



Peace Corps Office of Inspector General



Peace Corps Response Volunteer Bob Arias with counterpart and her daughter



Flag of Colombia

Final Program Evaluation Report: Peace Corps/Colombia IG-13-03-E

April 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1961 Colombia was one of the first countries to welcome Peace Corps Volunteers. More than 4,600 Volunteers served in Colombia until the program closed in 1981 for security reasons. In 2009 former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe invited the Peace Corps to return, and in September of 2010 Peace Corps/Colombia (hereafter, “the post”) re-opened with nine Peace Corps Response Volunteers (PCRVs)¹. More than eighty Volunteers, including 29 PCRVs, have served in Colombia since the program re-opened. Most Volunteers in Colombia work in the Teaching English for Livelihoods (TEL) project. PCRVs are involved in youth development as well as disaster relief and recovery efforts. At the time of the evaluation there were 24 Volunteers, including five PCRVs.

The Peace Corps carefully managed the re-opening of operations in Colombia. Former Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams sent assessment teams to Colombia to determine whether or not conditions in Colombia were suitable for Volunteers. The agency closely followed the recommendations that its assessment teams made concerning programmatic opportunities, geographic boundaries for operations, and safety and security precautions. The safety and security program is thorough, with sound oversight. Programming is anchored in the Colombian government’s initiative to make public schools bilingual, and has been well received. PCRVs and dedicated staff helped to get the program off to a good start despite a compressed reentry phase and early staffing and logistical challenges.

In general, Volunteers indicated that they received good support from the staff. The TEL project has been well designed. TEL Volunteers had ample opportunity to engage with Colombian teachers and students, and most were positive concerning their counterpart relations and site placements. The PCRVs were very pleased with their job assignments and counterpart relations. In addition, the post’s training program was generally well regarded by Volunteers. Post had made important adjustments to Volunteer training based on feedback from the first trainee group, training staff, and experience with supporting Volunteers. Staff morale was generally high, and both Volunteers and staff maintained a sense of optimism about the future of the program.

The evaluation uncovered some areas for improvement. The most significant challenge facing the post is the concentration of Volunteers in three major urban areas along the Caribbean coast. Due to security concerns, the post has been unable to place a sufficient number of Volunteers in smaller communities outside these major urban areas. We found that the Volunteers placed in these densely populated barrios (urban neighborhoods) had difficulty integrating, faced frequent sexual harassment, experienced high levels of stress, and were exposed to a greater risk of urban crime such as muggings and theft. Post leadership made some progress in obtaining U.S. Embassy approval to place Volunteers in smaller communities along the Caribbean coast, but additional assessments and discussion is warranted given the nature of the Peace Corps’ safety and security model and the documented risks to Volunteers.

¹ Peace Corps Response provides qualified professionals the opportunity to undertake short-term assignments in various programs around the world.

Volunteers also frequently struggled to adjust to living with a host family, and several had switched their host family. Managing host family changes had become a source of frustration for both Volunteers and staff. Some Volunteers lacked the necessary Spanish and cross-cultural skills and attitudes that would make a host family stay viable and productive, and post staff and leadership was focused on how to improve pre-service training and trainee assessment, to ensure that Volunteers swear-in with sufficient language and cultural skills. Also, we found that the TEL program manager had not been providing Volunteers with timely or useful feedback on their quarterly reports, that the post lacked sufficient office space, and that its medical evacuation plan had incomplete components.

Our report contains 10 recommendations, which, if implemented, should strengthen programming operations and correct the deficiencies detailed in the accompanying report.

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HOST COUNTRY BACKGROUND

Colombia is located in northern South America and has a population of over 46 million people, making it the third most populous country in Latin America. Seventy-five percent of Colombians live in urban or semi-urban areas. The official language is Spanish. Colombia is as big as the states of California and Texas put together. Its diverse natural environment includes large coral reefs, coastal areas, wetlands, mountain chains, grasslands, highlands and Amazonian rainforest.

Colombia's government is a constitutional republic. Democratically-elected President Juan Manuel Santos began his four-year term on August 7, 2010. The country is divided into 32 administrative departments, each with its own governor and popularly-elected local representatives.

Colombia's has the world's 29th largest economy, which has experienced a decade of relatively strong economic growth in terms of its gross domestic product (GDP). Average GDP per capita was approximately \$10,100 in 2011, ranking 109 out of over 220 countries. Despite recent years of strong economic growth, unemployment and poverty remain high in Colombia. Income inequality in Colombia is severe. Colombia's income GINI coefficient of 58.5 is the fourth highest in the world.² Colombia's inequality-adjusted human development index (IHDI) places the country at a low level of human development.³

Left-wing guerrillas have been fighting for decades against the government of Colombia and right-wing paramilitary groups. These armed groups include organizations that remain on the U.S. Department of State's list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs): the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Thousands of FARC, ELN, AUC members and others demobilized after a December 2003 peace agreement. However, many of their former members have since joined or organized their own *bandas criminales* (criminal gangs) known as BACRIMs. The activities of various BACRIMs currently represent, according to the U.S. Department of State, "one of Colombia's most serious security challenges." Colombian FTOs and BACRIMs are involved in narco-trafficking, among other criminal activities. Colombia remains one of the world's largest producers of cocaine, and the major source of cocaine seized in the United States.

² The income GINI coefficient measures the degree of deviation of household income distribution away from perfect equality: a value of 0 indicates perfect equality (all households have the same share of national income), and a value of 100 indicates perfect inequality (one household has all the national income). GINI coefficients near or above 0.5 represent 'extreme' inequality according to the International Labour Office.

³ The Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) adjusts the Human Development Index (HDI) for inequality. The IHDI discounts each component of the HDI (income, education, health) for the effects of inequality. The IHDI is the actual level of human development (accounting for this inequality), while the HDI can be viewed as an index of potential human development that could be achieved if there were no inequality.

PEACE CORPS PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The Peace Corps first opened the program in Colombia in 1961, and more than 4,600 Volunteers served in Colombia until 1981 when the program was closed due to safety and security concerns. In February of 2009 the President of Colombia invited Peace Corps to return. On May 11, 2010 Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams⁴ and Colombia's minister of foreign affairs signed an agreement to re-establish the Peace Corps in Colombia. Shortly thereafter staff began preparing the post to receive Volunteers, and in September of 2010 a group of nine PCRVs arrived. Four months later another group of PCRVs arrived, and in the fall of 2011 the first group of two-year Volunteers began their service. Since the post re-opened in 2010, over eighty Volunteers (including almost 30 PCRVs) have served in the country.

Volunteers in Colombia work in the education sector in a project entitled teaching English for livelihoods (TEL). The TEL project supports the Colombian Ministry of Education's initiative to make all public schools fully bilingual by 2019. Volunteers work with English teachers in Colombian primary, secondary and teacher-training schools. Volunteers co-plan and co-teach with Colombian English teachers in order to improve lesson planning and teaching abilities in the classroom. Volunteers also deliver English workshops and create English teaching materials in collaboration with Colombian teachers. Outside the classroom Volunteers provide English classes for people in their communities, and organize other educational and youth development activities for in-school and out-of-school youth.

At the time of fieldwork there were 24 Volunteers serving in Colombia, including 20 two-year Volunteers, three PCRVs working with youth in Barranquilla and one for disaster relief and recovery in a flood-affected region of the Atlántico department. An additional PCRV and 30 trainees arrived in Colombia just after our field work was conducted, bringing the total Volunteer and trainee population to 55. The post's FY 2012 budget was \$1.26 million.⁵

EVALUATION RESULTS

MANAGEMENT CONTROLS

One objective of our country program evaluation is to assess the extent to which the post has in place sufficient resources, support from the agency, and management controls to function effectively. We assessed a number of factors, including staffing; staff development; the office work environment; collecting and reporting performance data; and the post's strategic planning and budgeting, including planning involved with the re-opening of the post in 2010.

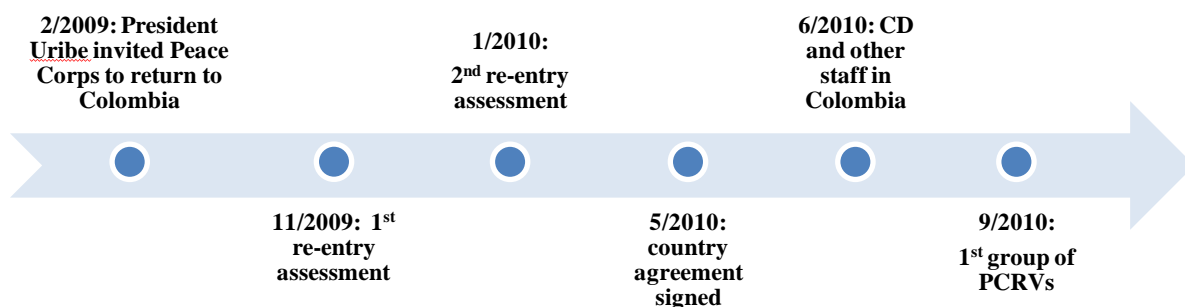
⁴ The current Acting Director of the Peace Corps is Carolyn Hessler-Radelet.

⁵ This amount does not include the salaries, benefits, and related cost of U.S. direct hires assigned to the post and other costs the agency has determined should be centrally-budgeted.

In reviewing staff performance appraisals, the post's relationship with headquarters, staff development, file maintenance, and strategic planning and budgeting, we found no significant areas of concern that would necessitate action by the post. From our interviews we determined that morale and professionalism among staff was generally high. Files were well organized and most documents we requested were quickly made available. Strategic planning and budgeting documents had been thoroughly developed, and staff did not report problems with obtaining resources necessary to carry out post operations. Several staff had recently participated in training and professional development opportunities.

In general the Peace Corps effectively managed the re-opening of its program in Colombia. The agency assessed the security conditions in Colombia, and then carefully adhered to the security-related recommendations in the assessment teams' reports. The assessment teams, collaborating with Colombian officials, identified programming opportunities that met the Colombian government's education priorities and set clear expectations regarding Volunteer recruitment. These assessments, in the hands of an experienced and capable management team in Colombia, provided a solid foundation for the first few years of operations.

Figure 1. Peace Corps Reentry Timeline



The safety and security program in place was thoroughly documented. Programming is anchored in Colombia's bilingualism initiative and has been well received. Starting the program with RPCVs helped get the program off to a good start in a short period of time despite some early administrative, logistical, and unforeseen challenges related to hiring local staff. In addition to the highly capable and experienced management team sent to open the post Peace Corps headquarters sent other employees on temporary duty assignments to assist pre-service training and during the search for a full-time doctor to serve as the Peace Corps medical officer (PCMO) for the post.

The post has been unable to place a sufficient number of Volunteers in small communities outside the major urban areas of Cartagena, Barranquilla and Santa Marta.

In response to former President Uribe's invitation, former Director Williams twice sent teams to Colombia to assess the viability of re-starting a program. The questions that the first assessment team sought to answer in November of 2009 concerned whether or not, and where, the Peace Corps could safely operate within Colombia's complex security environment. The team's

summary report⁶ identified the area along Colombia's Caribbean coast as being "the most favorable for providing a safe and productive PC [Peace Corps] experience." The Peace Corps safety and security officer (PCSSO) described this area, almost 300 miles from end to end, along the Caribbean coast:

An initial safe operating location for Peace Corps Volunteers would be a specific narrow area along the Caribbean coast encompassing the area of Sucre north of Sincelejo, Cartagena, Barranquilla, Santa Marta, and La Guajira as far as Riohacha. Placements must be confined to carefully selected urban and peri-urban⁷ areas that are determined at the outset of the site development process.

The PCSSO's report also identified the coffee-growing region near Manizales and Pereira (west of Bogota and south of Medellin) as being a "secure and stable area where Peace Corps could comfortably operate." According to the agency's security assessment report from 2009, the U.S. Embassy's regional security officer (RSO) at the time expressed concerns about the safety of Peace Corps Volunteers in Colombia. The report paraphrased the RSO's perspective:

There is a high probability of assaults, including the real concern that PCVs would be killed or kidnapped. The RSO is particularly concerned about PCVs [Peace Corps Volunteers] placed in rural areas or urban barrios were [sic] street crime is profuse.

In January 2010 a second assessment was conducted, which re-affirmed and elaborated on the first assessment report's main findings and recommendations, including that the Peace Corps could operate safely "within specific geographic parameters" along the northern Caribbean coast. As part of this second security assessment, the PCSSO met again with the RSO to review the security recommendations arrived at a few months earlier, and to outline a set of restrictions on staff and Volunteer travel within Colombia: "The program must take measures unique to the IAP Region in order to mitigate the identified risk of assaults or kidnapping by organized and semi-organized criminal elements."

Due to these security concerns the Peace Corps has not been able to operate freely within a "safe operating location" along Colombia's Caribbean coast. With few exceptions, the Peace Corps has confined its placement of Volunteers to three large urban areas: Cartagena (in the Bolívar department); Barranquilla (in the Atlántico department); and Santa Marta (in the Magdalena department). At the time of fieldwork, 21 of 24 Volunteers were in these three large cities. After 30 trainees swore in as Volunteers in mid-November 2012, 78 percent of Volunteers (42 out of 54) had urban sites. No Volunteers since the 2010 re-entry have been placed in the "coffee triangle" area west of Bogota identified in the initial PCSSO report. Five Volunteers had been placed in peri-urban communities near the metropolitan areas of Cartagena and Santa Marta, and seven Volunteers were in small towns in rural areas of the Atlántico, Magdalena and Bolívar departments. Almost half (26 of 54) the active Volunteers in Colombia in January 2013 were in the city of Barranquilla.

