped perceptions of other Latino cultures. Hispanic or Latino-Americans may be expected to interact in Panamanian society with more ease than other Volunteers. They may not find other Volunteers in Panamá with the same ethnic background.

Asian-American Volunteers may experience stereotypes, labeling, and negative comments because of many Panamanians’ limited exposure to the diversity of Asian and Asian-American cultures. Asian-American Volunteers may be considered Chinese (*chino*) despite efforts to clarify or explain ethnic background. Also, like Hispanic-Americans, they may not be considered “true” North Americans. In addition, Panamá’s historical involvement with certain Asian countries or the presence of Asian merchants in the community may have an impact on how Asian-American Volunteers are perceived.

Volunteers comments:

“Here in Panamá, I blend in because of my Latino roots. My mother is Dominican, so I am fairly dark. As a result, I find myself arguing with people a lot when they tell me I’m not really 100 percent American (*‘Not like her’* and then they’ll point to a blond Volunteer). When I went on a visit to my site, everyone was asking, in front of me, ‘Where’s the American?’ They wouldn’t believe me when I said I *was* the American. But there are perks. I don’t get charged as much on taxi rides or when buying things on the street. I also don’t deal with men hissing and leering at me as much.”

“I am Filipina-American, and I can pass for a Panamanian here. The advantages are that I don’t get stared at when I’m walking around, and people don’t readily assume that I don’t speak Spanish. Most people assume that I am Panamanian with some Chinese blood mixed in. Then they hear me speak Spanish and guess that I am from Nicaragua, Peru, Belize, or Tonga. They guess about every other country except the United States. They are shocked to meet a non-Caucasian American. One observation I have made is that Panamanians love white people or, to be more exact, blond hair and fair skin. These characteristics are very exotic to them because most people here don’t look like that. People with such characteristics are stared at and bothered more than me.”

“When I am walking by myself, I don’t hear as many *piropos* (catcalls) than when I am with my white female friends. Despite all this, I really like Panamá and its people. Especially at Volunteer sites, I have met the nicest and humblest people. I try to get beyond superficiality in meeting Panamanians with the hope that their stereotype of Americans will be somewhat tweaked.”

“Most Panamanians think there is only one country in Asia: China. Some have met development volunteers from Japan, but only a few. Therefore, I have adopted the nickname *Chinita*, which means ‘little Chinese girl.’ I use it with my friends, but loathe it when a Panamanian refers to me as *la chinita*. Why? Because I was born in Korea and have spent most of my life in the United States. Even after I say I am from the States, Panamanians ask if I speak Chinese. You get used to it, however, and fighting it only makes you frustrated. People in my community still call me *Chinita*. Sometimes, the kids will correct others and tell them I am Korean.”

Possible Issues for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning/Queer, Ally (LGBTQA) Volunteers

For LGBTQ Volunteers: Given Panama’s traditional values, sexual orientation and non-conforming gender identities might not be discussed openly. In some cases, the LGBTQ community may be stigmatized. Mindful of the cultural norms and country-specific laws, the decision to serve openly is left to each individual Peace Corps Volunteer. Many LGBTQ Volunteers have chosen to be discreet about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity within their host communities. Some LGBTQ Volunteers have chosen to come out to community members, with a result of positive and negative reactions, while some have come out only to select Peace Corps staff and Volunteers. Dealing with questions about boyfriends, girlfriends, marriage, and children may, at times, be stressful for LGBTQ Volunteers. You may find that Panama is a less open and inclusive environment than you have previously experienced. Gay men have to deal with *machismo*: talk of conquest(s), heavy drinking, girl watching, and dirty jokes.

Please know, however, that Peace Corps is supportive of you and Peace Corps staff welcomes dialogue about how to ensure your success as an LGBTQ Volunteer. More information about serving as an LGBTQ Volunteer is available at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Peace Corps Alumni website at lgbprpcv.org. Additionally, the Peace Corps’ LGBTQ employee resource group, Spectrum, can be reached at spectrum@peacecorps.gov.

For Ally Volunteers: Peace Corps staff intends to create open, inclusive, and accepting environments. As an agency, the Peace Corps encourages Volunteers to serve as allies to their LGBTQ colleagues in order to create a safe environment.

Many LGBTQ Volunteers have served successfully in Panama and have very fond memories of their community and service. LGBTQ support groups may be available in your country of service, providing a network to support the needs of the Peace Corps LGBTQ community. Peace Corps staff will work with Volunteers to provide them with locally informed perspectives.

Volunteers comments:

“Coming from the more ‘liberal’ United States to a Latin American country as a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender Volunteer can be a daunting experience. In Panamanian society, there is sort of a “don’t ask, don’t tell” system. There is a significant gay and lesbian population, but any non-heterosexual behavior is still widely seen as deviant. It is a very *machista* society, and one of the biggest insults you can make to another man is to call him gay. The concept of “gay” is not well-defined (for better or worse), meaning that many men have gay sex but don’t consider themselves to be gay. Lesbians tend to hide their sexuality more than gay men do, though there seems to be less of a stigma attached to lesbians. One of the most difficult questions is how you will deal with your sexuality in Panamá. Will you be yourself to your community or feel the need to go back in the closet? What does that mean for your well-being?”

