

Tom Hebert's Peace Corps Settlement House

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The Peace Corps, as we know, has Three Goals, but the agency traditionally has only spent about 1% of their budget on the Third Goal of the Peace Corps act, i.e., that's the RPCVs community. That given, Tom Hebert (Nigeria 1962–64) has come up with a great idea to help RPCVs, would-be PCVs, and the Peace Corps community-at-large with the "Peace Corps Settlement House" in Washington, D.C.

The Peace Corps Agency, of course, will not support the effort. As the Peace Corps Director wrote Tom recently—

I know how passionate you are about the community enrichment that is possible through the settlement house model. I know that you also realize that the leadership for a settlement house project must come from foundations, the NPCA/RPCV community, and committed others, because it is outside the authorities of the Peace Corps.

So this is what Tom Hebert has in mind. If you are willing and can help Tom, who is a writer and public policy consultant living on the Umatilla Indian Reservation outside Pendleton, Oregon, contact him at: tlhmavrick@gmail.com

The following is an edited version (for purposes of length) of Tom's proposal.

What is a Settlement House

In broad terms settlement houses are traditional neighborhood-based organizations provide social services and activities designed to identify and reinforce the strengths of individuals, families and communities.

Varying according to the needs of their inner-city neighborhoods, settlement services and programs that can help improve the lives of the people in a neighborhood may include: daycare, health care clinics, youth guidance and learning, workforce development, crime intervention, specialized programs for young people who have "aged out" of the foster care system, family and senior programs and other services to the community such as good food, recreation, entertainment, and cultural programs. Plus there can be public meeting rooms, both large and small.

More possibilities: job training and employment programs, early childhood education, arts education and theatrical performances, dance classes, computer labs, English-as-a-Second-Language and literacy education, citizenship instruction, legal counseling, mental health and home care, housing, senior centers and Meals-on-Wheels. And for the homeless, amenities like showers and toilets and a job assistance center.

The aim of any settlement or neighborhood house is to bring about a new kind of community life. It is in the community or neighborhood that people seek and fight for solutions to their concrete, daily, local and immediate problems. Settlements engage neighbors in the planning and design of their programs, and so they provide assistance and space to individuals and groups in efforts to solve community problems. In this way, houses also offer opportunities for community service: holding forums on local concerns, registering voters, and providing information about citywide issues.

The idea of a Peace Corps House in Washington DC, grew out of the life experiences of several RPCVs who spent part of their careers working and living in Washington.

How would Peace Corps traditions and the life experiences of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers play into the programs at Peace Corps House? Of critical importance there is RPCV/Washington DC.

Examples: local RPCVs, working with local schools, tutoring in Geography (location, people, their culture and relationships, and places of the world), start a homework club, a college entrance team, teach reading, some sports, and computers when they weren't doing something else. Something fun, social, cultural as well as teaching/learning. With RPCV internships, mentoring, training, and classroom assistance, we see also a possible collaboration with institutions of higher learning. Add in a quality after-school homework program and Peace Corps House should rock with learning.

Indeed, trained Returned Peace Corps Volunteers will be mentors in what have been called community dropout centers but we are calling the Learning Commons at Peace Corps House. We believe that this kind of service visibly/strongly demonstrates Peace Corps' Third Goal in action.

Another example: a Peace Corps Adventure Club. Schools don't have the time or money anymore to provide old-fashioned but effective field trips and time after school is at a premium for today's rushed kids.

The proposed PC House would be established and managed by the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA) working with the Settlement House leadership. Peace Corps House would thus be independent from the Peace Corps and *entirely* self-supporting.

Financing

Typically and traditionally, 75-80% of the funding in America's 400-plus settlement houses/neighborhood centers comes from existing local, state, and federal social service programs. Because a higher 80-90% government support is considered both risky and restrictive, getting it below 80% means a House has some support for infrastructure and innovation — government grants rarely cover the full cost of programs. Like many non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations, NPCA fundraising will arise from a brew of government, foundations and private sources. The good news is that an experienced fundraiser for Washington non-profits and settlement houses elsewhere is taking an interest in Peace Corps House. It also helps that recently the director of the Peace Corps sent a supportive letter noting that Peace Corps House will be "outside the authorities of the Peace Corps."

Building renovation funds? Working from a long-term lease, one possibility: The Anacostia Economic Development Corporation is a Community Development Corporation "established to meet the overall economic needs and to improve the quality-of-life circumstances of the residents residing in the Anacostia/Far Southeast community.

Next things

The Peace Corps House will necessarily proceed with small steps that strike the community as reasonable. It will all take time, money, and not come easy. But as Glenn Blumhorst, president of the NPCA said on February 7: "As NPCA, RPCV/W and several prominent settlement house professionals have endorsed the plan, we are gaining traction."

With that in mind, the next step forward is to fundraise maybe \$7,500 to hire a settlement professional to develop a detailed action plan in how to get operational. This plan would include sources of funds to hire the executive director who would then bring Peace Corps House to life.