

November 20, 2016

A Peace Corps House for Washington, DC ?

Social services, social justice.

A Project Summary & Situation Report

What is Peace Corps House?

A settlement house.

What is a settlement house?

America's 400 settlement houses — often called a community or neighborhood center — are all as different from one another as the history, the culture, the children and families, and the changing needs of the community they serve. Settlement houses date back to the late 1800s. Thus they bring tried and true traditions to any community.

Operating from an existing house or other building located in a neglected, stressed, careworn urban neighborhood, settlement staff works to identify and provide — or facilitate in obtaining — social services and a range of activities designed to reinforce the strengths of individuals and families and their children living in the area, thus making the neighborhood more livable.

Settlement houses thus contribute to the improvement of the quality of life for residents of a neighborhood where, as the District's Comprehensive Plan states, "poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, crime, and other social issues must be addressed for revitalization to truly succeed, all residents must be given opportunities to advance." Peace Corps House could help. Portland, Oregon's brimming with vitality Neighborhood House dates back to 1905. There are over 1,400 such organizations worldwide and over 400 in America.

How do they get the job done?

The aim of any settlement 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. Settlement houses engage neighbors in the planning and design of their programs, and provide assistance and space to individuals and groups in efforts to solve community problems. Many people who participate in settlement programs live within walking distance; typically, many staff are also neighborhood residents.

Although the community remains the focus of the settlement's attention, it is balanced through the personalized and direct involvement with the individual—generally in the context of the family—that the settlement fosters and supports the values of fellowship and mutual support that strengthens families and improves neighborhoods throughout a city.

Settlement Houses prosper because by their success-proven history since 1889 and theory they offer a rounded and comprehensive group of programs that go beyond the usual social service, problem-centered, government-sponsored programs. They are creative places.

Is there a settlement house in Washington DC?

No.

Could there be?

Yes. As Glenn Blumhorst, president and CEO of the National Peace Corps Association emailed on February 7: “Because NPCA, RPCV/W and several prominent settlement house professionals have endorsed the plan, we are gaining traction.” [See Letters of Support.]

As things stand now, will there be?

That’s unclear.

Why is that?

In March 2016, the NPCA, the original sponsor of Peace Corps House, had to withdraw its January agreement to establish and manage Peace Corps House due to inherited realities demanding a financial recovery and a new strategic plan with several competing NPCA programs. On March 6, 2016 Blumhorst emailed Tom Hebert that, “I’m going to need to slide the project to the back burner. Don’t despair. Nothing worthwhile is ever easy.” S’t true.

Thus, for several months PCH came to rest in a kind of limbo. Meanwhile, major players in this drama had never read the original 3-ring binder including the January Concept Paper and related documentation. Thus, this website, which has helped re-start Peace Corps House.

So, is there hope?

Yes, on two fronts. First, in late October Blumhorst and Chris Robinson, president of RPCVs of Washington, offered to help jump-start Peace Corps House by convening a meeting of local RPCVs who had shown an interest by posting on RPCV/W’s Facebook site. Chris also included information on their blog:
http://www.rpcvw.org/peace_corps_house_the_peace_corps_cafe

Glenn noted that, “Each of you has expressed interest in the concept of a Peace Corps Settlement House in Washington, D.C., as envisioned by RPCV Tom Hebert and formally endorsed by six settlement house professionals including Irma Rodriguez, the director of the International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers. NPCA and RPCV/W have committed to help establish a working group to champion the initiative.

“The objective of the meeting is to coalesce the working group and establish a preliminary action plan, to include raising \$7,500 for a street savvy feasibility study to take to the local community.”

Second, because one’s world doesn’t usually change with a single meeting, it soon became obvious that before that meeting, Peace Corps House needed to proceed on several fronts. To this end, in late October RPCV Joe Shaffner joined Hebert to help organize that meeting while pursuing several related possibilities.

Who is Tom Hebert?

A Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, Nigeria, 1962-1964, he worked with several earlier iterations of the NPCA. He began his volunteer work on several projects with the NPCA in September, 2014. [For more, see link to Website Team.]