“There are positive aspects, though, in that most gay Volunteers feel supported by some of the Peace Corps/Panamá staff and by a majority of Volunteers.”

Possible Issues for Volunteers with Disabilities

As part of the medical clearance process, the Peace Corps Office of Health Services determined you were physically and emotionally capable, with or without additional medical support, to perform a full tour of Volunteer service in Panama without a significant risk of harm to yourself or interruption of service. The Peace Corps/Panamá staff will work with disabled Volunteers to support them in training, housing, jobsites, or other areas to enable them to serve safely and effectively.

In Panama, Volunteers with disabilities may encounter people in their community who think that they always require special help and cannot function on their own. They may find that some Panamanians consider them incapable of work that requires physical exertion or less competent in professional situations. They may be faced with frank or inconsiderate remarks concerning their disability.

Possible Issues for Volunteer Couples

Before committing to Peace Corps service, couples should consider how different degrees of enthusiasm about Peace Corps service, adaptation to the physical and cultural environment, and homesickness will affect their lives. It can be helpful to recognize that your reactions to these issues will change throughout your service, and you may not always feel the same as your partner. You and your partner will have different jobs, different schedules, and difference societal pressures. One partner may learn the language faster than the other or have a more satisfying assignment. This can create competition and put different kinds of stress on each person. Anticipating how these pressures will affect you and your partner differently throughout your service can help you remain a source of support for each other. Making friends with other Volunteers is a critical part of fitting into the larger Volunteer culture and can also be a good way to expand your support network.

While couples will live together during their service, they may live in separate towns during their pre-service training. This is a stressful time for most Volunteers, and it can be helpful to discuss in advance how you will deal with this potential separation. Your partner can be an important source of stability but

can also add stress to your training experience. You may feel torn between traveling to visit your partner and focusing on your training, your host family, and friends you have made at your training site.

Couples often face pressure from host country nationals to change their roles to conform better with traditional Panama relationships. Panamanian men and women alike will often not understand American relationship dynamics and may be outwardly critical of relationships that do not adhere to traditional gender roles. It is also helpful to think about how pressures to conform to Panamanian culture can be challenging to men and women in very different ways. Considering how your partner is being affected and discussing what, if any, aspects of your relationship should be changed can help reduce stress for you both.

Possible Issues for Volunteer Couples in Panama

Being a married couple in the Peace Corps has its advantages and its challenges. For example, a ‘married’ man may be encouraged by Panamanians to be the more dominant member in the relationship, be encouraged to make decisions independently of his spouse, or be ridiculed when he performs domestic tasks. A ‘married’ woman may find herself in a less independent role than she is accustomed to or may be expected to perform “traditional” domestic chores such as cooking or cleaning. She may also experience a more limited social life in the community than single Volunteers (since it may be assumed that she will be busy taking care of her husband).

Couples also are likely to be treated with more respect because the community sees marriage as a responsibility. They may be asked when they will have children.

Please note that during training, couples may live apart if they are assigned to different projects. Please consult with your placement officer if you have any questions.

Volunteers comments:

“We love living and working in Panamá as a married couple. Serving with your spouse/partner has many clear advantages. This experience has already strengthened and added depth to our marriage in more ways than we imagined. It would be unfair, however, to pretend that serving with your spouse comes without its distinct challenges. In our experience, couples can expect to live with much less privacy than in the U.S. Learning to live in closer quarters and being prepared to play with whichever Panamanian child decides to come visit takes patience at first. But like many things about your new life as a Volunteer, this will feel natural and comfortable before you know it. Another challenging element to life as a couple is dealing with unwanted attention directed at one or both spouses/partners. Most often this will just be an occasional whistle or stare. In an overt form, it can include having men or women make calls at your spouse as the two of you walk by in a manner almost unheard of in the U.S. The degree to which you will have to deal with unwanted attention depends greatly on the community you work in. The last element we’d like to note is the delicate balance between ‘fitting in’ and maintaining certain customs that are important to us as a couple. For instance, the married women and men in our site spend far less personal time with each other than we are used to. Though professionally it might be to our advantage to ‘hang out with the fellas/ladies,’ we excuse ourselves when we feel we need some private time together. As long as you pack a dose of patience, humility, and humor, you and your spouse will enjoy the benefits of serving together.”