⁶ *Peace Corps Viability Assessment: Colombia. November 14-24, 2009*

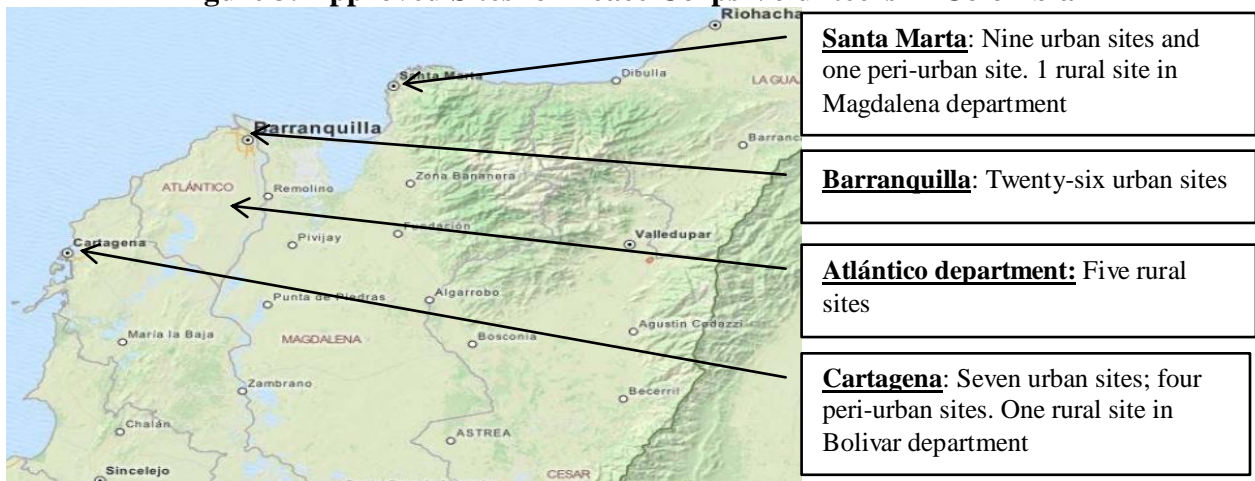
⁷ A "peri-urban" area is immediately surrounding or outside of a city.

Figure 2. Colombia



Area of Colombia where Peace Corps operates

Figure 3. Approved Sites for Peace Corps Volunteers in Colombia



Source: Peace Corps/Colombia Volunteer information database application as of January 4, 2013

The heavy concentration of Volunteers in three urban centers, especially in Barranquilla, rather than more broadly throughout communities along the Caribbean coast has been driven by the serious concerns held by the current U.S. ambassador regarding the security risks in rural areas

of Colombia. On-going security challenges affect areas where Peace Corps operates. In early January of 2012, a few days before the first group of two year Volunteers were to arrive at their sites in Santa Marta, a BACRIM called “the Urabenos” threatened the city’s business proprietors and closed the downtown’s market area for two days before the Colombian government intervened. This is an example of the on-going safety and security risks and challenges that characterizes the operating environment for Peace Corps and other U.S. government or international agencies in Colombia, where sections of relatively safe cities like Santa Marta can be paralyzed by the activities of BACRIMs or FTOs. Because of these concerns, security experts at the U.S. Embassy review, and then the ambassador must approve each new site before a Volunteer can be placed there.

The concentration of Volunteers within Barranquilla, Santa Marta, and Cartagena has had a range of negative unintended effects. These effects include: elevated levels of stress in the Volunteer population; frequent sexual harassment; minimal community integration; and elevated risk of urban-based crime. Because these effects trace back principally to factors associated with urban barrio living they will be treated in this section of the report rather than separately under Volunteer Support, though each effect does have implications for Volunteer support.

Elevated Stress Levels. Volunteers in Colombian cities have been experiencing higher than average levels of stress. Volunteers expressed elevated stress levels during our interviews. Volunteers also reported high levels of stress in response to agency-wide surveys conducted in 2011 and 2012. Staff in Colombia pointed out that the urban setting, and the “hyper-security situation” in Colombia has placed all Volunteers and staff under a constant level of stress. Volunteers we interviewed spoke frequently about the difficulties of being in such an urban setting:

“In training, someone gave a *charla*⁸ about walking around and introducing yourself to people--but you can't do that in this city. It's not safe, especially for a foreign woman.”

“Walking around near my house there are some stretches, where past 8 p.m. at night, I do not feel very safe. I do it but am on edge. People from my family have been attacked near my house. There is a park four blocks away where people were shot.”

“Living in a big city is very hard. Something that frustrates me is that the office does not know what it is like to live in these barrios. I am not sure the staff understands. My neighborhood is the loudest I have ever encountered in the city. There are some nights when I can't sleep due to the noise.”

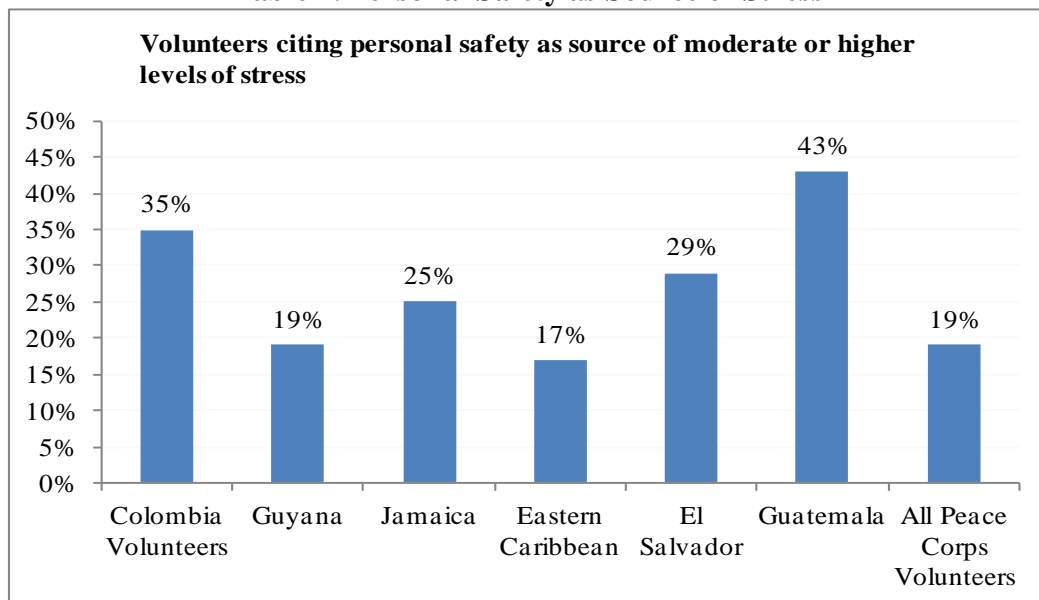
“I'm sad about not having a community like I was expecting—a small community. I have been told not to talk to others on the street—my neighbors recommended that I not interact with others in the community. I hate cities and am disappointed by the site.”

Indications of high levels of stress for Volunteers in Colombia include:

Thirty-five percent of Volunteers reported that their personal safety was a source of either “moderate” or “considerable” stress, compared to just 19 percent of Volunteers globally (2012 All Volunteer Survey (AVS) data).

⁸ A ‘charla’ is a talk, or a presentation.

Table 1. Personal Safety as Source of Stress



Source: OIG analysis of 2012 AVS data

PCRVs in Colombia who served in 2010 and 2011 reported experiencing relatively high levels of stress as well: 53 percent reported that safety and security issues caused them moderate to considerable stress, compared to just 25 percent at other posts (2011 Peace Corps Response survey data).

Eighty-five percent of Volunteers cited their counterpart or other community partner as a source of moderate or higher levels of stress, compared to 51 percent of Volunteers globally. And relations with counterparts or community partners caused one in four Volunteers in Colombia exceptional stress, compared to one in 20 Volunteers worldwide (2012 AVS data); Ninety percent of Volunteers in Colombia reported that their job caused them moderate or higher levels of stress, compared to 65 percent of Volunteers globally (2012 AVS data).

Table 2. Counterpart Stress

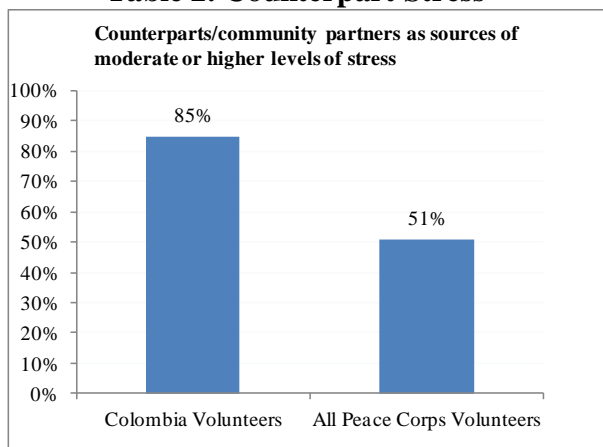
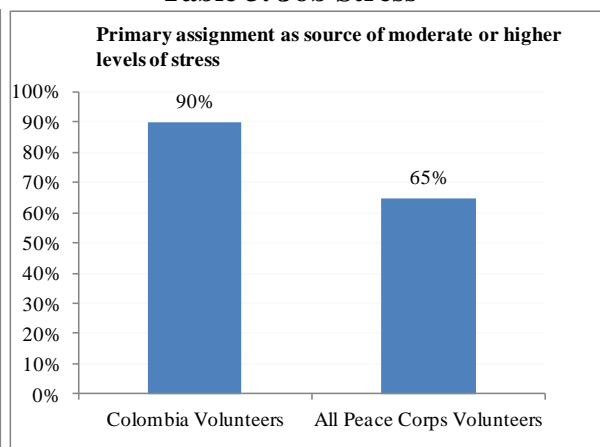


Table 3. Job Stress

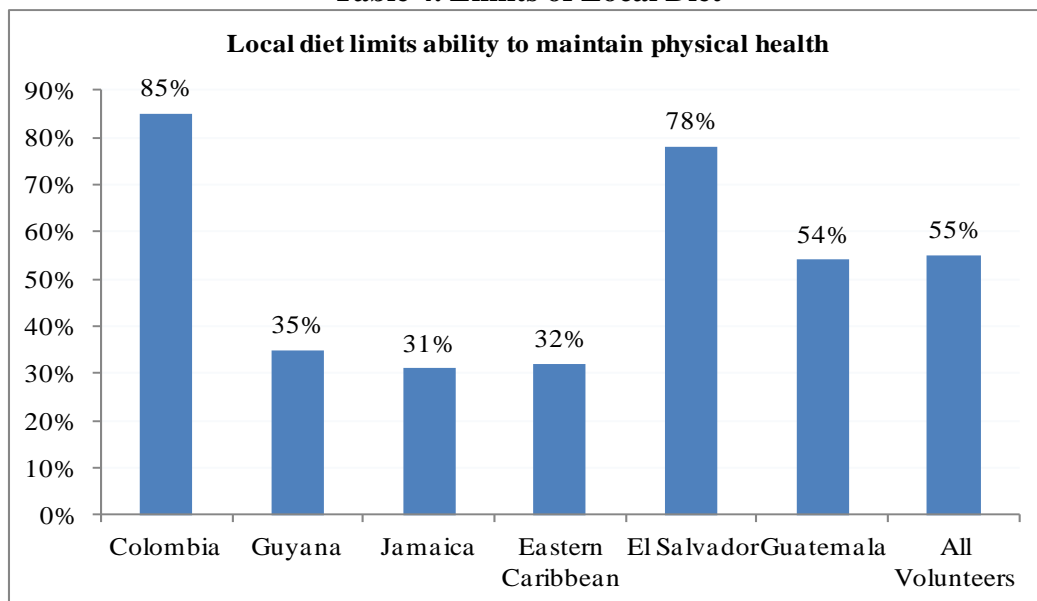


Source: OIG analysis of 2012 AVS data

Interacting with the Peace Corps staff in Colombia causes 30 percent of Volunteers “considerable” or “exceptional” stress, compared to nine percent of all Volunteers (2012 AVS data). Trying to stay healthy causes one in four Volunteers “considerable” or “exceptional” stress, compared to nine percent of all Volunteers (2012 AVS data).

85 percent of Volunteers in Colombia reported that the local diet limited their ability to stay healthy, compared to 55 percent of Volunteers globally (2012 AVS data).

