

Peace Corps House **Ward 8, Washington D.C.**

This is a proposal to involve the traditions of Peace Corps more fully in the every-day life of Washington, DC by working with city government, local community, and Returned Peace Corps Volunteers to create Peace Corps House, a settlement house to be located in SE/SW Washington.

To be founded and managed 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 Ward 8.

To begin at the beginning Settlement houses are traditional institutions in an inner-city neighborhood providing such social services as 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 to help improve the lives of the people in a neighborhood.

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 their 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, settlement 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.

However, in projects or programs similar to Peace Corps House (PCH) the Peace Corps has learned the hard way that if a local community doesn't take ownership—feel that it is theirs—it will not survive. The board of directors will, of course, be sensitive to any whiff of paternalism.

Indeed, as Jane Addams, a founder of the world's settlement house movement in 1889 with Chicago's Hull House said, "The Settlement must be open to conviction and must have a deep and abiding sense of tolerance. The only thing to be dreaded in the Settlement is that it lose its flexibility, its power of quick adaptation, its readiness to change its methods as its environment may demand. It thus must be hospitable and ready for experiment."

Today, the settlement house movement is truly international with several thousand settlement houses open and serving all over the world including well over 400 in this country. Which is one reason why Jane Addams received the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize. Clearly, it is Peace Corps friendly.

And, if the Peace Corps gets acquainted with settlement houses through Peace Corps House, then Volunteers could be taking with them in their kit bag the possibility of establishing a locally appropriate settlement house or neighborhood center in their country of service.

I. Purposes of Peace Corps House

1. To serve the people of Ward 8 with effective social services. Nor will it “lose its flexibility, its power of quick adaptation, its readiness to change its methods as its environment may demand.”
2. To help make Ward 8 a more livable and better place to grow up.
3. To help meet the requirements of No. 5 of the Peace Corps’ Six Point Strategic Plan:

To actively engage Volunteers, returned Volunteers and the American public through strong partnerships with private sector companies, schools, civil society, returned Peace Corps Volunteer groups and government agencies to increase understanding of other cultures and generate commitment to volunteerism and community service as a way to continue service.

II. Features

1. Location and facilities: Somewhere in Washington’s Ward 8. Local outreach, time, and opportunity will tell. Perhaps, the new developments at St. Elizabeths East will provide opportunity. Or, if one is available, Peace Corps House could “adaptive reuse” an unused school building or other suitable “found space.” Alternately, Peace Corps House might find it best to occupy several closely related buildings in a neighborhood setting (not retail). Chicago’s original Hull House was an aggregation of over a dozen buildings with a summer camp for children. Also proposed for parallel development is a Peace Corps Hostel (with a dormitory for people who might come there on vacations or spring break to volunteer for a week or two) and a Peace Corps Café (discussed below). NPCA windshield tours and discussions with settlement house professionals and local social service leaders will help in the Peace Corps House site selection process.

2. Management: Necessarily an NGO, Peace Corps House will be organized and managed by the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA) with an *experienced settlement house professional* as executive director reporting to a diverse board of directors of at least 13 members. To include local civic leaders and social workers, the NPCA, and area Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs). And fund raisers. It’s important that the board and staff is seen as working alongside local people.

3. Financial support: Peace Corps House will be *entirely independent* (not costing Peace Corps anything). Typically 75-80% of the funding in America’s 400-plus settlement houses/ neighborhood centers comes from existing local, state, 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 proposed Peace Corps Hostel and the Peace Corps Café will be independent sustaining operations.

4. 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.”

5. Partnerships: Peace Corps House will have an evolving relationship with the Peace Corps, the Mayor’s office, St. Elizabeths East, and Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus (THEARC), and more as they develop. 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.”

6. RPCV support: Given that there are upwards of 3,000 Returned Volunteers living in the metropolitan region with many belonging to several regional RPCV organizations, Peace Corps House has a large pool of potential volunteers to draw from. For example, the very active Northern

Virginia RPCV association describes itself as a social/service organization that conducts educational workshops, supports a mentoring program, and provides public speakers for programs at schools, churches, scout troops, etc. Peace Corps House fills the bill. The Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of Washington D.C. has agreed that local RPCVs could assume the roles described herein to help make the project sustainable in the long term. More possibilities follow below.

III. The District Government's Comprehensive Plan

The Comp Plan strives to make every neighborhood in the District of Columbia a "neighborhood of choice."