“As a Volunteer couple your experience will undoubtedly be unique to that of single Volunteers. But ‘unique’ is such a vague adjective, so my wife and I have brainstormed some of what we have discovered to be ‘advantages’ and ‘challenges’ of serving as a married couple. Some advantages we’ve found: constant support and encouragement; familiarity (in what can be a very unfamiliar environment); someone to share your experiences with (both while in Panamá and once you go home); easier to integrate into the community on both gender levels, you can approach people of the opposite sex with less

fear of misunderstanding as to your intentions (still, be careful to maintain appropriate boundaries; just because you're married does not mean you will be considered 'off limits'); an opportunity to work closely with your partner toward common goals; the constant evaluation of your service is easier with two heads; and married Volunteers generally have less trouble with unwanted attention and harassment than single Volunteers. Some challenges you may encounter: you will likely learn the language a little slower than Volunteers who have no chance to speak English in their sites; you may be more tempted to isolate yourself and, therefore, suffer in the integration process; some community members may already see you as a family unit and be less apt to take you under their wings; you may not fit into the typical 'Panamanian family model' where the wife is expected to stay home to cook and clean; if you have been married more than a couple of months and are not pregnant, people may assume you are unable to conceive; at times you may struggle to find adequate privacy; and you may even get tired of spending too much time with your spouse. Remember, everyone's experience is unique. These are just some observations we have made, and all of the so-called 'challenges' can be overcome. Other Volunteers have told my wife and I on numerous occasions, 'You are very lucky to have each other,' and it's true. Enjoy your time in Panamá and enjoy each other!"

Possible Religious Issues for Volunteers

In Panama, Volunteers of religions other than Christianity may be challenged or face generalizations about people of their religion. They may not be thought of as real Americans. Jews may occasionally be considered anti-Christian. Thus, some Volunteers may not feel comfortable disclosing their religion to the people in their community. Volunteers may not be able to find a suitable place of worship near their site or may find it difficult to fulfill their religion's dietary requirements.

Volunteers comments:

"Judaism is little known in the Panamanian *campo*. Few people I have talked to know what a Jew is or have met one, often confusing Jews with Arabs and vice versa. There is no prejudice that I have felt, only real interest in understanding what my religion is. Some people ask a lot of questions. Here, when one speaks of another religion, one usually means another sect of Christianity, so the idea of something outside of that is quite foreign to local people and takes some explanation. It also leads to some confusion as to why I don't celebrate Christmas. In Panamá City, on the other hand, people have more experience with Jews. While the four synagogues all have tight security (as most do in Latin America), I have never felt any anti-Semitism from people in Panamá City."

"In Panamá, an Asian-looking person is called *chino* or *china*. I have come to learn that it's just a custom here to refer to people by their characteristics. Surprisingly, it has been more stressful being a non-Christian than being called *chinita*. My community is half Roman Catholic and half evangelical. In a place where everyone is Christian, sometimes it can feel very lonely being Buddhist. Each person has their own way of dealing with these kinds of situations: Mine has been to keep a low profile and an open mind."

Possible Issues for 50+ Volunteers

Older Volunteers may find their age an asset in Panama. They will often have access to individuals and insights that are not available to younger Volunteers. On the other hand, they will be in a distinct minority within the Volunteer population and could find themselves feeling isolated, looked up to, or ignored.

Older Volunteers are often accustomed to a greater degree of independence and freedom of movement than the Peace Corps' program focus and safety and security practices allow. Pre-service training can be particularly stressful for older trainees, whose lifelong learning styles and habits may or may not lend themselves to the techniques used. A 50+ individual may be the only older person in a group of Volunteers and initially may not feel part of the group. Younger Volunteers may look to an older Volunteer for advice and support; some find this to be an enjoyable experience, while others choose not to

fill this role. Some 50+ Volunteers may find it difficult to adapt to a lack of structure and clarity in their role after having worked for many years in a very structured and demanding job.

More than younger Volunteers, older Volunteers may have challenges in maintaining lifelong friendships and dealing with financial matters from afar. They may want to consider assigning power of attorney to someone in the States.

Volunteers comments:

“The only disadvantage to being a senior Volunteer that I can think of is not being able to appreciate *típico* music or party at a *baile* until 2 a.m.! It’s being an older, married Volunteer that makes my experience very different. The largest drawback to my marital status has been in learning the language. Both my husband and I came with no Spanish, and we have made slower progress in learning Spanish than single Volunteers, who have no occasion to speak English in their sites. On the other hand, being married has huge advantages (e.g., close companionship in a new and often stressful environment and instant support and encouragement in joint and separate projects). Though it can be a positive opportunity and difficult at the same time, I’ve felt marriage to be an asset in Panamá. It seems to make you more approachable, it opens doors, and there’s faster acceptance. With the acceptance comes easier access to work opportunities. My husband and I wouldn’t have traded the past two years for anything. I’m just waiting for all those ‘senior’ baby boomers to discover how much fun we’ve been having in the Peace Corps and change the average age of Volunteers to 50! We just might sign up again when we are over 70. *Buena suerte!*”

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How much luggage am I allowed to bring to Panama?

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 per 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 Panama?

The current is 110 volts, 60 cycles AC (the standard in the United States). Note: Many Volunteers do not have electricity in their homes or have it for only a few hours a day.

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 are preferable to cash but credit card fraud is also a concern in Panama. Volunteers should be cautious when using credit cards, reviewing charges and statements often. 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 (contact your insurance company for information). Volunteers should not ship or take valuable items overseas. Jewelry, watches, radios, cameras, electronics, 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 Panama 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 Panama 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 partners. 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 frequently within one hour from another Volunteer. There is at least one Volunteer based in each of the regional capitals. Some sites require a day's travel to reach the Peace Corps/Panama post.

How can my family contact me in an emergency?

