

# *What is a Settlement House?*

## *Descriptions and notes for Peace Corps House*

March 6, 2016

Settlement houses—sometimes called community or neighborhood centers—are all as different from one another as the history, the culture, the people, and the needs of the community they serve.

### **First things**

It is here admitted that Tom Hebert's language in his binder's cover letter and Concept Paper concerning the role of both the Peace Corps and funding of Peace Corps House was problematic. It is here clarified.

The idea of a Peace Corps House in Washington DC, grew out of the life experiences of several Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) who spent part of their careers working and living in Washington. As a result, Peace Corps House will be established and managed by the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA) working with world-class professional House leadership. Peace Corps House will thus be independent from the Peace Corps and *entirely* self-supporting. How?

Typically 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.

Of course, if the management of Peace Corps House was to go awry—becomes a liability—Peace Corps would be within its rights to say, "Shape up or shut down."

Building renovation funds? Working from a long-term lease, one possibility: The Anacostia Economic Development Corporation is a Community Development Corporation that was "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."

### **Why settlement houses? What do they do?**

Working from several sources about the purposes and work of settlement houses, in broad terms these 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. Add in a quality after-school homework program and Peace Corps House should rock with learning.

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.

To be established in a neighborhood in Ward 8 or Ward 5, Peace Corps House will thus serve multiple purposes like providing the entire community a place for concerts, conferences, workshops, and a community library with archives, an enterprise incubator/accelerator with rental co-working office spaces. And making the House building (s) as energy efficient as possible while providing conservation workshops to home owners and retail stores. Perhaps a mobile beauty salon providing cosmetic services to people in need i.e., in homeless shelters? Such programs can break down stigma and isolation and increase self-esteem. If it finds a champion, it will happen.

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.

Although the community remains the focus of the settlement's attention, it is through the personalized and direct involvement with the individual, in the context of the family—often throughout a lifetime—that the settlement fosters and supports the values of fellowship and mutual support that strengthens families and improves neighborhoods throughout a city. Many people who participate in settlement programs live within walking distance; typically, many staff are also neighborhood residents.

### **Opportunities for the local RPCV community**

How would Peace Corps traditions and the life experiences of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers play into the programs at Peace Corps House?

Local RPCVs, working with local schools, will tutor 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 local institutions of higher learning.

Indeed, trained Returned Peace Corps Volunteers from the metropolitan area will be mentors in what have been called community dropout centers but we are calling, for now, the Learning Commons at Peace Corps House.

A specific 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. But it is likely that a program will be developed around an international/cross-cultural theme. A local RPCV organization would identify and stage weekend field trips for Peace Corps Adventure Club members. These would be expeditions into various local ethnic communities, meeting local leaders, eating traditional foods, even learning a dance step! There could be a local geography program where children and youth learn the now mostly unknown features and history of where they live. And to help unemployed community youth prepare for the world they will inherit, the Club could partner with the Earth Conservation Corps to work on Anacostia community clean up projects. For the RPCV community, the Club could become a national model.

### **Next things**

As noted in the January 20, 2016 Concept Paper: "To be founded by the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA), Peace Corps House will also raise the profile of the Peace Corps locally among federal policy makers, provide a natural focus for ongoing involvement of local RPCVs, and not least, help revitalize far Southeast and Southwest."

The start-up? Beyond working with experienced settlement house consultants and hiring the best possible neighborhood settlement house executive director and securing a building and any required renovation funding, 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. That said, Glenn Blumhorst, president of the NPCA on February 7: "As NPCA, RPCV/W and several prominent settlement house professionals have endorsed the plan, we are gaining traction."

### **Bottom line**

To get to the heart of settlement houses, they have always worked "to build an inclusive community by empowering, inspiring and connecting people who are working locally for social justice." Sounds good to us.