Table 4. Limits of Local Diet



Source: OIG analysis of 2012 AVS data

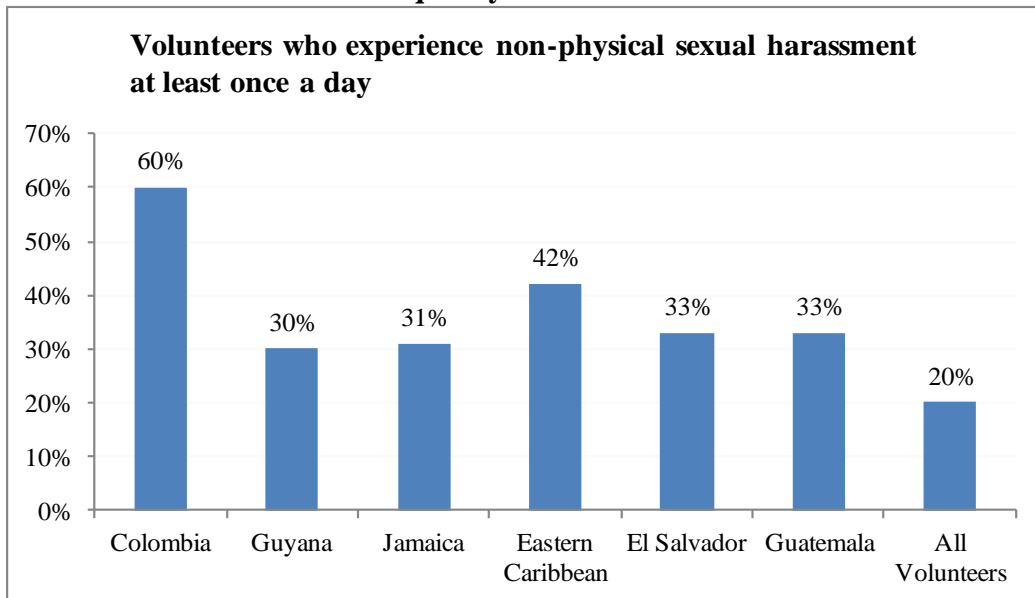
Half of the Volunteers in Colombia cited their host family as a source of moderate or higher levels of stress and 20 percent said their host family arrangement was exceptionally stressful. Just 24 percent of Volunteers worldwide experience moderate or higher levels of stress from their host family, and just three percent rated it as exceptionally stressful (2012 AVS data).

Frequent Sexual Harassment. Contributing to the daily stresses Volunteers experience in Colombia is the reality of sexual harassment. As the *Volunteer Welcome Book* warns, “You should be prepared for unwanted attention from Colombian men if you are an American woman.” Volunteers we interviewed reported being sexually harassed, and in their responses to the 2012 AVS Volunteers reported that sexual harassment was a daily stressor: 60 percent said they were harassed at least once a day and 40 percent said they were harassed multiple times each day (Table Five). By contrast, just 20 percent of Volunteers worldwide reported being harassed as frequently. According to 2012 AVS data, Volunteer harassment in Colombia comes from strangers (93 percent), Colombian counterparts and co-workers (71 percent) and other community members (64 percent). By comparison, Volunteers worldwide typically experience low levels of harassment from their counterparts or co-workers (25 percent) (Table Six).

The agency’s counselors we spoke to confirmed that the harassment data from Colombia was, “very unusual. That would be very stressful, obviously. Because they are getting it from

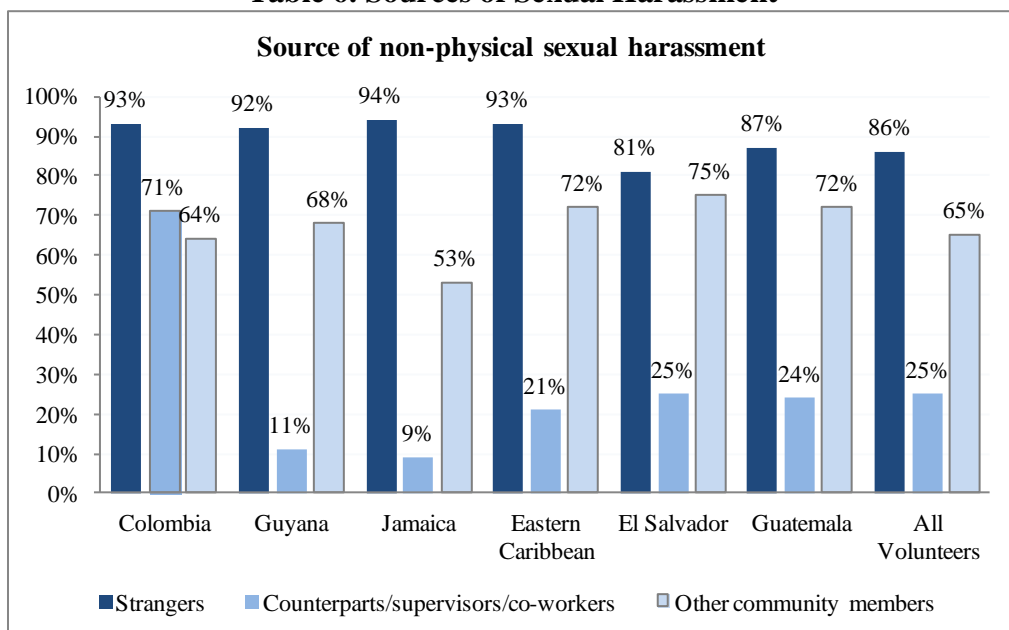
strangers on the street and also from people they know at their worksites.” During our fieldwork we directly witnessed students making rude gestures of a sexual nature to a female Volunteer we were attempting to interview. Another Volunteer had to change host families due to the severity of sexual harassment that was directed at her by a family member.

Table 5. Frequency of Sexual Harassment



Source: OIG analysis of 2012 AVS data

Table 6. Sources of Sexual Harassment



Source: OIG analysis of 2012 AVS data

In addition to being very frequent, sexual harassment for Volunteers in Colombia is also relatively more stressful than for most Volunteers worldwide: 21 percent of Volunteers in

Colombia reported that harassment is “very stressful”, whereas less than one in 10 Volunteers worldwide reported that the sexual harassment they experience was “very stressful” (2012 AVS data). Peace Corps’ counselors familiar with issues of harassment and stress noted that it is not unusual for Volunteers to have more difficulty integrating in an urban environment, nor is it unusual for them to experience more frequent sexual harassment in an urban setting. As the counselors observed, an important point about frequent sexual harassment in an urban environment is that:

It comes from strangers and it just doesn’t stop. So if that is going on they should not expect it to ever stop. So it’s important when that is true that Volunteers be given some tools to help them cope with it.

Minimal Community Integration. Peace Corps *Programming and Training Guidance*, part 1 describes how the achievement of Peace Corps goals depends on each Volunteer’s understanding of the local culture:

The Peace Corps philosophy and experience are that achievement of Peace Corps Goal One requires integration of Goals Two and Three; for Volunteers to help meet host country needs for technically trained individuals, they must also understand the host country’s culture and share their own culture with host country nationals. Volunteers and their communities learn from each other, share the learning with others, and as a result, promote greater opportunities for development and peace around the world. For some Volunteers, cultural learning and sharing is as important as their technical contribution.

Volunteers expressed frustrations at having to live and work in *barrios*. Several Volunteers reported not feeling safe in their barrio, and that taking common-sense safety and security precautions made it difficult to integrate. Female Volunteers in particular pointed out that Peace Corps’ approach to community integration conflicted with the daily challenge of avoiding unsafe areas in their barrios:

“I do not feel integrated in the community at all. Zero. It’s the security and it’s a bit being a woman. People will not leave me alone if I am friendly to anyone.”

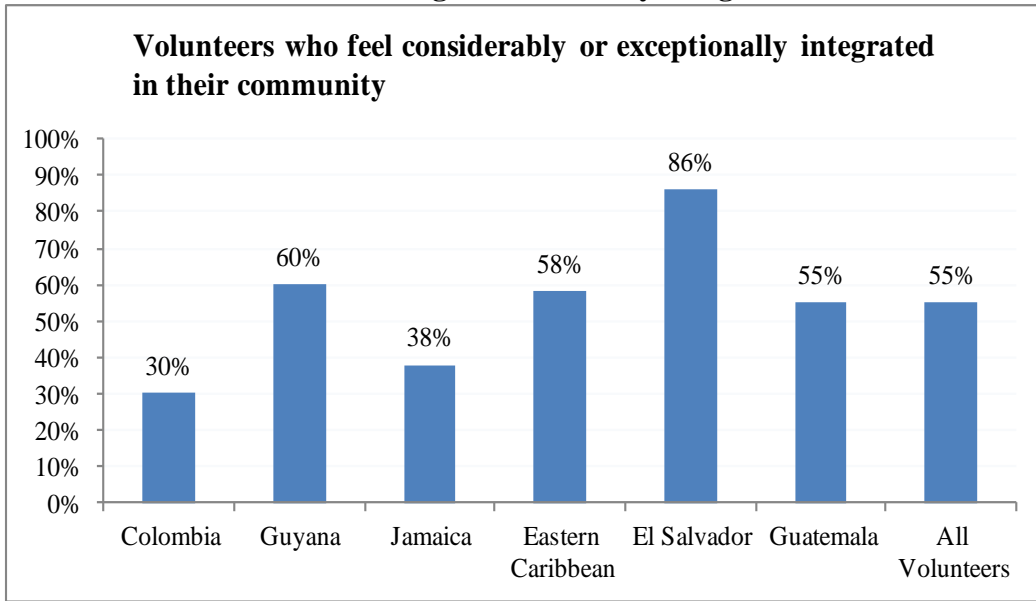
“I know I should visit more but it sounds terrifying and tiring.”

“Here no one knows me. The neighborhoods I have been in are not places where neighbors are outside interacting. People who are neighbors here don’t know each other.”

“There is not a community really outside the school. It’s not a meaningful concept. It’s an urban area. None of the teachers or students live nearby. There is no community to integrate into outside the school. The urban setting makes it hard to have a Peace Corps experience.”

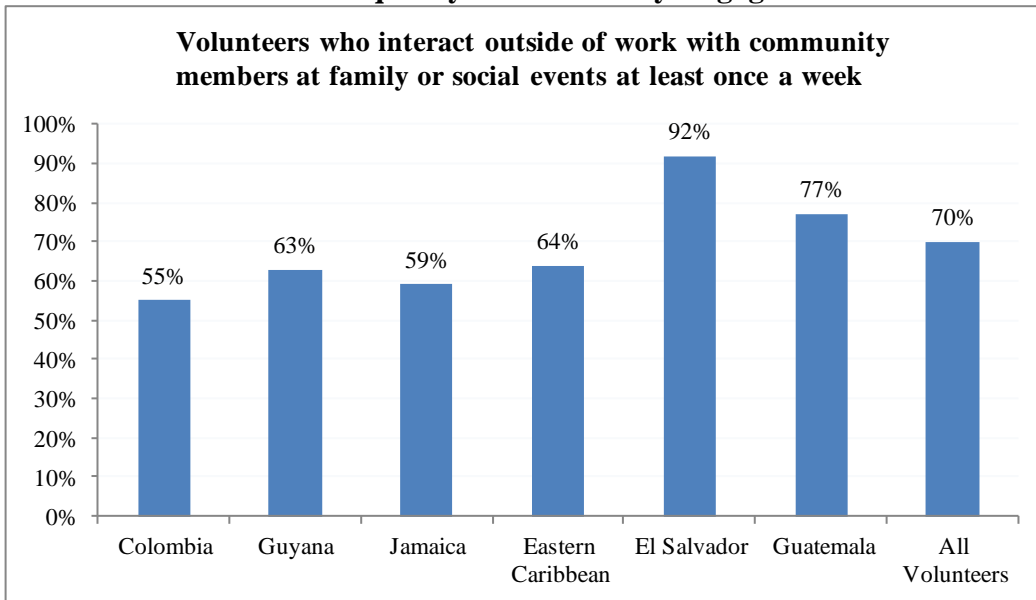
Responses to the 2012 AVS also indicated that Volunteers in Colombia rated their community integration lower than most other Volunteers. Just 30 percent of Volunteers in Colombia reported feeling either “considerably” or “exceptionally” integrated, whereas over half (55 percent) of Volunteers worldwide reported feeling at least “considerably” integrated. Compared to a selection of countries in the Caribbean and Central America where Volunteers also navigate challenging security environments, Colombian Volunteers report the lowest levels of community integration (Table 7). Volunteers in Colombia interact with Colombians at cultural or social events, outside of work, less frequently than do Volunteers worldwide (Table 8).

Table 7. Feeling of Community Integration



Source: OIG analysis of 2012 AVS data

Table 8. Frequency of Community Engagement



Source: OIG analysis of 2012 AVS data

Elevated Risk of Urban-based Crime. The decision to limit Volunteer site placements to three major urban areas has had unintended consequences for Volunteers, especially for female Volunteers in these cities. The *Volunteer Welcome Book* acknowledges that the risk of crime is higher in urban areas, “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.” In one case a

Volunteer was the victim of a violent assault in a dangerous barrio⁹, and later witnessed, at close range, sudden violence between Colombians while riding on a bus. The Volunteer reported that she continues to experience physical and psychological trauma as a result of these attacks, but remains committed to completing her service and does not want to change sites.

An essential tenant of Peace Corps' approach to Volunteer safety and security is that Volunteers are safest when they have integrated into their communities. MS 270, "Volunteer/Trainee Safety and Security" states: "The Peace Corps safety and security program is based upon... the recognition that Volunteers are generally safest and most productive when they establish strong ties to their community and develop an effective support network." This "integration model" of Volunteer safety and security can work in neighborhoods where a feeling of community exists, where neighbors know each other, and where the Volunteer is well known as being a part of the community. It also depends on Volunteers having sufficient local language and cross-cultural skills to successfully integrate. In the major urban areas of Colombia where most Peace Corps Volunteers have been placed, Volunteers, including those with strong Spanish, have faced significant difficulty integrating into their communities. Many of the barrios where Volunteers have been placed in Cartagena, Barranquilla, and Santa Marta do not possess community characteristics that make Peace Corps' integration model viable. This is so despite the fact that all sites in these three cities were identified, assessed and developed in a rigorous manner, in accordance with the post's site development criteria and procedures that included in-depth reviews by security experts and approval for use by Peace Corps and the U.S. Embassy.