The Peace Corps Counseling and Outreach Unit provides assistance in handling emergencies affecting trainees and Volunteers or their families. Before leaving the United States, instruct your family to notify the Counseling and Outreach Unit immediately if an emergency arises, such as a serious illness or death of a family member. The Counseling and Outreach Unit can be reached at 855.855.1961, select option 1, ext. 1470. After business hours, on weekends, and on holidays, the COU duty officer can be reached at the same number. For non-emergency questions, your family can contact your country desk staff through the main Peace Corps number: 855.855.1961.

How easy is it to call home from Panama?

International phone service to and from Panamá is good. For about \$1 for 30 minutes, you can use your cell service provider to call home.

Should I bring a cellphone with me?

Contact your phone company to see if they can unlock your phone. Some companies may do it for free. Otherwise, cellular phones are widely available and reasonably priced in Panamá. Feature phones start at around \$20, and basic smart phones at around \$90.

Will there be email and Internet access? Should I bring my computer?

Internet access in Panamá is spreading. All provincial capitals and many other large towns have Internet cafes. Connection speeds tend to be decent, and the service is reasonably priced and reliable. Internet access for Volunteers is available free at the Peace Corps/Panamá office. Almost all Volunteers have a computer or tablet. (As a note, Volunteers are required to submit a report twice a year which must be submitted via a Windows or Mac computer.) Some sites will not have electricity but solar panels can be purchased in Panamá or a community member or the local store may offer charging at a price. Generally, you will not know if your site will have electricity until pre-service training. Should you choose to bring electronics, it is your responsibility to maintain and insure it. The Peace Corps is not liable if it gets damaged or stolen.

WELCOME LETTERS FROM PANAMA VOLUNTEERS

Dear Invitee,

Welcome to Panama! You have been selected to serve in the best country that the Peace Corps has to offer! OK, so I might be biased. Though Panama is incredibly tiny, with a relatively high Human Development Index, it is actually an exceptionally diverse country. There are prominent indigenous cultures throughout the country, each with their own unique cultures, dress, customs, and attitudes. There are rich and poor Panamanians, there are Latino and indigenous. The great part about Peace Corps/Panama is that we work in all these different types of communities!

I am currently serving on the east side of Panamá in the rural indigenous Emberá reservation, a tribe that draws its roots from the Chocoes. My primary work is with water and sanitation technologies (WASH) and I've worked with my local water committee to help them do basic maintenance and raise funds for repairs on our local aqueduct system. I also started a pilot compost latrine project in my community to identify some other sanitation options.

One of the greatest advantages of serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer is being able to connect with people of all ages in your community. One of my most rewarding projects has been working with an NGO called Ultimate Without Borders and creating an Ultimate Frisbee team in my site with weekly practices. Our two years of working together culminated in a regional tournament with five other teams and a total of 80 kids competing. The benefits of working with youth are incredibly gratifying. Though they will always test your patience, there is nothing better than seeing a group of kids from different families and backgrounds work together toward a collective goal. In working with these kids I have learned a lot about myself and I can only hope I've helped give them some leadership skills for the future.

Not every day will be easy, and you will learn to appreciate small successes. Remember to be patient; just as Rome wasn't built in a day, neither will your rural Panamanian community learn to wash their hands BEFORE dinner as opposed to after dinner after just one conversation. The experience of being a Peace Corps Volunteer is rewarding and challenging. Get excited; it's going to be a great adventure! ¡Suerte, pue'!

Danielle Renzi
Environmental Health (EH) Volunteer, 2012–14

Congratulations and *bienvenidos* to Peace Corps/Panama!

We are thrilled that you have accepted the invitation and shared the good news with friends, family, and loved ones. Now that your bags are packed with everything you *think* you'll need for the next two years, you are ready to embark on one of the greatest and most rewarding challenges of your life!

We all come in with our own expectations of what the next two years will be like. You may catch yourself thinking about the obvious things, like whether or not you will have running water or electricity. What it'll be like to live in the mountains or by the ocean? Will you have to travel by horse, boat, bus, or foot to reach your community? What type of house will you live in or maybe even have to build? These questions and uncertainties are natural, but it is important to realize that, over time, things you once found yourself concerned about will become trivial as you begin your journey of service and adventure.

Panama will undoubtedly change you. You will laugh, cry, love, and sweat in ways you never thought possible! An endless array of culture, tropical fruits, wildlife, and life beyond anything you have ever imagined is waiting to be discovered. In this beautiful land that is begging to share all that it has to offer, you will find yourself discovering little by little the most important lesson of all—how much you have to offer.

There are many opportunities for Volunteers from all sectors within the Peace Corps to work in the local school systems. As a tourism and English consultant, I constantly found myself working with teachers, students, and community members. I loved what I did. Whether teaching adult English classes or working in the elementary school, it's the children's and teachers' enthusiasm and eagerness to learn that always kept me going. When you reach your community you will begin to understand, as I have, that it's the people who make the difference.

Marin Brownell
Teaching English Volunteer, 2009–11

Dear Invitees,

A big congrats to you! Your Peace Corps adventure is finally beginning. Take a few deep breaths and really let this moment sink in because you will always remember the contrast of your life before and after Peace Corps service.