How did the proposal for Peace Corps House come about?

It began during Hebert's mid-October 2015 discussion with Peace Corps' leadership about the possibility to move Peace Corps headquarters out of downtown Washington DC, into so an appropriate neighborhood so that it could "walk its talk." This, by bringing new resources into the neighborhood. But it quickly became apparent that the General Services Administration (GSA), which handles most federal office space, wouldn't go along with the concept of moving an agency headquarters for the social good.

Then what happened?

Already talking about another kind of Peace Corps presence in the city, Hebert remembered he had Jane Addams' 1910 book, "Twenty Years At Hull House" on a bookshelf.

Thus was born the notion of Peace Corps House, a settlement house in the same tradition as noted on the book's jacket by Francis Perkins, "Addams discerned and revealed the beauty of the cultural life and spiritual value of the immigrant at the time when nothing was so despised and unconsidered an American life as the foreigner." Perkins herself was U.S. Secretary of Labor, 1933-1945, and the first woman appointed to a White House cabinet. Before that she worked at Hull House and later in a settlement house in Philadelphia.

And then?

Hebert went to work on a Concept Paper to the Peace Corps, which went to Carrie Hessler-Radelet on January 20. [See Concept Paper] From the cover letter:

"As an alternative to relocating the Agency, the Peace Corps could help create a settlement house in Washington's Ward 8 across the Anacostia River. As a former resident of Washington and as an RPCV I deeply believe that *Peace Corps House*, as an NGO, would implant the Peace Corps Community deep in Washington for decades to come while contributing to both the redevelopment and culture of our home city — something long overdue."

How is Peace Corps House going to start-up?

Beyond working with experienced consultants and hiring the best possible, most appropriate neighborhood settlement house director, and securing both a building and any required renovation funding, Peace Corps House would have necessarily proceeded with small steps that strike the locally designated community as reasonable. It could begin in a church basement or in some shared space with another community organization.

Were any settlement house experts or consultants involved in the planning of Peace Corps House?

Yes. Rick Nitti, executive director of Neighborhood House in Portland, Oregon, a richly comprehensive group of 15 facilities located across the city, serving with passion, upwards of 20,000 low income individuals, families, and seniors each year.

And, Irma Rodriguez, executive director of the International Federation of Settlements and Community Centers (IFS) in New York City. IFS is an association of national, regional and local organizations working to strengthen communities around the world.

IFS' mission is to build an inclusive global community by empowering, inspiring and connecting people who are working locally for social justice. Ms. Rodriguez has had over 30 years experience in settlement house management. She has been a strong supporter of Peace Corps House. [See Letters of Support from both Rick and Irma.]

Could a group of RPCVs in another city take this idea and run with it?

Yes, that is one of the purposes of this website. There is lots of essential background on this website, including some Lessons Learned in this initial attempt. As a model, in Washington, the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of Washington D.C. RPCV's agreed in late January 2016 to undertake a significant role in opening Peace Corps House. [See Letters of Support.] Again, with the skills and experience that come with Peace Corps service, a settlement house could thrive most anywhere in America.

So, what programs could Peace Corps House provide?

Varying according to the needs of their neighborhoods, settlement programs may include: job training and employment programs, early childhood education, parenting skills, a senior center, afterschool youth programs, computer labs, English-as-a-Second- Language, Meals-on-Wheels, literacy education, after-school (3-6 PM), homework classes, health care clinics, individual tutoring working with local schools, special-interest clubs for students, daycare for both the elderly and pre-school children, citizenship instruction and legal counseling, mental health and home care, a community library with archives, housing, and special rooms for meetings, classes, workshops, concerts, a computer lab and perhaps a enterprise incubator/accelerator with rental co-working office spaces.

Add in recreational activities including, arts education, theatrical performances, dance classes, and related entertainment and cultural programs. This tradition goes back to Jane Addams' original 1989 Hull House in Chicago ,which had three theater spaces.

For the growing numbers of the homeless?