The PCSSO's February 3, 2010 report contained this important cautionary note about the pitfalls of concentrating Volunteers in three cities:

Careful consideration needs to be given to the optimal size of a program that is limited in the near-term to urban and peri-urban areas in only three cities. Placing almost 30 PCVs in such a limited geographic area could result in problematic Volunteer conduct sometimes associated with high concentrations of PCVs.

Also, a large number of PCVs in only three cities may require Post to place Volunteers in sub-optimal placements. These placements might be sub-optimal programmatically (e.g., to a school that has only a modest English-teaching program and therefore doesn't fully occupy the PCV), or they may be to areas with questionable security climates. As examples of both types, the programmatic Viability Report from this visit lists Pies Descalzos in Barranquilla as a potential partner, despite the fact that this foundation already has 7 World teach volunteers assigned to it in Barranquilla. As another example, Granitos de Paz is listed as another potential partner, despite the foundation's working in the most dangerous Cartagena neighborhood that is replete with gang violence.

The PCSSO does not make a specific recommendation about the maximum number of Volunteers that is appropriate for the north coast. However, the PCSSO maintains that care must be given in determining the optimal number of Volunteers so that that Post can avoid placing Volunteers in insecure neighborhoods and so that selected sites offer sufficient engagement (and avoid distractions) so as to promote Volunteers' integration in their communities.

The risk of theft, assault and other common types of urban crime is high, and it is likely that more Volunteers in Colombia will be victims of crime as long as most are in Cartagena, Barranquilla and Santa Marta. To reduce the concentration of Volunteers in Cartagena,

⁹ A barrio is a neighborhood.

Barranquilla and Santa Marta, the Peace Corps needs to develop new sites outside of these urban areas.

We recommend:

- 1. That the regional Peace Corps safety and security officer and the post's safety and security coordinator, in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy's security personnel, assess security conditions along Colombia's Caribbean coast and define the geographic boundary within which the Peace Corps can develop new sites and safely operate outside of major urban areas.**
- 2. That the post develop a strategy to mitigate, and help Volunteers better manage, stressors connected to their service, including personal safety, healthy diets, sexual harassment and other stressors.**
- 3. That the Inter-America and the Pacific Operations regional director and the associate director for Safety and Security assess the viability of community integration approach to Volunteer safety for urban sites in Colombia, and, if necessary, identify and implement steps to strengthen its effectiveness.**

VOLUNTEER SUPPORT

Our country program evaluation attempts to answer the question, "Has the post provided adequate support and oversight to Volunteers?" To determine this, we assessed numerous factors, including staff-Volunteer communications; feedback from staff on Volunteers' written reports; medical support; safety and security support including staff visits to Volunteer work sites, the Emergency Action Plan (EAP), and the handling of crime incidents; and the adequacy of the Volunteer living allowance.

Volunteers gave generally favorable ratings for the quality of support they had received from the staff. Volunteers' ratings for support in specific areas were as follows.

Table 9. Volunteer Perceptions of Staff Support¹⁰

Support Area	Percent of Volunteers Rating “Average Support” or Better	Average Rating
Leadership	75%	3.4
Programming	95%	4.3
Training	100%	4.7
Safety and Security	94%	4.1
Medical	100%	4.5
Administrative	100%	4.4

Source: OIG interviews.

With respect to Volunteer living allowances, seventy-eight percent of Volunteers indicated that their monthly living allowance was at least adequate (3.4 or 5 out of 5). However, even among those Volunteers who rated the living allowance a 3 (adequate), several asserted that the higher cost of living in Cartagena justified a higher stipend for Volunteers in that city; some Volunteers reported that it was very costly to maintain a healthy diet (even though host families were supposed to provide two meals/day); some reported that they typically spent from \$30 to \$50 of their own money each month in order to buy healthy food, pay for taxis when other forms of transportation were unsafe, or simply purchase clothes or toiletries.

However, more than half of interviewed Volunteers, including Volunteers in each city, did not report any problems with their monthly living allowance. The post had performed living allowance surveys and explained the survey results to Volunteers. The living allowance in Colombia is likely to remain a source of stress for some Volunteers, though there does not appear to be much more that post can do to ensure that the living allowance is fair and adequate.

Volunteers rated the quality of medical support they have received from the current PCMO in Colombia quite favorably (average of 4.5 out of 5). The PCMO, who has been at post since May of 2012, was the ninth PCMO in Colombia since August of 2011. Volunteers gave her high ratings for the quality of her care and support.

The host family policy generates stress for Volunteers and management challenges for staff.

The *Volunteer Welcome Book* for Colombia informs those who have been invited to serve in Colombia that all Volunteers in Colombia must live with a host family for their entire service. The *Volunteer Handbook* describes the reason behind the required host family stay:

All PCVs are required to live with a host family for their entire service; this applies to all PCVs, regardless of age or marital status. Living with local families supports the PCVs’ introduction to and

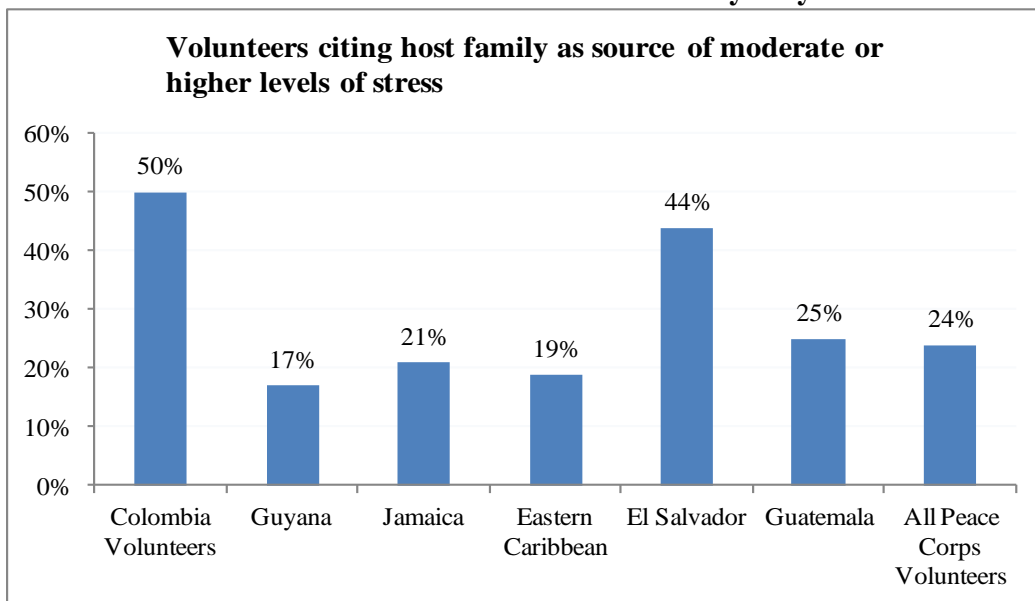
¹⁰ Leadership was derived from the country director score. Programming was derived by averaging the scores of the Director of Programming and Training and the Program Manager for TEL. Training was derived by averaging the ratings for the training manager and senior trainer. Safety and Security was derived from the safety and security coordinator score. Medical was derived from the collective PCMO scores. PCVL/PCVC scores were derived from the average scores for individuals in those positions.

integration into their communities, strengthens language skills, and provides conditions for increased safety and security.

In addition to these reasons are economic factors. The three cities of Barranquilla, Cartagena and Santa Marta are expensive. Post leadership acknowledged that renting rooms from host families makes it possible to place Volunteers in the large urban areas in a cost effective manner, but that renting apartments for Volunteers in the cities would be cost prohibitive.

Volunteers in Colombia have frequently struggled to adjust to living with their host families. The host family model has generated stress in the Volunteer community (Table 10).

Table 10. Stressfulness of Host Family Stays



Source: OIG analysis of 2012 AVS data¹¹

Excluding host family changes that were necessary to address a security concern, a site change, or a host family issue unrelated to the Peace Corps, four Volunteers had changed their host families a total of six times, and one Volunteer was planning to request a third host family change. The frequency with which some Volunteers have requested a host family change has led to management challenges for staff. Volunteers and staff were concerned that the frequent host family changes had angered and alienated Colombian families.

“We’re also making families angry by all of these changes—there’s too much concern for the Volunteer and not the family.”

“This is a major pebble in the shoe for us.”

¹¹ Colombia, El Salvador and Guatemala require Volunteers to stay with a host family for the full length of their service; Guyana, Jamaica and Eastern Caribbean do not have this requirement. In addition, “Colombia Volunteers” survey responses come from one group (cohort) of Volunteers whereas responses from other countries include Volunteers from multiple cohorts, at different points in their service.

The problem of host family changes in Colombia has two main causes. Volunteers with lower Spanish proficiency have tended to struggle more to form effective relationships with their Colombian host families, and have lacked the communication skills to address and resolve day-to-day issues with their host families without relying on support from staff. In addition, the *Volunteer Handbook* states that Volunteers are not required to stay with the same host family during their entire service, and may request a host family change:

The HFC [Host Family Coordinator] and your PM [Program Manager] are available to help resolve any issues you may have with your host family. Volunteers are not required to stay with the same family for their entire service and may change families if necessary.

The staff person responsible for coordinating host family stays for Volunteers has limited English, which has complicated communication with the same subset of Volunteers who have experienced the most difficulties with the host family model. Volunteers were upset about this arrangement, and the issue had become a point of disagreement between Volunteers and staff, and among Volunteers. The host family model has been problematic for some Volunteers. Staff expressed frustration with the strict 27 month home-stay requirement for all Volunteers as well as a desire to identify policies that would better match the needs of Volunteers and reduce the frequency of host family changes.

We recommend:

- 4. That the country director and Inter-America and the Pacific Operations regional director at headquarters identify a host family policy for Colombia that results in Volunteers having more successful host family relationships.**

The post lacked sufficient office space for staff and Volunteers.

Characteristics and Strategies of a High-Performing Post: Post Management Resource Guide articulates agency standards related to adequate office space for staff and Volunteers:

Volunteers are (and feel) welcome at the Peace Corps office, where they have a combination of facilities (resource center, computers, lounge, etc.) appropriate to support them both technically and personally.

Workplaces (offices, training sites, resource centers, etc.) are conducive to work. They are organized, basically comfortable, modest, clean, accessible, and large enough for individuals to get their work done without disruption (April 2010).

The work of staff was made more difficult by the lack of sufficient office space. Staff complained that there was not enough office space to perform common tasks like develop flip charts or to store materials, and expressed that the office “is a problem for everyone.” Headquarters personnel who had visited the post indicated their concern that the office was inadequate to the long-term needs of the post. Leadership at the post was aware that the current amount of office space was inadequate and was trying to identify options to secure additional space. Plans included converting a training room used by temporary language and culture facilitators into a Volunteer lounge.

The Peace Corps office had limited space available to accommodate visiting Volunteers. There was a small area off one corridor with a desk, two chairs, two computers and a printer where only two Volunteers could work at the same time. There was no Volunteer lounge. Much of the Volunteer resource center was on shelves in the country director's office. Volunteers described the office environment as cramped and crowded, and worried that it would only get worse when 30 more trainees were scheduled to arrive at the end of August 2012.

We recommend:

- 5. That the country director and the Inter-America and the Pacific Operations regional director at headquarters assess the sufficiency of the current office space and secure additional office space, if needed.**

The post had not completed its medical evacuation plan.

MS 264 "Medical Evacuation" requires each post to prepare a country-specific Medical Evacuation Plan. MS 264.3 "Policies" states:

- (f) Each post must prepare a country-specific Medical Evacuation Plan (Plan), keep it current, and adjust it according to changes available in commercial transportation or conditions at the medevac locations that could impede or prevent medevac to such locations. The Plan is intended to be a comprehensive, country-specific reference guide designed to assist the Post with the safe and efficient medical evacuation of Volunteers, in individual cases and/or as a group. The Plan should be prepared by the PCMO in consultation with embassy medical personnel as appropriate, and approved by the Country Director (CD).

The post did not have a completed medical evacuation plan at the time of the evaluation. Information on communication systems, emergency transfusion procedures, emergency supplies and equipment, Volunteer evacuee documents, accompaniment documents, and regional medevac procedures had not been completed. The PCMO asserted that she had looked for the medical evacuation policy and been unable to locate it, and thought it perhaps was no longer part of the PCMO's responsibilities.

The fact that the post had nine different PCMOs between August 2011 and May 2012 undoubtedly made it more difficult for the post to focus on getting the medical evacuation plan completed. The lack of a medical evacuation plan for over two years represents an area of weakness with respect to the re-opening of operations in Colombia. It raised the level of risk that a Volunteer's needs would not be properly addressed in a medical emergency when the PCMO or other experienced staff were not available. Fortunately the post's current leadership had sufficient experience to effectively manage evacuations for the Volunteers who needed to be evacuated from Colombia for emergency medical care.

In the months following the evaluation post has made progress on its medical evacuation plan. As of January 2013, each component of the medical evacuation plan had been attended to, and the plan was nearing completion.

We recommend:

- 6. That the Peace Corps medical officer complete the medical evacuation plan.**
- 7. That the Office of Health Services review the post's medical evacuation plan to ensure its completeness.**

The TEL program manager had not provided feedback to Volunteers on their work reports.

Characteristics and Strategies of a High-Performing Post: Post Management Resource Guide sets expectations regarding communication between staff and Volunteers:

The country director and staff communicate regularly and openly with Volunteers through a variety of means. They convey useful technical and program information and policies, and give encouragement, constructive suggestions, and admonitions, as appropriate. They also actively seek input from the Volunteers (April 2010).