My name is George Place. My wife, Soraya, and I are sustainable agricultural systems (SAS) Volunteers serving in our third year as Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs). We were originally assigned to an indigenous community in the Comarca Ngabe Bugle. We arrived in-country on May 3, 2012. We lived in the town of Tolé, where I served as the Staple Crops coordinator and Soraya coordinated the Universidad Al Campo (UAC) project as well as working in Gender and Development (GAD). It has been a wild ride full of great challenges, including building our own house, growing our food, learning the indigenous language (a serious work in progress), and discovering where we can focus our energy and skills for long-lasting community empowerment. The Peace Corps is one of the only agencies in Panama that works at such close community engagement in the spirit of true mutual empowerment. In fact, it is a bit of a cliché that PCVs take away much more from this experience than our communities do.

The communities where you will be living are already preparing for your arrival. They have been fighting to get you for a long while, many years in some cases. You will all be wonderful Volunteers in your own way, your community will love you and you will soon call rural Panama “home.” So relax. Breathe deeply and enjoy the ride between now and swearing in. It doesn't matter if your Spanish is nothing beyond “hola” and “baño” this time next year you'll be fluently gossiping with your neighbors. Nobody minds that the closest you've come to farming is mowing the lawn, soon you'll be wielding a machete like a campesino ninja. If you are having some doubts, do not despair. Doubts and fears are natural at this stage: Enjoy them because that is what makes this an adventure.

Allow me to offer some logistical advice. Unless you don't mind sleeping on bamboo tables during a site visit, bring a camping sleeping mattress (I have never seen an inflatable backpacking mattress available in-country). Pack a headlamp since almost no SAS Volunteers have electricity and good headlamps are hard to find. Many Volunteers are happy to have a small laptop as well. I also recommend a portable water treatment device; I prefer UV light treatment. Just about everything else can be purchased here.

Finally, attitude is everything on this journey. If you have expectations about what this will be you will suffer when those expectations go unmet. Remember that you didn't sign up for Peace Corps to have an

easy, comfortable, familiar experience (hopeful this is true!). I suspect that most of you are coming to be challenged, stimulated, and stretched beyond your current comfort zones. Surrender to this experience, engage in every moment, and you will get everything you want. I am extremely excited to meet you (we're going to have an opportunities to together during your training, I hope) and once again, congrats. Welcome to the Peace Corps.

George Place
Sustainable Agriculture Systems (SAS) Volunteer, 2012–14

Congratulations on your acceptance to the Peace Corps!

You have in your hands an invitation to one of the greatest countries in the world and the adventure of a lifetime. I distinctly remember being in your shoes, reading and re-reading the welcome packet, RPCV blogs, and anything I could get my hands on about Panama, trying to imagine what my life would be like and how best to prepare for the next two years. As I'm sure you've heard many times throughout the application process, however, everyone has a different experience and your service is really what you make of it. With that being said, there are a few things I would definitely bring along if you decide to accept the offer to serve.

First: a healthy dose of patience. Development takes time. Your projects won't come to fruition overnight, and you may not even see the results of your efforts until long after you leave the country. On a personal level, there is no good fairy who can wave a magic wand to give you fluency in another language and you'll find cultural integration to be an ongoing process. Your patience is rewarded, though, with a deep sense of accomplishment and a new way to appreciate small triumphs.

The second thing I'd be sure to pack is humility. The longer I'm here, the more I realize what a privilege it is to serve people who have so much to teach me about perseverance, generosity, and humanity. While it is true that many of us teach in the schools, we are often more appropriately labeled students as community members guide us through new social situations, teach us how to prepare local foods, and make sure that we don't leave home without an umbrella.

A third thing I wouldn't leave behind is the support system of friends and family at home who will help to make this adventure possible. Other Volunteers will become the best friends you never knew you've always known, but especially in a country so devoted to family, it is important to know where your roots are—where you come from. Take time in these last few weeks at home and throughout your service to stay connected to the people who made you who you are.

With these things, and maybe a toothbrush for good measure, you should do alright. Panama is a fabulous country full of generous and jovial *gente* and overflowing in natural abundance. You've really hit the jackpot on Peace Corps service -- We can't wait for you to arrive!

Saludos,
Joan Campau
Community Environmental Conservation (CEC) Volunteer, 2014–16

Dear Peace Corps/Panama invitee,

Felicidades! Congrats on getting an awesome assignment that will no doubt be challenging, exciting, frustrating, satisfying, and, above all, a learning experience. Panama is a country full of great natural beauty, extreme economic disparity, diverse culture, and genuinely hardworking subsistence farmers.

I lived in a Latino (non-indigenous) community of about 200 people in the low altitude hills not too far from the capital. Despite the paved road that allows public transit (AKA a glorified pick-up truck known as a *chiva*) to drop me relatively close to my house, I regularly hiked up to an hour or more through the mud to visit homes and farms within my community. Farmers here produce the usual Panama crops, including rice, yucca, corn, plantain, banana, and coffee. Residents have recognized that their carb-based diet is lacking in important nutrients, and so my main focus was on home vegetable gardens and fisheries. These projects aimed at helping locals diversify their diet, while incorporating sustainable practices such as organic fertilizers (compost). Other SAS projects I worked on were related to coffee production and agribusiness. In my spare time, I started a reading group to encourage kids to practice reading and listening to books I read aloud. Literacy rates were pretty low in my town (our multi-grade school only went up to seventh grade), and I found that students were eager for opportunities to practice this critical skill.