Provide access to amenities like showers and toilets, meals and job assistance. 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.

Getting down

But to create a welcoming atmosphere, beyond specific social services, casework and individual needs, today's settlement houses also offer other opportunities for community service: holding forums on local concerns, registering voters, and providing information about citywide issues. Indeed, a consistent commitment to advocacy, promoting social change, has always been a bedrock goal of settlements. For this, a consensus approach towards social action is essential.

What would have been Peace Corps House's relationship with the Peace Corps?

After some early hope that perhaps the Peace Corps would rent space for a think tank, the Peace Corps Institute and a small conference center for offsite meetings (which tend to be more successful), all that was abandoned in early discussions with Office of Strategic Partnerships. On March 6, Hebert emailed everyone that, "Because of new knowledge, emerging realities, and better thinking, I have been

updating, editing and rewriting the Concept Paper to both strengthen it and straighten out some troublesome and/or vague language. In particular, in the Paper both the role of the Peace Corps and funding were wishy-washy. So, the first sentence in Financial Support now reads: "Peace Corps House will be *completely independent* (not costing Peace Corps anything).

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."

But as is stated in the original Concept Paper, "*Peace Corps House will also raise the profile of the Peace Corps locally among federal policy makers, and provide a natural focus for ongoing involvement of local RPCVs, and not least, help revitalize Ward 8.*"

Change and development at Peace Corps House?

Happily, the settlement house movement's founding idea was to meet the needs of a neighborhood through immediate services and programs combined with a commitment to change and social reform. This tradition continues. Indeed, as Jane Addams, a pioneer of the world's settlement house movement with her 1889 opening of Chicago's Hull House said, "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."

From the experience, advice, and help from other American settlement houses in the newly reconfigured 500-member Alliance for Strong Families and Communities — and fully informed by local needs — other facilities, services and attractive features at Peace Corps House will develop over time. Jane's "power of quick adaptation" means that if a possible program finds a persistent champion at Peace Corps House, it will happen.

Opportunities for local Returned Peace Corps Volunteers?

As noted, this proposed settlement house will be of unique character in that it will be established and partially managed and staffed by persons who have served around the world as Peace Corps Volunteers. These are people who will bring with them not only the experience of having worked in the fields of education, community development, and health or health education, but also have the ability and compassion to work within a struggling community to foster the common good of the residents.

Possible projects using local RPCVs: working with local schools, tutoring in Geography (location, people, their culture and relationships, and places of the world), they could also 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 also envision collaborations with local institutions of higher learning. [See link to original Concept Paper.]

Other possibilities?

Trained Returned Peace Corps Volunteers could 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 and strongly demonstrates Peace Corps' Third goal in action: bringing the world home, helping

promote a better understanding of peoples of other nations on the part of Americans.

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. Local RPCVs and their organizations 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 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.

The Peace Corps Café

In this spirit is the proposed Peace Corps Café, a full-service restaurant providing profit for sustainability but also hosting events providing for free expression, learning and development, a place to debate and reflect. The model is the Press Café in Batumi, Georgia (eastern Europe) and organized by a PCV. See more detailed discussion in the Concept Paper and in this website's ARCHIVES.

Funding Peace Corps House?

Typically 75–80% of the on-going funding of America's 400-plus settlement houses or neighborhood centers comes from existing local, state, and federal social service programs. But government grants rarely cover the full cost of 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. Like many non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations, real-world fundraising will arise from a brew of government, foundations and private sources. However, Haley Kamen-Flack, an experienced fundraiser for Washington non-profits and settlement houses elsewhere has taken an interest in Peace Corps House. As has RPCV Stacie Reimer, an NGO founder .and thus a grant writer who will volunteer her writing skills.

Where it gets sticky

That's all true. But it doesn't yet pass a reality test. As Irma Rodriguez, our mentor and advisor, told us, "Settlements are all put in the position of competing for limited resources. Makes it hard to start something new because other community groups think 'oh boy more competition.' That's why local people really need to want it and to be involved. At least if someone emerges to take it to the community in a sophisticated manner, they do have something to take. The only problem is that a group of folks in DC need not only to think it a good idea but willing to work on it. Work without funding and with the passion for implementation that you have for the idea. You know what I mean? That's how settlements have mostly grown — community members pulling it together in the beginning, figuring out what they need, starting small and making it happen." Listen up folks, Irma knows her stuff.

