

Common Challenges Faced by Peace Corps Volunteers

Being a Peace Corps Volunteer is the “toughest job you’ll ever love.” As a Volunteer, you are representing the United States 24/7 and you are expected to respectfully integrate into your community to affect positive change. There will be times, though, when cultural and infrastructural factors will make effective and sustainable change challenging or seemingly impossible. An important element of preparing for service is developing realistic expectations of what life is like as a Volunteer. As you read through this document, examine your reactions and how you might respond. Although these examples are not all-inclusive and vary per country and person, they draw upon many Volunteers’ shared experiences that required patience and flexibility.

Culture Shock

While you may have international experience already, culture shock during Peace Corps service is often due to the realities of living at a local level in a developing country for 27 months. At different phases of Peace Corps service, you will feel the highs and lows and at times will be at a loss to understand why you feel one way when you think you ‘should’ feel another way. This is normal for all Volunteers as they separate from their American culture and adapt and integrate into various host countries cultures and customs. Additionally, unexpected behavior or responses to a situation can be challenging to understand. Some of the concerns that Volunteers face are common realities in many countries across social and cultural strata:

- Being engulfed with new sights, sounds, people, and routines upon arriving in-country and learning a new culture and language. This can be exciting and overwhelming.
- Learning how to manage different bureaucratic systems, norms, and values in your daily life.
- Seeing cruelty to animals, domestic violence, and corporal punishment, and responding in a meaningful way.

Modern Conveniences

Peace Corps sites and Volunteer houses always meet Peace Corps safety standards, but locations and accommodations vary considerably per country and in terms of modern conveniences and amenities. Volunteers should be prepared to demonstrate flexibility with regard to the availability of the following:

- **Electricity:** Not all Volunteer houses will have electricity. Even houses with electricity may be subject to frequent outages, unreliable service, and limited capacity.
- **Water:** Many Volunteers do not have access to indoor plumbing and may have to transport water from local wells and/or treat water before using it.
- **Toilets:** Many houses do not have modern “Western” toilets. Options range from indoor “Turkish”-style squat toilets to outdoor pit latrines and outhouses.
- **Bathing:** Water heaters and overhead showers are very rare. Volunteers should be prepared to take bucket baths and heat water on the stove (when necessary) for bathing.
- **Heating / Cooling:** Most Peace Corps sites experience some extremity of hot and/or cold weather for much of the year. Volunteers should not count on access to air conditioning and/or indoor heating as they are extremely rare.

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- **Housing:** Volunteer houses range from rural huts made from natural materials to modern urban apartments. Volunteers should expect to live in housing typical and appropriate for the community in which they serve.

Internet/Communication

Although communication technology and media access continue to spread in even the most remote places of the world, each Peace Corps site has varying degrees of availability and reliability. Many Volunteers learn to appreciate the charm of snail mail—handwritten letters to and from home that take weeks to arrive—along with the heartbreak of some care packages that never do arrive. Although many sites have no electricity (or reliable electricity), Volunteers still often travel with laptops to use them in towns to submit reports to Peace Corps posts/headquarters.

Isolation

A major challenge of Peace Corps service is the various types of isolation that Volunteers can face. To be successful, Volunteers should anticipate developing coping techniques for these types of isolation, which may include the following:

- **Geographic Isolation:** Many Volunteers live in rural sites tens or sometimes hundreds of miles away from the nearest major city. Limited transportation infrastructure in these regions can mean it takes from one day to several days to reach the capital or other large cities. This is especially true for Volunteers serving in island sites.
- **Isolation from Other Peace Corps Volunteers:** Some Volunteers may serve with other Volunteers in the same or neighboring towns; others may be the only Volunteer in a province or region. Volunteers should not expect to have daily contact with other Volunteers or Americans.
- **Isolation from Peace Corps Staff/Office:** One of the ways that the Peace Corps differs from traditional employment is that Peace Corps staff do not micromanage or provide constant guidance in terms of implementing work projects. Visits from staff to Volunteer sites are infrequent, and Volunteers should not anticipate regular trips to the Peace Corps office as part of their normal duties. All Volunteers, particularly those placed far from a capital city, should expect to be independent, resourceful, and self-directed in their work.

Host Family

While it is good experience to have grown up with many siblings, to have raised children, or to have lived in a dorm, the “lack of privacy” associated with being a Peace Corps Volunteer will be a different experience. Volunteers will have their own rooms in a host family’s house, but the idea of space in the U.S. is different from many of the Peace Corps host countries. Host families are excited to welcome Volunteers and mean well, so it is beneficial to approach the unfamiliar or unexpected with patience and openness to learning. Expecting less independence can help prepare Volunteers for the many living situations in which they may find themselves. Most Volunteers live with a host family for three months during pre-service training and many will live with a host family for the duration of service.

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Religion

Volunteers may be assigned to serve in Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, or other traditionally religious communities, as many Peace Corps countries fall under either one (or more) of these categories. Peace Corps Volunteers are free to practice their own religion but should be prepared to worship alone as access to certain religious services may be limited or non-existent. The Peace Corps maintains the position of being a non-religious organization. Peace Corps Volunteers are expected to uphold this ideal and adhere to the related rules and regulations of the Peace Corps, including not engaging in proselytizing activities.

Diet

The Peace Corps cannot guarantee that a Volunteer will be able to maintain a preferred diet. Primarily, Volunteers are expected to eat a diet that will allow them to maintain their health. The Peace Corps is unable to make placement decisions based on dietary preferences. It is likely that Volunteers will be presented with foods they are unfamiliar with or do not like. It is important to be respectful, thoughtful, and tactful in these situations.