The best advice I can give is that **your Peace Corps experience will be what you make of it**. It is up to you to both swallow your pride and be willing to integrate into a completely foreign culture, while at the same time being confident in your ability to help those around you. The Peace Corps provides the ideal environment for mutually exchanging knowledge: You will get to use and develop the skills you already have and you will learn new ones. But you have to be proactive. Projects will not arrive on your doorstep. Get out there, get to know people, and figure out what projects will benefit your community. Let yourself feel frustration, learn from it, and get excited when things go well. And don't stress out if you are coming in with a limited (or non-existent) background in agriculture. The program and training staff are amazing and will support you along the way.

Bring your sense of humor, positive attitude, a big smile and get ready for the fastest two years of your life!

Lila Holzman
Sustainable Agriculture Systems (SAS) Volunteer, 2012–14

Congratulations for accepting your Peace Corps invitation to Panama; You won't regret it! Panama has a wonderful training staff to get your language and technical proficiencies up to speed when you enter for your nine weeks of training. Also, Panama is a lovely place to be and when your plane lands at Tocumen airport and you see Panama City you may ask yourself, "Why does Panama need Peace Corps it looks like a developed country?" However, once you leave Panama City, you will immediately start to see why we are here.

Panama has the second-worst income distribution in Latin America. The money from the Panama Canal has not benefited as many people as one might expect. This is why the Peace Corps has four development projects to reach the people in the poor, rural areas of Panama: Community Environmental Conservation (CEC), Environmental Health (EH), Sustainable Agriculture Systems (SAS), and Teaching English (TE).

I was part of the SAS project. I helped farmers send in samples of soil to facilities that analyzed what nutrients were lacking and what ways we can supply these deficient nutrients. I made gardens with the women's group in my community and we tried to maintain 100 percent organic produce. Another project

was to make a garden behind the school to show kids how to make organic fertilizer. But as a SAS Volunteer, I am not always busy with farm work: I also pursue teaching English to the kids in my community. It is less formal than what a TE volunteer might do but I think that is the beauty of the Peace Corps: You are allowed a good measure of flexibility in your job and what you want to do as secondary projects. You can truly make this service your own unique adventure.

That is not to say you won't face challenges and difficult days in your community that you are eventually assigned to after your nine weeks of training. From my own experience, I dealt with three major obstacles. First, I had to deal with people who told me that they don't like me, not from anything that I have done to them, but because I am a foreigner. Second, in terms of projects, it can be difficult to discern what the community wants as a Peace Corps project when you go to your community, which can be frustrating to try and find out when months go by. Finally, learning to live on your own, with hardly any contact, from outside friends or family from the States can make you feel isolated and lonely.

But I want you to know that these obstacles have solutions. Luckily for me, the people who said that they don't like me constitute a minority in my community and I made friends with up to 13 people in my community that I consider close allies and good people to talk to. I can have a laugh and go have a cup of coffee with these different families that I have befriended and they make my days a lot easier. For the second problem, the Peace Corps gives you two years to serve in your community and this is a lot of time for you to establish trust in your community and to go at their pace when finding out a project to do with your community. Finally, the loneliness can be solved with the friends that you make in your community and with your fellow Volunteers that you are going to train with in the coming weeks.

I remember when I was in your shoes and I thought to myself, "I am a history major who does not have a lot of experience speaking Spanish and I am going to commit myself to serve for two years in a Latino country doing agriculture. Am I ready for this?" After a year in my service, I felt fulfilled in my life and my work serving with my fellow man. So if you have any worries that you are not adequate or ready for this job, I want you to take a deep breath and remove those thoughts from your head because you are ready, it's the reason you were invited. Make your last days in the States a time of good farewells and come in with a good attitude and a willingness to always work and better yourself and you will be great. Remember, your own unique adventure waits for you so jump in and enjoy the ride!

Josh Joggerst
Sustainable Agriculture Systems (SAS) Volunteer, 2013–15

Ñan törö!

Hello and welcome to Peace Corps/Panama! We are all very excited for you to begin this incredible, challenging, fulfilling, and fun adventure.

My name is Abby Bryant, and I am a Group 73 Sustainable Agriculture Systems (SAS) Volunteer in a rural indigenous village in Bocas del Toro. Though I am part of the agriculture program, I arrived to Panama with very little technical knowledge. I was concerned that my business background would not be good enough, but the SAS program has been incredibly supportive in providing me with the tools and training I needed to succeed as a Volunteer.