The agency's *Programming and Training Guidance: Project Design and Evaluation* describes actions that program managers (PM) take in order to effectively monitor and evaluate their project's progress. A key periodic action step the agency expects program managers to perform is to review Volunteer work reports and then give feedback to Volunteers on their reports (e.g. acknowledging accomplishments, addressing challenges and making suggestions.)

Eleven of twenty (55 percent) Volunteers who were interviewed in Colombia had received no feedback from the TEL program manager on either of two quarterly work reports they had submitted. Six Volunteers had received feedback on their first work report, but not their second report; just three Volunteers had received feedback on both their first and second reports. For some Volunteers the lack of feedback on their first report negatively affected the amount of effort the Volunteers put into completing subsequent work reports.

"The fact that she has not responded to my VRF makes me unmotivated to do my next VRF. The feedback I got was not useful because it was very late."

"On my second VRF I did not put much effort into answering the more narrative parts of the form, because I do not believe that [PM] reads it or will take the time to respond."

"The last one was shorter; the first one was more complete and detailed."

"The 2nd time I did the bare minimum, since I did not get any feedback on the first one."

As a result there was less useful information for project management purposes than would have been the case had a more timely and substantive review of Volunteer work reports been provided. Reductions in the amount of care and attention Volunteers put into their quarterly reports can also compromise the ability of the post to communicate accomplishments in annual reports to project stakeholders, a key indicator in the agency's performance and accountability report. It may also compromise the post's ability to develop complete and accurate information as part of annual strategic planning and budgeting analyses (i.e. "program analysis"). The cause

of this lack of timely feedback on Volunteer work reports was not entirely clear, though appeared to be a mix of factors, including the program manager's lack of comfort with the VRT.

We recommend:

- 8. That the director of programming and training set expectations regarding the timeliness of staff feedback to Volunteers on their work reports and ensure that staff uses the Volunteer Reporting Tool to support Volunteers and communicate project results.**
- 9. That the program manager become more familiar with the feedback functionality of the Volunteer Reporting Tool and provide timely and substantive feedback to Volunteers.**

PROGRAMMING

The evaluation assessed to what extent the post has developed and implemented programs intended to increase the capacity of host country communities to meet their own technical needs. To determine this, we reviewed:

- the coordination between the Peace Corps and the host country in determining development priorities and Peace Corps program areas;
- whether post is meeting its project objectives;
- counterpart selection and quality of counterpart relationships with Volunteers;
- site development policies and practices.

Host Country Relationships and Coordination. In our review of post's records and through interviews with post leadership, Colombian Ministry officials and other project partners, we found evidence of strong relationships between Peace Corps and host country officials and partners. The relationship in particular between the Secretary of Education in Barranquilla and post senior staff and leadership has been well developed and maintained. Each Colombian partner interviewed expressed an interest in receiving more Volunteers, explaining the many opportunities available to support program growth in education as well as youth development.

TEL Project Design. The TEL project has been designed and managed to allow current Volunteers sufficient opportunity to contribute to its goals and objectives. All TEL Volunteers were familiar with the goals of the TEL project and 16 of 21 Volunteers stated that they could contribute to the goals at least moderately well. All Volunteers had at least one Colombian teacher or school administrator as a counterpart, and several Volunteers considered all the English teachers at their school as either actual or potential counterparts. The 20 TEL Volunteers interviewed counted approximately 70 Colombian educators among their counterparts. Volunteers were generally very positive concerning their counterpart relationships: 77 percent of Volunteers characterized their counterpart relationship as being either above average or outstanding.

Figure 4. The Teaching English for Livelihoods Project Framework

Project Purpose: Colombian primary, secondary, and technical education teachers will strengthen their personal and professional opportunities through improved English teaching abilities.

Goal One: Teachers at the primary, secondary and technical education levels will improve their current TEFL methodologies, their teaching resources development and lesson planning skills, and will gain practice in using English in classroom settings.

(Goal one includes three objectives, paraphrased as: co-planning and co-teaching; workshop development for English teachers; and development of creative teaching materials)

Goal Two: Students and teachers whose primary instructional responsibility is not English will develop communicative competencies in English, according to their needs.

(Goal two includes two objectives, paraphrased as: English language training for non-English teachers; and English learning through extracurricular activities for youth)

Goal Three: Community members will be engaged in programs and activities related to education and youth development that can improve their livelihoods.

(Goal three includes two objectives, paraphrased as: youth life skills development through community-based projects; and English learning opportunities for community members.)

The post's 2012 report¹² on the accomplishments and status of the TEL project indicates that TEL Volunteers in 2012 made contributions toward bilingualism along the north Caribbean coast, and that some of the desired outcomes of the TEL project (Colombian teachers improving their English teaching abilities, Colombian youth improving their life skills and their English abilities, and Colombian community members improving their English abilities) were progressing.

PCRVs, though not working directly with the English goals of the TEL project, engage in youth and community development work with a non-governmental organization focused on youth and other community-based projects. The type of work PCRVs conduct is in line with the intent of the third goal of the TEL project, focused on community members and youth development (Figure 4). PCRVs reported being very satisfied with their sites, and having sufficient project work to do.

Site Development. Site development in Colombia adhered to a set of steps described in the post's site development guidebook. This guidebook is based on similar written criteria and management controls that guide the site development processes at other posts including Zambia, Ecuador, and Paraguay. Documentation related to each step in Colombia's site development and approval process was organized and demonstrated sufficient oversight by the director of programming and training, and the country director. Ninety-five percent of Volunteers expressed

¹² The 2012 Project Status Report for the TEL Project in Colombia.

satisfaction with their sites, including 62 percent who were “very satisfied.” Ninety-one percent of Volunteers indicated that they had sufficient work to do most of the time.

TEL Project Challenge Areas. TEL Volunteers face difficult work challenges that generate stress and frustration. Colombian English teachers often work second jobs outside the school, and lack time to collaborate with Volunteers on lesson planning for their classrooms. A few Volunteers reported that many of the teachers they work with have ingrained habits and resist changing their teaching methodologies. Some schools cancel classes with little advance notice, leaving Volunteers confused and feeling under-utilized. Volunteers also reported that their classrooms were noisy and difficult to manage--a challenge that appeared more acute for Volunteers with less teaching experience.

A few Volunteers questioned if the right balance had been struck in the TEL project because they had to spend too much time on their first goal responsibilities at school (co-teaching/co-planning).

“It's hard to do anything like workshops with the teachers during the week because I spend so much time co-teaching.”

“Sticking us in schools is a waste past the first year. There are hundreds of schools and many motivated teachers. We have the potential to develop a program here to reach so many teachers and students and schools and to create materials to be passed on. We could do that through other means than being in the classroom.”

In addition, several Volunteers argued that the TEL project should focus on placing more Volunteers at *normales* (teacher training colleges) where student teachers are more open to learning how to teach English more effectively.

“We should be splitting time between the English teachers in training at the normales, and English teachers in the public schools.”

“Co-teaching is something that looks great on paper but in my experience it only works when there are certain things in place. 1) both teachers must want to co-teach together. 2) both teachers must have time to co-plan together and 3) both teachers should have complementary skills. I think co-teaching could be more effective here if it were focused on working with teachers in training at the normales. There are a few [teachers] who are motivated to co-plan and co-teach and learn, but they are few and far between. For this reason co-teaching in the schools should be de-emphasized by the project in order to refocus Volunteers in normales. Those teachers are in a formative place and much more eager to try new things as they learn how to teach.”

In a review of Volunteer site placements we determined that, in fact, the post had placed TEL Volunteers with sufficient professional background as teachers in *normal superiores* or teacher training institutions. With few exceptions, Volunteers with less teaching experience were placed in public schools where they could both gain teaching experience and begin to collaborate through co-planning and co-teaching with public school English teachers.

TEL Project Prospects for Growth. Because the number of TEL Volunteers in 2013 is more than twice the number of active Volunteers during our fieldwork we were unable to assess the

question of what the optimal size of the TEL project should be in the urban and peri-urban areas to which operations have been limited. Though we are not issuing a formal finding or recommendation specific to programming, post may benefit from a review of the TEL project conducted by an education specialist from Overseas Programming and Training Support (OPATS) in order to assess specifically whether or not a sufficient number of high quality programmatic opportunities exist in Cartagena, Barranquilla and Santa Marta for the projected numbers of TEL Volunteers.

TRAINING

Another objective of the post evaluation is to answer the question, “Does training prepare Volunteers for Peace Corps service?” To answer this question we considered such factors as:

- training adequacy;
- planning and development of the training life cycle;
- staffing and related budget.

As of August 2012, post had conducted one 11-week pre-service training (PST) for two-year Volunteers (from October 14 2011 through January 13, 2012) with assistance from temporary duty training staff that Peace Corps headquarters provided to the post. As field work for this evaluation was ending, the post was preparing for the arrival of 30 trainees and had made a number of important modifications to its training program. The post had evaluated its first PST and incorporated lessons-learned into the design and planning of its second PST. In addition to 11 weeks of PST, most interviewed Volunteers had participated in two subsequent workshops, one on HIV/AIDS education prevention, another on project management and leadership. Volunteers gave favorable ratings (at least 3 out of 5) for most of the training they had participated in, though language received a lower average rating than other types of training.

Some Volunteers lacked sufficient Spanish skills to function effectively in Colombia.

The Peace Corps Act section 2521 contains a foreign language proficiency standard which specifies:

No person shall be assigned to duty as a volunteer under this chapter in any foreign country or area unless at the time of such assignment he possesses such reasonable proficiency as his assignment requires in speaking the language of the country or area to which he is assigned.

The post’s *Volunteer Welcome Book* states that all trainees must demonstrate that their Spanish tests at or above the “intermediate medium” proficiency level prior to swearing-in as Volunteers.

We interviewed Volunteers who acknowledged that they lacked sufficient Spanish language skills. Spanish proficiency test scores from PST in 2011 show that twelve out of twenty-three trainees arrived in Colombia with a “novice” level of Spanish. Post lacked certified language testers for the PST in 2011¹³. As a result, test scores did not indicate how many Volunteers had

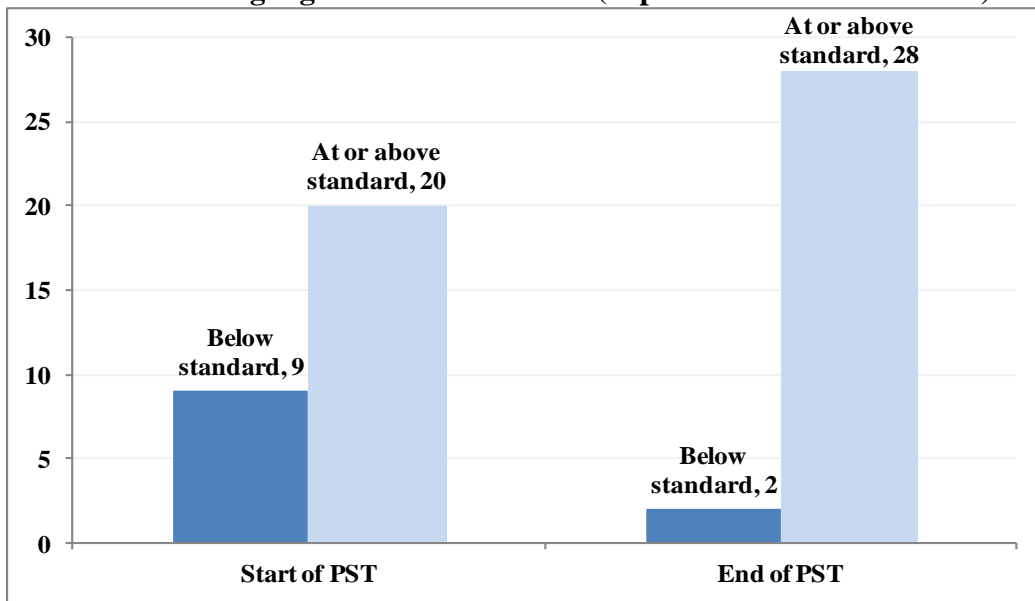
¹³ Peace Corps Colombia had certified Spanish language testers for the fall 2012 PST.

met the “intermediate medium” swearing in requirement. All trainees swore-in as Volunteers, including some who, based on our interviews with staff and Volunteers, had not met the Spanish language swearing-in requirement. Volunteers generally rated the quality of Spanish instruction during PST lower than other types of training. Language training received a 65 percent favorable rating, and seven (35 percent) of Volunteers rated the quality of language instruction during PST as below average. Most of the criticism from Volunteers concerning the quality of Spanish language instruction focused on the methodology that the instructors used, which did not provide instruction in Spanish grammar. This criticism came from Volunteers with advanced Spanish as well from those with novice and intermediate Spanish.

As noted previously, Volunteers with lower Spanish proficiency have tended to struggle in their Colombian home stays more than have Volunteers with advanced Spanish. Poor Spanish skills among some Volunteers have created problems communicating with staff as well. In addition, lack of Spanish skills impedes Volunteers efforts to engage in activities other than teaching English.

In the PST that started in September 2012, the post made some adjustments to its Spanish instruction approach in two key ways: adding Spanish grammar instruction in response to feedback from Volunteers; and allowing advanced or superior Spanish speaking trainees to do independent projects during the time reserved for Spanish instruction. Language proficiency test scores for trainees who swore-in as Volunteers in November 2012 indicated that seven of nine trainees improved their Spanish sufficiently to meet the post’s swearing-in requirement.