Area elements: Far Southeast/Southwest is a community of contrasts. It includes the 19th century row houses of Historic Anacostia as well as brand new communities like Henson Ridge and Wheeler Creek. Its housing ranges from single family homes in neighborhoods like Congress Heights, to garden apartments in neighborhoods like Washington Highlands and Fort Stanton, to high-rise apartments such as the Wyngates and Faircliff Plaza.

Anacostia and the surrounding Far Southeast/Southwest neighborhoods that surround it have stayed strong through difficult times. But many middleclass residents left the area in the 1970's, 80's and 90's, affecting the stability of the area's neighborhoods. The crime rate and unemployment rate remain chronically high and are well above the city and regional average. The average resident must go outside their neighborhood to shop, enjoy a restaurant, and even find basic services like groceries. Today, the priorities are clear: safer streets, better schools, more jobs, and improved housing choices. The Comprehensive Plan reflects these priorities in its policies and maps. Poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, crime, and other social issues must be addressed to improve the quality of life for residents in the Far Southeast/Southwest. For revitalization to truly succeed, all residents must be given opportunities to advance.

Peace Corps House could be a vital partner of such a process, which also relates to one of St. Elizabeths East's Redevelopment Goals: "Create new employment and education opportunities for DC residents, particularly those of Ward 8." But to add to the mix of issues Ward 8 faces, from a February 2014 "Truth Out" story,

DC's Poorest Residents Fight Displacement by Gentrification

"But as developers become desperate for new real estate to flip, residents living east of the Anacostia River (the unofficial dividing line between the city's haves and have-nots) are seeing the beginning of gentrification take shape. And if the past decade has taught them anything, it is that gentrification usually leaves longtime low-income residents out in the cold — literally." But, settlement houses have always worked "to build an inclusive community by empowering, inspiring and connecting people who are working locally for social justice." This conviction might assist the Ward 8 community to hold itself against gentrification and fast-rising rents.

There's more. In the 2011 *DC Youth Needs Assessment* Ward 8 had the lowest proficiency for reading and math in public schools. And in the Ward, where 48% of children live in poverty, births to teenage mothers accounted for 20% of births and the Ward had the greatest number of sexually transmitted diseases. Ward 8 also had the highest percentage of persons receiving SNAP funds."

So, it's no surprise that youths in Ward 8 "bear a disproportionate of the disparities in health, education, recreation, culture and legal services." Which leads us here:

IV. Possible Social Service Programs (suggestive, not inclusive)

1. An after-school Learning Commons

Some research and possibilities. For example, a 2006 report from the National Institute on Out-of-School Time states that,

“Ten years ago, it was enough for a program to provide a safe space, some time to do homework, and a variety of recreational activities. Now programs are to achieve many of the goals of schools, families, and communities, as we increasingly look to programs to boost academic achievement, stem youth crime, increase children’s health and well being, and support working families.”

That hasn’t changed. So simply turning our children and teens out on the street on school days with neither constructive activities nor adult supervision is not acceptable, nor is it particularly useful to engage them with a re-jiggered Sports and Recreation program, however juiced-up with advice.

According to *Invest in Kids* research, the most effective Primary Prevention Programs for dealing with alcohol and drug issues begin in the after-school hours from 3-6 PM. “When the school bell rings, turning children and teens out on the street with neither constructive activities nor adult supervision, violent juvenile crime suddenly soars. A properly designed after-school program between the hours of 3:00 to 6:00 PM can have strong positive effects on children’s academic, social, and emotional lives. These young people learn to read well, get better grades, attend school more with improved behavior and express greater hopes for the future.

“Such programs also have positive effects on motivation, engagement in learning, expectations of success, team work, conflict resolution, social competence, improved behavior, and leadership skills. Quality youth development and after-school programs protect both children and adults from becoming victims of crime, and cut teen pregnancy, smoking, and drug use while they help youngsters develop the values and skills they need to become contributing citizens.”

This is true, especially, when After-School and graduation incentives programs provide mentoring, tutoring, and group learning, with each student having an individually designed program combining what *both* they and their parents need and want. In this way, a Peace Corps House program could transform this time into hours of academic enrichment, wholesome fun and community service while alleviating child care worries of working parents. Of course, there will also be a quality school homework aspect to the program, indeed whatever is needed, and wanted, by parents and our youth, in any form that is honest, innovative, inviting, and lively, effective programs.