In addition to serving as a National Coordinator for Agribusiness, I keep myself busy with a variety of projects in my community. Depending on the day, I may be facilitating a business training, working on a cacao farm, teaching a women's group how to bake, or hanging out in my house with a bunch of kids and my dog. One of my favorite parts of being a Peace Corps Volunteer is the freedom and flexibility we have

in directing our work. Though this unique responsibility may at times seem a little daunting, instead of focusing on having just the right experience or always knowing the answers, take a breath and savor the moment.

Before joining the Peace Corps, I thought I would feel most accomplished after a successful seminar or business development training. However, that was before a group of kids started referring to me as *Tia* so that I would feel a part of their family. It was before kids fought over who would be first to show me their new, improved grades, and it was most certainly before my community members, one by one, arrived at my little hut to welcome me and tell me that they had prayed for my safe arrival.

I cannot tell you what your site will be like, what you'll do each day, or even what type of relationship you will have with your future community members. What I can tell you is this: Every challenge and hardship will be worth it and your experience will be unique to you.

Congratulations and we look forward to seeing you!

Abby Bryant
Sustainable Agriculture Systems (SAS) Volunteer, 2013–15

PACKING LIST

This list has been compiled by Volunteers serving in Panama 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 Panama.

For luggage in general, duffel bags and backpacks are much more practical than suitcases. Rolling suitcases are not practical for Panama. Be sure to put the following items in a carry-on bag for quick and easy access once you arrive in Panama: passport, baggage-claim tickets, customs forms, World Health Organization (WHO) card, and immunization records

Outdoor gear such as sleeping mats, headlamps, etc., and high-quality footwear will be more difficult (but not impossible) to locate in Panama, so when deciding what to bring, consider prioritizing those items over clothing. Finally, bring what you know you'll need to be happy, but base your decisions primarily on the type of work you will be doing and your probable living conditions. **Do not bring anything that you would be heartbroken to lose or that you cannot carry en route to Panama and your community.** When in doubt, leave it out.

Sector Introductions

These short summaries of each sector's work give an idea of what is needed in each sector.

Community Environmental Conservation

CEC Volunteers sometimes work in the field, so a pair of good shoes, some work shirts, and long pants are necessary. When working in schools, Volunteers should wear business-casual clothing. Flip-flops are inappropriate and very short skirts and dresses are not recommended, as they will attract unwanted attention.

Environmental Health

Environmental Health Volunteers live in more rugged areas, where it is typically humid, hot, and muddy. Work days (once a week or every other week) will involve rubber boots, grabbing your tools, and heading off into the jungle. In between work days, you'll need business-casual clothing for community meetings, visiting agencies, and secondary projects such as working on farms or in the classroom. Days of relaxation and after work days are typically spent wearing shorts or comfortable pants and T-shirts.

Teaching English

Since Teaching English Volunteers are in and out of classrooms, it is important to have a variety of business casual professional wear. For women, heels can make a professional impression. While out of school or working on secondary projects, you may want to wear more casual clothes. Due to the connection with the schools, TE Volunteers likely live in larger communities where it is acceptable to wear shorts and tank-tops (not spaghetti-strap) in your free time. Because you will be helping teachers develop teaching materials and lesson plans, it is very useful to have a computer.

Sustainable Agriculture Systems

Farm work is usually hot and sunny, so bring clothing that provides sun and insect protection. This includes long breathable pants, a button-down long-sleeve shirt with a collar, an undershirt, socks, rubber boots, hat, and bandana. During community member visits, you can wear business casual or whatever you like (excluding gym shorts and revealing clothing). Bring footwear that can handle very muddy, gravel,

and river crossings (there is a lack of bridges in interior Panama). In all, having a pair of sturdy sandals and rubber boots works well for all conditions. During office visits and meetings, wear business casual (dresses and skirts at an appropriate length, dress pants, khakis, polos, blouses, nice v-neck or crew-necks T-shirts) and refrain from wearing flip-flops, boots, or tennis shoes.

General Clothing

Panama has affordable clothing (readily available) stores throughout all areas of the country. Panamanian fashions reflect those of the United States, so don't feel like you have to change your style of dress.

Because of the heat and humidity, cotton and quick-dry fabrics are good ideas, especially for underwear. Outdoor clothing with fabric that wicks away moisture can be useful; however, cotton-synthetic blends also hold their shape and can be cooler to wear. EH and SAS Volunteers will generally wash their clothes by hand, therefore aim to bring more durable items.

The following clothing items are generally not acceptable, especially during training, in professional settings, or in your community: short shorts (above the knee) on women or shorts on men, spaghetti-strap tank tops, or flip-flops.

- 3–4 pairs of casual pants (quick-dry, cargo, jeans); (2-3 for CEC PCVs)
- 1–2 dress pants or skirts for EH and SAS; 3-4 for CEC and TE
- 2–4 casual shorts (gym shorts, capri pants; should be at least finger-tip length)
- 1–2 work shirts (T-shirts, old button-down shirts) for CEC and TE; 2-4 for EH and SAS
- 3–5 dress shirts (dri-fit polos, button-down shirts, polos, blouses) for CEC and TE; 1-2 for EH and SAS
- 3–6 casual shirts (button-downs, T-shirts, wide-strap tank tops)
- 1 warm top (sweater, sweatshirt, thermal shirt)
- 1–2 bathing suits (more conservative is better)
- 4–6 pairs of socks for CEC and TE; 5-10 pairs for EH and SAS (dark colors are preferable)
- 10–14 pairs of underwear
- 10–14 bras for women (regular bras are recommended as sports bras might not dry as quickly)
- 1–2 hats/bandanas

Shoes

Shoes larger than size 10 (both men and women) or wide widths are hard to find in Panama.