Peace Corps House building renovation

Downstream, past the inevitable challenge of troubles and rough water, working from a long-term lease (i.e. 15 years), one possibility is to work with a local community development corporation that viewed Peace Corps House as improving the local quality-of-life. After securing the required funding for purchase and renovation costs, the corporation would be paid back in monthly installments.

What kind of leadership?

Beyond a tough-minded but enthusiastic board of directors (including fundraisers), of great importance is the hiring of the most experienced and relevant executive director possible for Peace Corps House.

[See link to the detailed and newly-revised 5-page Job Description, which has been vetted by several settlement house professionals.]

First Steps?

But to get to reality quickly — to establish Peace Corps House — an essential way forward is to hire a consultant who might open a single-room office somewhere, hangs a sign on the door, orders up some business cards and letterhead, finds someplace convivial to hang out and starts meeting with local interests while talking with settlement house professionals in other cities.

An alternative to simply renting office space is to join The Hive, a co-working office center in Anacostia devoted to “innovators, visionaries, entrepreneurs.” In any case, the result will be a “street savvy” feasibility study/action plan based on several “windshield tours” around town to find a site, informal surveys of the community, local funders (government, foundations, and private sources), potential board members, and existing human service organizations that might be interested in a new home for their operations. As Irma Rodriguez suggested above, with this incremental approach, Peace Corps House could end up working out of a series of smaller but gradually larger facilities as it found footing.

Where?

It should be noted here that it was originally thought that Ward 8 would be the best site for Peace Corps House. But then we learned that gentrification was pushing real estate values there through the roof. Therefore Peace Corps House might be better sited elsewhere in DC.

Seventy-five hundred bucks?

But in order to hire that consultant knowledgeable in the organization and operation of settlement houses, we must initially raise about \$7,500. This individual would develop a feasibility study with a fundraising plan that would include the route to hiring, ASAP, the best possible executive director to bring Peace Corps House to life. So, that’s the goal at the moment. Ideas?

Local involvement?

At this point, it’s important to understand that few local people have been involved in this discussion of possibilities. This because we couldn’t go to the community until we had something in hand. At least, at the moment, if we can get Peace Corps House

back on track with this website and a working group, the community might see that this is an initial plan worth considering and improving upon. It's our only hope.

What else?

Because Peace Corps House will necessarily proceed with small steps that, as noted, strike the community as reasonable—its buy-in is absolutely essential. It will all take time, money, and not come easy. But yes, it could get going. And it could bring new features and thinking to the table:

Examples?

“Camp HOPE America is the first evidence-based camping and mentoring program for children exposed to trauma in the United States. Our goal is to give children and teens their childhood back and help them find a Pathway to HOPE. Will you join us?” <http://www.camphopeamerica.org/>

“Shamayem “Shu” Harris is renovating this abandoned house on Avalon Street in a blighted and broke Detroit neighborhood and is renaming it the Homework House. It's intended to be a space for neighborhood kids to study, get homework help and access other educational resources — there are very few after-school programs in the area, Harris said.” — *Huffington Post* June 21, 2016

“Big Mama's Kitchen & Catering restaurant in Omaha will be housed in a mixed-use facility called the Community Accelerator which will anchor the 40-acre Highlander development. The 65,000 square foot Accelerator building has been designed to be a hub of technology, entrepreneurship, recreation and education for the neighborhood. In addition to Big Mama's restaurant, the Accelerator will house a coffee shop, an urban farming facility, and satellite locations for Creighton University and Metro Community College.” — *Huffington Post* July 17, 2016

The Bottom line?

Settlement houses have traditionally worked “to build an inclusive community by empowering, inspiring and connecting people who are working locally for social justice.”

Sounds good to us.

You?