Add in field-trips, creative writing, computers, web design, job training and employment programs, early childhood education, music, 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 school-to-prison pipeline can be broken and dreams restored. Three Washington high schools’ Future Projects provide inspiration with coaching by “building will and skill in students and improving the culture of the school.” Similarly, Peace Corps House could rock with learning.

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

2. 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 possible that a volunteer program could be developed around an international/cross-cultural theme. A local RPCV organization could 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 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.

Another possibility: Local RPCVs, working with local schools, could 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 internships, mentoring, training, and classroom assistance, and also possible collaborations with local institutions of higher learning.

V. More opportunities

. . . from readers of earlier drafts: Peace Corps House could serve multiple purposes, i.e., providing the entire community a place for concerts, conferences, workshops, etc.), and a community library with archives, an enterprise incubator/accelerator with rental co-working office spaces. And making the building (s) as energy efficient as possible while providing conservation workshops to home owners and retail stores. Or a mobile beauty salon providing cosmetic services to people in need i.e., in homeless shelters. It can break down stigma and isolation and increase self-esteem. As Jane Addams said, settlement houses must be flexible, hospitable and ready for experiment.

VI. The Peace Corps Café

The idea behind the Peace Corps Café, independent but related to Peace Corps House, comes from the Press Café in Batumi, Georgia, that far corner of eastern Europe. Happily, it was the project of Craig Schwinck, a Peace Corps Volunteer from Henderson, NV. Craig served in the coastal city of Batumi, 2010 to 2012.

“My assignment was to establish a place where the free press in Georgia was able to come, discuss, debate, develop and learn from each other. We who started the café had a goal to create a safe haven for that expression. It became a place not only for the press, but for everyone in the state of Adjara to share diverse ideas, experiences and good food. Would it work in Washington?

“I believe so. The Press Café has two distinct concepts that would work in DC: It is a full-service restaurant providing profit for sustainability. Next, the Events provide for free expression, learning and development, a place to debate and reflect. It has an experience-driven dynamic that is transferable if developed around the local area.

“Since its opening in late 2010, the Press Café has hosted many events covering topics such as; human rights, journalistic ethics, civil and religious freedom, documentary and art-house cinemas. The Café atmosphere is kept new and inviting by changing the art and décor monthly and the Café is available for NGO's to use for open and closed meetings. While the Press Café is a school for democracy, the emphasis is on enjoyable. The Café also has unique uses such as hosting children in a program where they learn about the development of the Georgian constitution and their rights under it.”

RPCV Craig Schwinck's original 25-page *Management Manual* for the Press Café is available to help jump-start such a café. Wouldn't a Peace Corps Café as an independent outgrowth of Peace Corps House help make Far Southeast/Southwest a neighborhood of choice and a more livable and better place to grow up?

Because that is the aim of Peace Corps House. Not to generate a local culture of dependency or weaken existing programs—rather than support self-sufficiency—but to help Ward 8 “build back better.”

VII. Resources

1. Background

- Anacostia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anacostia>
- St. Elizabeths East: <http://stelizabethseast.com>
- Google images: Anacostia and Ward 8
- Neighborhood House, Portland, Oregon: www.nhpd.org

2. Reconnaissance: A lengthy NPCA-sponsored windshield tour of Anacostia and Ward 8 visiting the THEARC and St. Elizabeths East and perhaps Ward 5. Participating will be two deeply experienced settlement house professionals: Irma Rodriguez, executive director, International Federation of Settlement Houses and Neighborhood Centers (IFS) and Michael Zisser, president of the board of directors of IFS as well as CEO of New York City's University Settlement, the largest group of Houses in the world.

3. Mayor Murial Bowser: Phone: (202) 727-6300.

4. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton: Phone: (202) 225-8050

District office at S.E. 2041 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave., S.E. **Phone: (202) 678-8900**

5. FLOTUS: To outline a possible role for the First Lady, if Peace Corps House finds traction in Ward 8, NPCA should talk with Michelle Obama.

Office: 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. **Phone: (202) 456-1111.**

6. IFS: The International Federation of Settlements, New York, is an association of national, regional and local organizations working to strengthen communities around the world. Its mission is to build an inclusive global community by empowering, inspiring and connecting people who are working locally for social justice. IFS' exec. director is Irma Rodriguez. See letter of support. **Phone: (917) 951-9829.**

VIII. The start-up?

As noted, 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. Glenn Blumhorst, president of the NPCA: “As NPCA, RPCV/W and several prominent settlement house professionals have endorsed the plan, we are gaining traction.”

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