- 1 pair comfortable dress shoes (2-4 for TE PCVs); dressier sandals are considered formal for the Peace Corps/Panama office
- 1 pair hiking shoes/rubber boots (many PCVs use rubber boots, which can be bought in Panama)
- 1-2 pairs casual shoes (running shoes, sneakers, sandals)

Electronics

Remember, the items listed below are **only suggestions and not requirements. They can be expensive to purchase and might be lost, damaged, or stolen.** Consider purchasing personal articles insurance if you plan to bring expensive electronics or other gear.

Tablet, computer, or neither: It is highly recommended that you bring a laptop to facilitate your work and reporting requirements. A tablet may be cheaper and can perform most of the functions a computer can, but must be able to run Microsoft Silverlight, which is required to run the reporting form that must be submitted to Peace Corps/Panama once every six months. Alternatively, reports could be submitted using

a computer at an Internet café if you don't bring a laptop. To get Internet besides Wi-Fi, PCVs can purchase data USB sticks (available in Panama) that plug into laptops or tablets that have a SIM slot.

- Flashlight (headlamps are recommended)
- Water resistant/shockproof watch
- Digital camera
- Laptop/tablet
- Rechargeable battery pack for phone
- Unlocked cellphone
- E-reader
- Portable solar charger

Miscellaneous

Check the medical section of the welcome book concerning which items to bring including prescriptions, over the counter medication, and glasses.

Note for females: Feminine products are easily accessible in Panama. Pads are available in all community stores; specific brands and tampons are available in all cities. During your service, you will likely be visiting a city at least once a month, so it will be easy to buy more. That said, bring enough items with you for 1-2 months.

- This Welcome Book
- Your Volunteer Assignment Description
- Dry bags (it rains a lot and it's good to protect your gear; zip-top bags work as well)
- Rain protection (compact umbrella, lightweight poncho)
- Small, sturdy backpack for short trips
- Start-up supply of toiletries
- Bath towel (quick-dry recommended)
- Beach towel
- Sunglasses

Other items to bring or purchase in Panama

- Inexpensive jewelry
- Photos of home
- Hobby items
- Pocketknife or multipurpose tool
- Hand sanitizer
- Sarong/wrap
- World map
- Reusable water bottle
- 501 Spanish Verbs book
- Small padlocks for luggage
- Sleeping pad (for traveling)
- 100% cotton sheets or lightweight sleeping bag

What Not to Bring

- Batteries
- Razors (readily available in country for personal hygiene, both disposable and refill cartridges)

- Basic health-care items (such as sunblock or bug repellent) unless you have a specific brand or preference; basic items are included in the medical kit
- Kerosene burners
- Kitchen supplies
- Wedding ring/band (a cheap silver band is a good placeholder)
- Mosquito net (supplied by Peace Corps)
- Spanish-English Dictionary (supplied by Peace Corps)

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 are relevant to everyone, and the list is not comprehensive.

Family

- Notify family that they can call the Counseling and Outreach Unit at any time if there is a critical illness or death of a family member (24-hour phone number: 855.855.1961 ext. 1470).
- Give family and friends the Peace Corps On the Home Front handbook.

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 service; 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 abroad, 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 United States.
- Obtain student loan deferment forms from the lender or loan service. Information about loan deferment is at peacecorps.gov/loans.
- 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 ext. 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, then extension number (see below)

Peace Corps mailing address: Peace Corps
Paul D. Coverdell Peace Corps Headquarters
1111 20th Street NW
Washington, DC 20526

For Questions About	Staff	Toll-free extension	Direct/Local
Responding to an invitation	Office of Placement	ext. 1840	202.692.1840
Country information	Kimberly Helm Desk Officer	ext. 2521 panama@peacecorps.gov	202.692.2521
Plane tickets, passports, visas, or other travel matters	CWT SATO Travel	ext. 1170	202.692.1170
Legal clearance:	Office of Placement	ext. 1840	202.692.1840
Medical clearance and forms processing (includes dental)	Screening Nurse	ext. 1500	202.692.1500
Medical Applicant Portal questions			amsadmin@peacecorps.gov
Medical reimbursements (handled by a subcontractor)			800.544.1802
Loan deferments, taxes, financial operations		ext. 1770	202.692.1770
Readjustment allowance withdrawals, power of attorney, staging (pre-departure orientation), and reporting instructions	Office of Staging	ext. 1865	202.692.1865
New Volunteer Portal questions			staging@peacecorps.gov
<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>			
Family emergencies (to get information to a Volunteer overseas) 24 hours	Counseling and Outreach Unit	ext. 1470	202.692.1470
Office of Victim Advocacy		ext. 1753 24 hours (call or text)	202.692.1753 202.409.2704