Table 11. Language Scores of Trainees (September-November 2012)



Source: OIG analysis of post data. One trainee was not tested at start of PST.

The two trainees who tested one level below (intermediate low) the post’s swearing-in standard were allowed to swear-in because each had strong potential to meet the Spanish standard within three months of swearing-in, each had demonstrated a commitment to improving his/her Spanish, had maintained a positive attitude, and shown the ability to integrate well with Colombian host

families. Based on post's adjustments to its Spanish language program, including its tightening of the application of swearing-in requirements for trainees, we have determined that no recommendation specific to Spanish language training is merited.

Some Volunteers lacked flexibility, self sufficiency, and respect for Colombians.

MS 201 "Eligibility and Standards for Peace Corps Volunteer Service" states the attributes required to qualify for Volunteer service, which include sufficient "maturity, flexibility and self sufficiency to adapt successfully to life in another culture, and to interact and communicate with other people regardless of cultural, social and economic differences."

We observed during our fieldwork occasions when Volunteers made insensitive comments in English about Colombians in their presence, perhaps assuming that English would not be understood. Some Volunteer complaints about aspects or conditions of their service reflected deficits of cross-cultural understanding, self sufficiency, maturity and flexibility:

"My previous host family only let me use the iron one hour a week. In my current host family there is no ironing board, so I have to iron my clothes on my bed, and that is not convenient."

"A woman, a counterpart, started praying during a workshop when we were all assembled. I mean, this was a U.S. government event. What happened to the separation of church and state! Well, I was very shocked by this, and so I got up and left."

"One Volunteer called her mother in the United States to complain about bugs in her bed, and then her mother called the office."

Staff and Volunteers expressed dismay at some of the culturally-insensitive attitudes some Volunteers have demonstrated toward Colombians:

"A few of the Volunteers do not represent the three goals well in Colombia. Some have been rude and have been verbally aggressive to their host families. It is difficult to bear."

"There have been situations with Volunteers who have been disrespectful with their counterparts and with teachers."

"I have witnessed Volunteers making insulting comments about Colombians and Colombia in the presence of Colombians. Colombians often understand what they are saying, and it is embarrassing. Volunteers have shown a lack of respect for the culture."

"If you find yourself complaining about something the first thing you should do is stop and ask yourself, what did I sign up for? This job is supposed to be hard, and compared to what Colombians have to deal with what should you expect? How would the kids you are around take what you are complaining about if it is their life? You're supposed to work under the conditions of how people live. So please, don't complain about the water not being cold, or the coffee having sugar, or too much rice, or whatever! Look in the mirror. Why did you come here? More self-reflection needs to happen, please."

Volunteers and staff acknowledged that PST did not sufficiently stress the importance of understanding and respecting Colombians and their culture, or the idea that being a Volunteer means being in service to the people of Colombia.

We recommend:

- 10. That the director of programming and training and the training manager make necessary adjustments to training so that Volunteers in Colombia clearly understand their role as Volunteers, including the requirement to demonstrate respect for Colombians and their culture as well as sufficient adaptability and self sufficiency.**

OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the Office of Inspector General (OIG) is to prevent and detect fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement and to promote economy, effectiveness, and efficiency in government. In February 1989, the Peace Corps OIG was established under the Inspector General Act of 1978 and is an independent entity within the Peace Corps. The Inspector General (IG) is under the general supervision of the Peace Corps Director and reports both to the Director and Congress.

The Evaluation Unit within the Peace Corps OIG provides senior management with independent evaluations of all management and operations of the Peace Corps, including overseas posts and domestic offices. OIG evaluators identify best practices and recommend program improvements to comply with Peace Corps policies.

The OIG Evaluation Unit announced its intent to conduct the evaluation on May 2, 2012. For post evaluations, we use the following researchable questions to guide our work:

- To what extent has post developed and implemented programs to increase host country communities' capacity?
- Does training prepare Volunteers for Peace Corps service?
- Has the post provided adequate support and oversight to Volunteers?
- Are post resources and agency support effectively aligned with the post's mission and agency priorities?

The evaluator conducted the preliminary research portion of the evaluation May 3 to July 13, 2012. This research included a review of agency documents provided by headquarters and post staff; interviews with management staff representing the Inter-America and the Pacific Operations region, Peace Corps Response, OPATS, Volunteer Support, the Office of Health Services, Volunteer Recruitment and Selection, and the Office of the Director.

In-country fieldwork occurred from July 31 to August 15, 2012, and included interviews with post senior staff in charge of programming, training, and support; the U.S. ambassador; the RSO and assistant RSO; a Colombian government ministry official; and Colombian non-governmental organization representatives. In addition, we interviewed all Volunteers who were serving in Colombia at the time of fieldwork. After the in-country fieldwork the evaluator did additional analysis of data that was made available in late October and early November including results from the 2012 AVS (the same Volunteers interviewed during field work in August 2012 also had recently responded to the 2012 AVS) and other reports submitted by post to headquarters.

This evaluation was conducted in accordance with the Quality Standards for Inspections, issued by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency. The evidence, findings, and recommendations provided in this report have been reviewed by agency stakeholders affected by this review.

INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

As part of this post evaluation, interviews were conducted with 24 Volunteers, 10 staff members in-country, and 24 representatives from Peace Corps headquarters in Washington D.C., the U.S. Embassy in Colombia, and key ministry officials. Volunteer interviews were conducted using a standardized interview questionnaire, and Volunteers were asked to rate many items on a five-point scale (1 = not effective, 3 = average effective, 5 = very effective). The analysis of these ratings provided a quantitative supplement to Volunteers' comments, which were also analyzed. For the purposes of the data analysis, Volunteer ratings of "3" and above are considered favorable. In addition, we interviewed 18 of 24 Volunteers at their sites and inspected their housing using post-defined housing criteria; for the six sites we could not visit we relied on Volunteer interviews to determine if their housing met the post's standards. The period of review for a post evaluation is one full Volunteer cycle (typically 27 months).

The following table provides demographic information that represents the entire Volunteer population in Colombia; the Volunteer sample was selected to reflect these demographics.

Table 12. Volunteer Demographic Data

Project	Percentage of Volunteers
TEL Project	83%
Response Volunteers	17%
Gender	Percentage of Volunteers
Female	58%
Male	42%
Age	Percentage of Volunteers
25 or younger	50%
26-29	21%
30-49	17%
50 and over	13%

Source: PC/Colombia Volunteer roster in August 2012.

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

At the time of our field visit, the post had 19 permanent staff positions as well as eight temporary training staff to assist with PST. We interviewed 10 staff members.

Table 13. Interviews Conducted with PC/Colombia Staff Members

Position	Status	Interviewed
Country Director	USDH	X
Director of Programming and Training	USDH	X
Safety and Security Coordinator	PSC	X
Executive Assistant	PSC	

Director of Management and Operations	USDH	X
General Services Assistant	PSC	
Driver/Messenger (2)	PSC	
Financial Assistant	FSN	
Cashier	FSN	
Information Technology Specialist	PSC	
Administrative Assistant	PSC	
Medical Officer	PSC	X
Medical Administrative Assistant	PSC	
Training Manager	PSC	X
Host Family Coordinator	PSC	X
TEL Project Manager	PSC	X
Programming and Training Specialist (2)	PSC	X
Language and Cultural Coordinator	PSC	
Language and Cultural Facilitators (9)	PSC	

Data as of August 2012. *PSC is personal services contractor; FSN is foreign service national.

We interviewed twenty-four other stakeholders during this evaluation's preliminary research phase, as part of our in-country fieldwork, and upon return to Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Table 14. Interviews Conducted with PC/Headquarters Staff, Embassy Officials, Ministry Officials and Project Partners

Position	Organization
Regional Director	PC/Headquarters/IAP Region
Chief of Operations	PC/Headquarters/IAP Region
Chief of Programming and Training	PC/Headquarters/IAP Region
Country Desk Officer	PC/Headquarters/IAP Region
Chief Administrative Officer	PC/Headquarters/IAP Region
Director, Office of Health Services	PC/Headquarters/OHS
Deputy Director, Office of Health Services	PC/Headquarters/OHS
Psychologist, Counseling and Outreach Unit	PC/Headquarters/OHS/COU
Expert Consultant, Counseling and Outreach Unit	PC/Headquarters/OHS/COU
Director, Peace Corps Response	PC/Headquarters/PCR
Programming Specialist, Peace Corps Response	PC/Headquarters/PCR
Recruitment and Placement Specialist, Peace Corps Response	PC/Headquarters/PCR
Regional Security Advisor	PC/Headquarters/IAP Region
Peace Corps Safety and Security Officer	PC/Headquarters/IAP Region
Placement Supervisor, Volunteer Recruitment and Selection	PC/Headquarters/VRS
Placement Manager, Volunteer Recruitment and Selection	PC/Headquarters/VRS
Program & Training Education Specialist, Overseas Programming and Training Support	PC/Headquarters/OPATS
Senior Advisor, Office of the Director	PC/Headquarters/D
Regional Security Officer	U.S. Department of State/Colombia
Ambassador	U.S. Department of State/Colombia

Assistant Regional Security Officer	U.S. Department of State/Colombia
Secretary of Education of Barranquilla	Colombia's Ministry of Education
School Principal in Barranquilla	Fundación Pies Descalzos
Executive Director, Colombian partner organization	Fútbol con Corazón

Data as of November 2012.

LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

WE RECOMMEND:

1. That the regional Peace Corps safety and security officer and the post's safety and security coordinator, in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy's security personnel, assess security conditions along Colombia's Caribbean coast and define the geographic boundary within which the Peace Corps can develop new sites and safely operate outside of major urban areas.
2. That the post develops a strategy to mitigate, and help Volunteers better manage, stressors connected to their service, including personal safety, healthy diets, sexual harassment and other stressors.
3. That the Inter-America and the Pacific Operations regional director and the associate director for Safety and Security assess the viability of the community integration approach to Volunteer safety for urban sites in Colombia, and, if necessary, identify and implement steps to strengthen its effectiveness.
4. That the country director and Inter-America and the Pacific Operations regional director at headquarters identify a host family policy for Colombia that results in Volunteers having more successful host family relationships.
5. That the country director and the Inter-America and the Pacific Operations regional director at headquarters assess the sufficiency of the current office space and secure additional office space, if needed.
6. That the Peace Corps medical officer complete the medical evacuation plan.
7. That the Office of Health Services review the post's medical evacuation plan to ensure its completeness.
8. That the director of programming and training set expectations regarding the timeliness of staff feedback to Volunteers on their work reports and ensure that staff uses the Volunteer Reporting Tool to support Volunteers and communicate project results.
9. That the program manager become more familiar with the feedback functionality of the Volunteer Reporting Tool and provide timely and substantive feedback to Volunteers.
10. That the director of programming and training and the training manager make necessary adjustments to training so that Volunteers in Colombia clearly understand their role as Volunteers, including the requirement to demonstrate respect for Colombians and their culture as well as sufficient adaptability and self sufficiency.

APPENDIX A: ACRONYMS AND GLOSSARY OF SPANISH TERMS

AUC	United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia
AVS	All Volunteer Survey
BACRIMs	Bandas criminales (criminal gangs)
Barrio	A neighborhood
Charla	A talk, or discussion
EAP	Emergency Action Plan
ELN	National Liberation Army
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FTO	Foreign terrorist organization
GOC	Government of Colombia
GDP	Gross domestic product
HDI	Human development index
IHDI	Inequality-adjusted human development index
NGO	Non-governmental organization
Normales	Teacher training schools
OIG	Office of Inspector General
PCMO	Peace Corps Medical Officer
PCSSO	Peace Corps Safety and Security Officer
PCRV	Peace Corps Response Volunteer
PCV	Peace Corps Volunteer
PST	Pre-service training
RSO	U.S. Embassy Regional Security Officer
TEFL	Teaching English as a foreign language
TEL Project	Teaching English for livelihoods project
USG	United States government
VIDA	Volunteer information database application

APPENDIX B: AGENCY'S RESPONSE TO THE PRELIMINARY REPORT



Since 1961.

MEMORANDUM

To: Kathy Buller, Inspector General

Through: Daljit K. Bains, Chief Compliance Officer

From: Nina Favor, Acting Regional Director
George Baldino, Country Director

Date: April 1, 2013

CC: Carrie Hessler-Radelet, Acting Director
Stacy Rhodes, Chief of Staff
Carlos Torres, Acting Associate Director for Global Operations
Joaquin Ferraro, Deputy Inspector General
James F O'Keefe, Assistant Inspector General/Evaluations
Ed Hobson, Associate Director for Safety and Security
Daryl Sink, Chief, Overseas Operations, Safety and Security
Shelley Swendiman, Acting Chief of Operations
Howard Lyon, Chief of Operations Advisor
Amy Johnson, Chief of Programming and Training
Ella Ewart, Country Desk Officer
Joshua O'Donnell, Regional Security Advisor
Brenda Goodman, Deputy Associate Director, Office of Health Services

Subject: Agency Response to the Preliminary Program Evaluation Report of Peace Corps/Colombia (Project No. 12-Eval-06), February 2013

Enclosed please find the agency's response to the recommendations made by the Inspector General for Peace Corps/Colombia, as outlined in the Preliminary Report of the IG Evaluation sent to the Agency on February 15, 2013.

The Inter-America and Pacific (IAP) Region, Office of Safety and Security and Office of Health Services concur with 10 of 10 recommendations. Post has addressed and provided supporting documentation for all recommendations.