Gender Roles

Peace Corps Volunteers often serve in conservative societies with a wide array of prescribed gender roles. These cultures, often characterized by “machismo” and patriarchal customs, may add another level of culture shock by placing a strain on Volunteers accustomed to more equitable roles in society.

Minority Challenges

It is important to know that being a minority in Peace Corps has many definitions and implications. Below are a few points that preview the different ways host country nationals might respond to U.S. minorities. There is no way to fully prepare for these realities, but acknowledging that they will be a part of your service is the first step.

- It is not uncommon for Volunteers to be faced with assumptions about Americans, and many countries perceive the typical American to be Caucasian.
- Your community and respective country will have a great deal of curiosity about you, which can manifest itself in friendliness and a desire to chat, stare, point, inquire, touch, etc.
- Many cultures are less sensitive to physical attributes and may make very blunt matter -of-fact statements. These things are not meant to hurt the Volunteer’s feelings, but are a way of the culture.

Serving as a LGBTQ Volunteer

LGBTQ Volunteers have successfully served all across the globe. Serving abroad as an LGBTQ Volunteer presents its own unique set of challenges in every country, and the Peace Corps has compiled a lot of useful information to cover many of the commonly asked questions as well as some resources that you can connect with directly to have any additional questions answered.

Serving as an LGBTQ Volunteer FAQs:

http://files.peacecorps.gov/multimedia/pdf/learn/howvol/faq/LGBTQ_FAQs.pdf

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Serving as a same-sex couple FAQs:

<http://www.peacecorps.gov/volunteer/learn/howvol/couplesquestions/>

Connect with and learn from LGBTQ returned Peace Corps Volunteers:

<http://lgbrcpv.org/>

Connect with a Peace Corps recruiter to learn more about serving as a LGBTQ Volunteer:

<http://www.peacecorps.gov/volunteer/learn/meet/offices/?from=rsb>

Personal Appearance

Personal appearance is important for Volunteers representing the Peace Corps. Many communities perceive personal appearance to be an important indicator of who you are. A Volunteer's appearance has an effect on the relationship with the community, and the Peace Corps expects Volunteers to dress in a manner similar to their host community/country. It should be noted that dress standards in many Peace Corps communities tend to be more conservative than in the United States. Many communities also have different standards as to what is acceptable for men and women to wear. Body piercings and tattoos sometimes have negative associations. In some posts, Volunteers are asked to cover visible tattoos and remove/cover body piercings until they are integrated into their communities.

Health Concerns

Serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer is different than visiting a country as a short-term tourist. Volunteer assignments are physically and mentally demanding. Volunteers typically experience increased walking, less developed public transportation systems, new diets, new languages, and new challenges to personal resilience. When reviewing opportunities to serve in different countries on our website, please be sure to read through the medical considerations section for each job opening. The Peace Corps Office of Medical Services will help Volunteers make informed decisions and minimize health risks. Volunteers are permitted to serve only in countries where the health-care resources they need can be provided.

Not all medical care and medications are available everywhere, and some common food allergens can be unavoidable in certain countries where Peace Corps Volunteers live and work. Accurately disclosing your medical history allows the Peace Corps to work to find a country with the resources necessary to help you stay healthy throughout your service.

Additional information may be found here:

- [What About Health?](#)
- [Ensuring Volunteers' Health During and After Service](#)

Use of Alcohol/Drugs

Peace Corps has strict policies regarding drug and alcohol abuse in service. The expectation is that Volunteers will adhere to Peace Corps rules, U.S. laws, and host country laws related to drug and alcohol use. A Volunteer found to be involved with drugs not authorized for medical purposes will be administratively separated. There are host countries where the use of alcohol is strongly encouraged and

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there are others where drinking alcohol is prohibited. Volunteers are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner, and demonstrate behaviors that prioritize personal safety.

- Drug use and/or irresponsible drinking behavior can compromise the safety and security of the Volunteer and lead to behavior which may discredit the Peace Corps or the Volunteer or affect the Volunteer's performance in an assignment.
 - Examples of such behavior include public intoxication, drinking while at the work site, failure to appear for work or training due to intoxication or hangovers, and verbal or physical aggressiveness while under the influence of alcohol. Such inappropriate or unsafe behavior may be grounds for disciplinary action, including administrative separation.
 - Additional information may be found here: [Peace Corps Manual Section 204 \(3.5 Drug Use/3.6 Use of Alcohol\)](#)

Recent drug or alcohol related offenses may be a disqualifying factor for Peace Corps service. For more information about the Peace Corps' drug and alcohol policy, go to www.peacecorps.gov/legalinfo.

Physical Challenges in the Peace Corps

Life as a Peace Corps Volunteer can present a number of physical challenges. Below are a few of the common challenges most Volunteers face during service.

- **Walking / Biking**: Volunteers (even those in urban areas) may have to walk several miles a day. Many Volunteers receive a bicycle when they arrive in-country and rely on that as their main transportation method.
- **Carrying Food and Water**: Most Volunteers are responsible for getting their own food and water. Some Volunteers have access to general stores, but many rely on weekly markets and have to carry a week's worth of groceries several miles from the market to their homes.
- **Public Transport**: Public transportation in most Peace Corps countries is very different and more physically challenging than travel in the United States. Taxis are normally old vans or cars. Most forms of public transport do not have climate control.
- **Climate**: Many Peace Corps countries have severe weather conditions. In many African countries, temperatures during the hot season can reach over 100 degrees. In many of the Eastern European countries, temperatures can drop well below freezing in winter.

Having the ability to adjust to the many new and different situations you encounter as a Peace Corps Volunteer allows you to be responsive to the people you will live with and serve. By being resourceful, working with what you have, and keeping an open mind, you will be to overcome these challenges and thrive.