The Region will continue to work with Post and the departments identified in the Preliminary Report to ensure closure of these recommendations by the dates included within for outstanding recommendations.

Recommendation 1

That the regional Peace Corps safety and security officer and the post's safety and security coordinator, in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy's security personnel, assess security conditions along Colombia's Caribbean coast and define the geographic boundary within which the Peace Corps can develop new sites and safely operate outside of major urban areas.

Concur

IAP Region and Peace Corps (PC) Colombia (also referred to as post) have a continued commitment to diversifying site placements in coordination with the Embassy. As indicated in the U.S. Embassy Regional Security Officer's (RSO) "Decision Memo Atlantico", Peace Corps personnel collaborated closely with the RSO to reassess security conditions along the current program region of the Caribbean coast. The RSO who held the same position in Colombia at the time of Peace Corps' re-entry, based his favorable recommendation that Peace Corps be approved to operate in 11 new sites on two rigorous security assessments of the Atlantico Department in 2011 and 2012. While the current US Ambassador to Colombia has declined to approve Volunteer placement in the new sites that the RSO identified, PC Colombia will engage the new Ambassador in a conversation on the issue at such time as one is appointed.

Documents Submitted:

- *Decision Memo Atlantico*
- *Strategic Plan Summary Excerpt from FY13-15 IPBS Submission*
- *Strategic Plan Summary Excerpt from FY14-15 IPBS submission*

Status and Timeline for Completion: April 1, 2013

Recommendation 2

That the post develops a strategy to mitigate, and help Volunteers better manage, stressors connected to their service, including personal safety, healthy diets, sexual harassment and other stressors.

Concur

Post has carefully considered the struggles that CII-3¹⁴ Volunteers experienced and which provided the basis for this recommendation. Post would like to emphasize the fact that at the time of the IG evaluation, there was only one group of PCVs in country who were entering their 8th month of service and who responded to the All Volunteer Survey during their 5th to 8th month of service. The 8th month point is an important time in the Volunteers' service as they are just coming out of the low point of the adjustment curve where they are likely to have the largest amount of adjustment issues. Compounding this is the fact that they did not have experienced two-year Volunteers who could have provided mentoring and advice. In the time leading up to the IG evaluation as well as during and following the evaluation, post has been developing a comprehensive strategy to help Volunteers mitigate the Colombia-specific stressors that led to the findings discussed in the evaluation report. This strategy used the results of Volunteer evaluations, staff site visits to Volunteers (including CD, DPT and P&T staff), the IG evaluation, VAC meetings, informal conversations with Volunteers, internal Volunteer satisfaction surveys and the Annual Volunteer Survey as reference resources.

The strategy includes the following components:

- 1) Changes to the COTE and overall 27 month Training Continuum
- 2) Peer Support Network
- 3) Changes to Language Training
- 4) Host Family support
- 5) Arrival of new Safety and Security Coordinator

Each of these components is discussed in detail below:

Changes to COTE

Prior to the IG evaluation, changes in the Calendar of Training Events (COTE) for CII-4¹⁵ were already being contemplated. What prompted the changes under consideration were observations and feedback from the first group of regular two-year Peace Corps Volunteers to serve in Colombia since re-entry and who had arrived in October 2011. Many of these changes were made to help Volunteers better manage stressors related to their service. Building upon the Peace Corps sessions on resiliency, post designed a "Resiliency Series" weekly session with Trainees to discuss the many components of adjustment. As a result, Trainees were able to discuss stressors they would likely encounter and began to develop strategies for dealing with stressors typically associated with service.

¹⁴ CII-3 refers to the group of Peace Corps Volunteers that arrived in October 2011. This group was the first cohort of Peace Corps Volunteers serving for 27 months to arrive in Colombia since Peace Corps re-entry in 2010. CII-4 refers to the second cohort of Volunteers with 27 month service duration, which arrived in August 2012. CII-5 will arrive in August 2013.

¹⁵ CII-4 arrived in August 2012.

At the March 2013 reconnect IST for CII-4, post presented the second of three Peace Corps Resiliency trainings. The third will be facilitated at the mid-service IST in November, 2013. Finally, staff was trained in supporting Volunteer Resiliency during a staff retreat in January, 2013.

The Director of Programming and Training (DPT) and Peace Corps Medical Officer (PCMO) designed and delivered a session on how to advocate for yourself appropriately in the cultural context giving Volunteers more tools to manage the additional stressors of situations such as host families asking for loans, unwanted advances, etc.

In the coming year, the DPT, Safety and Security Coordinator (SSC) and PCMO will work together to design or strengthen sessions on maintaining healthy diets, and dealing with sexual harassment in the Colombian context. Finally, post leadership has worked with the Volunteer Advisory Council (VAC) to support Volunteer led committees in Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWP) and Diversity.

Peer Support Network

In order to help Volunteers develop resiliency and respond to each others' needs, post has worked with Volunteers to formulate a strategy for a Peer Support Network. Deputy Associate Director of the Office of Health Services Brenda Goodman was supportive of the initiative in her recent trip. As a transition to a full functioning network of PCV Leaders, the Volunteers proposed establishing a support Hotline for which Volunteers will be selected and trained by May, 2013. This action is part of a multi-tiered strategy that post will be implementing in 2013. The strategy includes the following:

- 1) Current Volunteers will apply for and be selected to serve and be trained as members of a "Peer Support Hotline" where they will be available to answer calls from other Volunteers to listen to and provide support. Peer Support Hotline members will provide their contact information to the Volunteers and respond when called upon.
- 2) As the first two-year Volunteers reach their COS, those who have been chosen to extend as Peace Corps Volunteer Leaders (PCVLs) will be trained in Peer Support Network methodology. They will then act as the members of Post's Peer Support Network and the hotline is programmed to be phased out.
- 3) Starting with CII-5 Trainees who arrive in August 2013, and as part of the COTE for PST, all Trainees will receive training on active listening and other peer support skills.

This strategy supports the results of post's most recent AMCS as well as requests from Volunteers. Beginning in January, 2013, a select group of Volunteers met with the DPT, CD and PCMO and then worked together to develop the strategy. The initial members of the Hotline will be trained in May, 2013, while the PCVLs will be trained in December, 2013.

Changes made to Language Training

Additionally, Post has improved language training through an enhanced language training curriculum that incorporates more grammar, a point raised on pages 22-23 of the report. Also, all LCFs hired for the PST for CII-4 (August-November, 2012) were certified to

administer the Language Proficiency Interview, which in turn enabled post to more precisely assess Trainee's progress. Additionally, internal evaluations of language training in the most recent PST that followed the IG evaluation (CII-4) showed Trainees were satisfied with their language training. Furthermore, the two trainees mentioned on page 23 who did not make the minimum Intermediate Medium level for swear-in, were sworn in under the condition that they receive tutoring and pass the minimum language level by their reconnect IST in March, 2013, their third month of service. Both Volunteers were tested at reconnect and made the Intermediate Medium level.

Host Families

In response to numerous Volunteer requests and after the IG evaluation, post revisited the standard agreement with host families to allow greater flexibility and meal options. While the changes made have led to an overall increase in PCV housing/living allowances, they have responded favorably to Volunteer diet and health needs, and appear to have contributed to the reduced number of complaints about host families since the changes went into effect. Finally, a survey conducted by the Host Family Coordinator at the reconnect IST for CII-4¹⁶ shows high satisfaction with their host families.

New Safety and Security Coordinator and Support for Dealing with Unwanted Attention

Post's new SSC (began March 11, 2013) is highly experienced in safety and security training and in field support. She brings to the position perspectives on safety and harassment issues that we feel confident will strengthen Volunteer resiliency and coping capabilities. She came to Peace Corps from Security and Safety Unit of the United Nations in the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia. Her resume reflects and highlights that background and experience. Additionally she completed United Nations on-line training on "Workplace Harassment, Sexual Harassment & Abuse of Authority", and is the author of a 69 slide PowerPoint presentation on security issues related specifically to women. At mid-year she together with the Country Director (CD) will bring Volunteers together in sub-regional safety and security meetings to discuss and address their priority concerns. These combined annual SSC-CD led meetings are part of the improved strategy to deal with Volunteer stressors.

Post is confident that the 2013 Volunteer Annual Volunteer Survey (AVS) feedback will corroborate the effectiveness of post's overall strategy to support Volunteers to advocate for themselves as well as to manage stress appropriately and effectively

Documents Submitted:

- *Host Family Contributions and Food Options*
- *CII-4 Pre-service Training Calendar of Training Events*
- *Agenda for Reconnect IST for CII-4*
- *Standard Host Family Agreement*
- *SSC Resume/ detail on experience outlined above*

¹⁶ CII-4 arrived in August 2012.

- *SSC Cover Letter to PC/Colombia - detail on experience outlined above*
- *Peace Corps developed Resiliency sessions*
 - *“Epic Journey” including:*
 - *Adjustment curve*
 - *“Coping Strategies” including*
 - *Adjustment curve*
 - *“The Year Ahead”*
- *Post developed resiliency series: Training materials for staff to support Volunteer resiliency*

Status and Timeline for Completion: April 1, 2013

Recommendation 3

That the Inter-America and the Pacific Operations regional director and the associate director for Safety and Security assess the viability of the community integration approach to Volunteer safety for urban sites in Colombia, and, if necessary, identify and implement steps to strengthen its effectiveness.

Concur

Post implements Peace Corps Strategy for Volunteer Safety and Security, an integrated safety and security model which includes three concepts, one of which is integration, to support Volunteer safety. Challenges to urban site placements in Colombia are common to other Peace Corps posts with urban sites. Colombia’s approach starts with a mandatory host family stay policy in big-city urban environments that lack dynamic and community-centered neighborhood life. In these big-city barrios, many Volunteers have not found opportunities to become engaged in community activities or develop relationships with neighbors and other community members. In PC Colombia’s site placement structure, a healthy and inter-active host family relationship is an essential ingredient and starting point for successful community integration. Post uses the host family agreement, annual host family trainings and Volunteer site visits to facilitate the host family’s and the Volunteer’s understanding and appreciation of each other’s cultural norms and values.

Peace Corps’ Strategy for Volunteer Safety and Security references example factors that improve Volunteer safety. Post is strong in all factor areas mentioned in the strategy, and is making further refinements to language training, supporting adherence to local customs, and engagement in community activities. Changes to language training are outlined in the response to Recommendation 2. Supporting adaption to local customs is an ongoing process based in part on the Volunteer’s relationship with the host family. Other enhancements to support are outlined in the response to Recommendation 2 as changes to the COTE as well as the inception of the Peer Support Network. Finally, post is working toward supporting Volunteers to identify meaningful community activities outside of the framework of their main assignments.

PC Colombia staff members have identified an increasing number of dynamic and committed non-profit organizations, foundations, and community-based associations

serving the poor and disadvantaged. These contacts and alliances have opened up opportunities for Volunteers to become more involved in meaningful community activities beyond the framework of their main assignments. From Volunteer site visits and in-service trainings staff has learned that this “secondary activity” type involvement is contributing significantly to Volunteer service satisfaction, with Volunteers conveying that they have become effectively engaged in important aspects of community life, even if it is at times beyond their immediate neighborhood.

We believe this is a developing best practice to address Volunteer challenges to community integration in large urban environments similar to those PC/Colombia Volunteers are facing. So much so that the Volunteers themselves formed a special committee in January 2013 to develop an inventory of such organizations in Cartagena, Barranquilla and Santa Marta to provide fellow Volunteers opportunities for intensive and highly motivating collaboration with disadvantaged target groups. The committee has provided Volunteers with an electronic version of Organization Profiles that have been completed (attached below as a Document Submitted) and that are being continually added as the inventory is updated. The Organization Profiles are accessible on the Volunteer SharePoint, and a hardcopy binder of the same is accessible for reference in the PC Office Volunteer Lounge.

Additionally, since comfort in communicating in the local language goes a long way in facilitating integration in the different aspects of community life, post has taken steps to improve the training side of language learning. These steps are noted in greater detail in the comments regarding language training improvements in response to Recommendation 2.

Post has also been consistent in communicating to invitees, Trainees and Volunteers in-service the challenges to successful community integration. The support team at post pursues opportunities to discuss with Trainees and Volunteers, individually during Trainee one-on-one sessions and Volunteer site visits as well as at group events, the various coping and resiliency strategies that may be appropriate and effective in their specific cases.

Post is reviewing the “PACA-Urban” session which was released by OPATS in February 2013 to determine how to incorporate in the PST for group CII-5 which will begin in August 2013. This session considers appropriate application of and trains participants in four key PACA tools (community map, seasonal calendar, daily activity schedule, and priority ranking matrix) in urban or peri-urban communities.

Finally, an important component contributing to the Volunteers’ potential integration in the communities where they live and work is the initial development and selection of their assigned sites. For this process, team members at post are guided by and apply the criteria and procedures outlined in Peace Corps Colombia’s “Safety and Security Site Selection Inspection Guide” (one of the documents submitted below). This is acknowledged in the evaluation report: “. . . all sites in these three cities {Cartagena, Barranquilla, and Santa Marta} were identified, assessed and developed in a rigorous

manner, in accordance with the post's site development criteria and procedures." Since August 2012 further enhancements have been made to: *Safety and Security Site Selection Inspection Guide, Volunteer Family Evaluation, Evaluacion por las familias anfitrionas, HOST FAMILIES brochure, Host Family Criteria-SP, Manual_de_Familias. Additional documents have been developed including: Organizational Profiles and Peace Corps' PACA-Urban session.*

Documents Submitted:

- *Safety and Security Site Selection Inspection Guide – PC/Colombia*
- *Organization Profiles*
- *Volunteer Family Evaluation at 6 months*
- *“Evaluación por las familias anfitrionas” (The template for the Host Family’s evaluation of the Trainee/Volunteer home-stay experience)*
- *HOST FAMILIES (A brochure handout describing Peace Corps and the Host Family experience)*
- *Host Family Criteria-SP (the Spanish version of criteria used in the process of selecting host families)*
- *“Manual_de_Familias_Febrero 2013” (Post’s manual to guide host families regarding the background and mission of the Peace Corps as well as outlining their responsibilities and PC/Colombia’s expectations of their role.)*
- *Peace Corps’ PACA-Urban session*

Status and Timeline for Completion: April 1, 2013

Recommendation 4

That the country director and Inter-America and the Pacific Operations regional director at headquarters identify a host family policy for Colombia that results in Volunteers having more successful host family relationships.

Concur

As Peace Corps has re-started our program in Colombia, the mandatory Host Family Policy serves to protect our Volunteers. Developing relationships with host families and communities presents learning opportunities. Post has been making ongoing adjustments, which post elaborated further during the evaluator’s visit. Since the IG visit the following changes have been implemented:

- 1) Volunteers must stay with their first assigned host family for at least three months before changes will be considered (safety and security concerns excepted). This change in the policy was based on conversations between post staff and Volunteers and was implemented in August, 2012. Volunteers interviewed by IG had been working under and were commenting on the previous policy.

2) The food policy was changed to give Volunteers more flexibility in determining their meal options, a factor identified as a considerable point of stress for Volunteers. This policy change was implemented in October, 2012.

3) The Host Family Coordinator, in addition to providing initial trainings of the families selected, has already begun conducting follow up meetings with families at the one-year mark. The purpose of these meetings is to maintain strong communication, reinforce the components of the host family experience, and provide a forum to receive feedback and troubleshoot possible problems. These yearly meetings that began in January 2013 are a strategy also included in Post's IPBS for 2014-2015.

4) Volunteers and Host Families will be providing a six-month evaluation of the joint experience. Evaluations will also take place at the year and two year marks of Volunteer service. This will apply to all families, including families affected by Volunteer changes of host families.

5) The Host Family Coordinator has developed user friendly handbooks for both Volunteers and Host Families. These will be distributed to Host Families and Volunteers as part of the site selection process for the CII-5 training cycle. The distribution will take place September-November, 2013.

Documents Submitted:

- *Host Family Policy - excerpt from Volunteer Handbook*
- *Volunteer Family Evaluation at 6 months*
- *“Evaluación por las familias anfitrionas” (The template for the Host Family’s evaluation of the Trainee/Volunteer home-stay experience)*
- *HOST FAMILIES (A brochure handout describing Peace Corps and the Host Family experience)*
- *Host Family Criteria-SP (the Spanish version of criteria used in the process of selecting host families)*
- *“Manual_de_Familias_Febrero 2013” (Post’s manual to guide host families regarding the background and mission of the Peace Corps as well as outlining their responsibilities and PC/Colombia’s expectations of their role.)*
- *Host Family Contributions and Food Options*

Status and Timeline for Completion: April 1, 2013

Recommendation 5

That the country director and the Inter-America and the Pacific Operations regional director at headquarters assess the sufficiency of the current office space and secure additional office space, if needed.

Concur

The country director will provide the IAP Regional Director updated information regarding the current distribution of office space. Post now has a full complement of core staff, and has made important changes in space distribution to resolve a confidentiality issue in the Medical Unit and to provide appropriate lounge and work space for Volunteers when at the office. These changes, however, have eliminated a work area for training staff, a need that must be addressed temporarily or permanently before the next PST cycle that begins in August 2013.

Inter-America and Pacific Region Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) visited post in February 2013 and this provided the opportunity for an assessment of the current office space. Both the CAO and the RD are in concurrence that additional space is needed. Post is implementing the proposed Action Plan to acquire additional office space.

Documents submitted:

- PC Colombia Action Plan for Acquiring Additional Office Space

Status and Timeline for Completion: April 1, 2013

Recommendation 6

That the Peace Corps medical officer complete the medical evacuation plan.

Concur

After the field work of the program evaluation was conducted, the Country Director and Peace Corps Medical Officer coordinated the completion of post's Medical Evacuation Plan. The plan was submitted to OHS for review.

Documents submitted:

- PC Colombia Medical Evacuation Plan

Status and Timeline for Completion: March 12, 2013

Recommendation 7

That the Office of Health Services review the post's medical evacuation plan to ensure its completeness.

Concur

The Office of Health Services has reviewed post's Medical Evacuation Plan. The very complete Post Specific Medical Evacuation Plan is approved for implementation.

Documents submitted:

- PC Colombia Medical Evacuation Plan (submitted under Recommendation 6)

Status and Timeline for Completion: March 20, 2013

Recommendation 8

That the director of programming and training set expectations regarding the timeliness of staff feedback to Volunteers on their work reports and ensure that staff uses the Volunteer Reporting Tool to support Volunteers and communicate project results.

Concur

Post has implemented a policy where the project team that consists of two PTS's and one PM divide the responsibility of responding in writing to Volunteer reports as opposed to the PM being the sole person responsible for this task. They will rotate the Volunteers they respond to and they have one month to respond upon receipt of the last Volunteer report during the cycle. The policy is attached, was communicated to Volunteers via bi-weekly newsletter and will be added to the Volunteer handbook's latest version set to be published August, 2013. In addition to the written feedback for the VRT, the PM and two PTSs provide feedback to Volunteers in various ways. Through site visits, formal meetings, informal meetings, office visits by Volunteers, phone calls, emails and surveys, Volunteers have made use of these multiple opportunities to interact and receive feedback from their PM and PTSs.

Documents submitted:

- Peace Corps Colombia Volunteer Reporting Tool Feedback Policy
- Bi-Weekly Newsletter of Feb 22, 2013

Status and Timeline for Completion: February 22, 2013

Recommendation 9

That the program manager become more familiar with the feedback functionality of the Volunteer Reporting Tool and provide timely and substantive feedback to Volunteers.

Concur

All project support staff were trained in the VRT via web-ex specifically conducted for post by Kevin Cropper from OCIO. There was also a follow up training with the DPT so that by March 1st (memo attached), all were trained in the feedback functionality of the VRT.

Documents submitted:

- VRF Memo
- VRT training
- Sample of PM feedback
- VRT User Guide

Status and Timeline for Completion: March 1, 2013

Recommendation 10

That the director of programming and training and the training manager make necessary adjustments to training so that Volunteers in Colombia clearly understand their role as

Volunteers, including the requirement to demonstrate respect for Colombians and their culture as well as sufficient adaptability and self-sufficiency.

Concur

As explained above in the response to Recommendation 2, the creation of the Resiliency Series was in response to observations and feedback of Volunteers not having the basic adaptation skills nor understanding their role as Volunteers in Colombia. Considerable time was spent in the PST CII-4 discussing the role of a Volunteer in Colombia, not only in the Resiliency Series, but also with the Peace Corps developed sessions such as “Role of Volunteer in Development,” “Peace Corps’ approach to Development,” and “Understanding my work partners.”

Finally, at the time of the IG evaluation, there was only one group of Volunteers in country who were at their 8 month point of their service. Essentially they had no peer role models to look up to and learn from. It should not be underestimated that by having experienced Volunteers in country, both with Volunteers now in their second year (who were the focus group for this report) as well as excellent Response Volunteers, the group that arrived in August 2012 have peers to look to for leadership and support in dealing with adjustment issues.

Documents submitted:

- *CII-4 Pre-Service Training Calendar of Training Events*
- *Post developed “Resiliency Series”*
- *Peace Corps developed Resiliency sessions*
 - *“Epic Journey” including:*
 - *Adjustment curve*
 - *“Coping Strategies” including*
 - *Adjustment curve*
 - *“The Year Ahead”*
- *Peace Corps sessions “Approach to Development,” “Role of the Volunteer in Development,” and “Understanding my Work Partners”*

Status and Timeline for Completion: April 1, 2013

APPENDIX C: OIG COMMENTS

Management concurred with all 10 recommendations. We closed eight recommendations (3-10) based on a review of corrective actions and supporting documentation. Recommendations 1 and 2 will remain open pending confirmation from the chief compliance officer that the documentation identified in management's response and in our analysis has been received.

In its response, management described actions it is taking or intends to take to address the issues that prompted each of our recommendations. We wish to note that in closing recommendations, we are not certifying that the agency has taken these actions or that we have reviewed their effect. Certifying compliance and verifying effectiveness are management's responsibilities.

We will consider closing recommendation 1 following receipt of documentation that indicates Peace Corps/Colombia has obtained approval to develop new sites outside of major urban areas. Please respond with documentation to close recommendation 2 within 90 days of receipt of this memorandum.

We wish to acknowledge the comprehensive manner in which the post and region responded to the report and our recommendations. Post has enhanced its site selection criteria; improved language, cross-culture and other areas of Volunteer training; identified community-based organizations that give Volunteers additional opportunities to contribute in their communities; and improved its processes and policies to support more successful host family experiences. We also commend the post for the detailed and thorough documentation it provided in response to all 10 report recommendations.

Recommendation 1

That the regional Peace Corps safety and security officer and the post's safety and security coordinator, in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy's security personnel, assess security conditions along Colombia's Caribbean coast and define the geographic boundary within which the Peace Corps can develop new sites and safely operate outside of major urban areas.

Concur

IAP Region and Peace Corps (PC) Colombia (also referred to as post) have a continued commitment to diversifying site placements in coordination with the Embassy. As indicated in the U.S. Embassy Regional Security Officer's (RSO) "Decision Memo Atlantico", Peace Corps personnel collaborated closely with the RSO to reassess security conditions along the current program region of the Caribbean coast. The RSO who held the same position in Colombia at the time of Peace Corps' re-entry, based his favorable recommendation that Peace Corps be approved to operate in 11 new sites on two rigorous security assessments of the Atlantico Department in 2011 and 2012. While the current US Ambassador to Colombia has declined to approve Volunteer placement in the new sites that the RSO identified, PC Colombia will engage the new Ambassador in a conversation on the issue at such time as one is appointed.

Documents Submitted:

- *Decision Memo Atlantico*
- *Strategic Plan Summary Excerpt from FY13-15 IPBS Submission*
- *Strategic Plan Summary Excerpt from FY14-15 IPBS submission*

Status and Timeline for Completion: April 1, 2013

OIG analysis: In its response to the recommendation the agency indicated that it would engage the new Ambassador on approval of new site locations. Recommendation 1 will remain open until post is able to obtain approval from the U.S. Embassy to develop new sites for Volunteers outside of major urban areas along the Caribbean coast.

Recommendation 2

That the post develops a strategy to mitigate, and help Volunteers better manage, stressors connected to their service, including personal safety, healthy diets, sexual harassment and other stressors.

Concur

Post has carefully considered the struggles that CII-3 Volunteers experienced and which provided the basis for this recommendation. Post would like to emphasize the fact that at the time of the IG evaluation, there was only one group of PCVs in country who were entering their 8th month of service and who responded to the All Volunteer Survey during their 5th to 8th month of service. The 8th month point is an important time in the Volunteers' service as they are just coming out of the low point of the adjustment curve where they are likely to have the largest amount of adjustment issues. Compounding this is the fact that they did not have experienced two-year Volunteers who could have provided mentoring and advice. In the time leading up to the IG evaluation as well as during and following the evaluation, post has been developing a comprehensive strategy to help Volunteers mitigate the Colombia- specific stressors that led to the findings discussed in the evaluation report. This strategy used the results of Volunteer evaluations, staff site visits to Volunteers (including CD, DPT and P&T staff), the IG evaluation, VAC meetings, informal conversations with Volunteers, internal Volunteer satisfaction surveys and the Annual Volunteer Survey as reference resources.

The strategy includes the following components:

- 6) Changes to the COTE and overall 27 month Training Continuum
- 7) Peer Support Network
- 8) Changes to Language Training
- 9) Host Family support
- 10) Arrival of new Safety and Security Coordinator

OIG analysis: Please provide documentation that the Peer Support Network described in the agency's response has started to function. This could include evidence that Volunteers have been selected and trained to serve as members of the "Peer Support Hotline."

APPENDIX D: PROGRAM EVALUATION COMPLETION AND OIG CONTACT

PROGRAM EVALUATION COMPLETION

This program evaluation was conducted by Senior Evaluator Jerry Black under the direction of Assistant Inspector General for Evaluations Jim O'Keefe, with assistance from Evaluation Apprentice Tim Shaw.



Jim O'Keefe
Assistant Inspector General for Evaluations

OIG CONTACT

Following issuance of the final report, a stakeholder satisfaction survey will be distributed. If you wish to comment on the quality or usefulness of this report to help us improve our products, please email Assistant Inspector General for Evaluations Jim O'Keefe at jokeefe@peacecorps.gov, or call 202.692.2904.

Help Promote the Integrity, Efficiency, and Effectiveness of the Peace Corps

Anyone knowing of wasteful practices, abuse, mismanagement, fraud, or unlawful activity involving Peace Corps programs or personnel should contact the Office of Inspector General. Reports or complaints can also be made anonymously.

Contact OIG

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Mail: Peace Corps Office of Inspector General
P.O. Box 57129
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