

The time is right to expand the Peace Corps

Written by Mike Honda
Monday, 10 October 2011 12:08

As the Peace Corps celebrates its 50th anniversary this month, it is time to take stock and commit to making it bigger, better and bolder.

As one of four members of the House who volunteered, I answered President John F. Kennedy's call for Peace Corps recruits in the 1960s and served in El Salvador. To say that the Peace Corps changed my life and my perspective, and influences now my modus operandi as a member of Congress, would be a sweeping understatement.

My time in El Salvador taught me so much. I went into the corps as a college student just shy of graduation with little direction; I emerged with the confidence that my emotional, psychological and physical limits had been pushed, plied and ultimately surpassed. I went into the Peace Corps driven by the shame of my youthful lack of direction; I emerged determined to do something about the pervasive poverty surrounding me.

I went into the Peace Corps speaking one language; I emerged speaking another: Spanish, a gift that introduced me to a new world, gave me a new way of understanding new cultures and one which has helped me connect to constituents in California. The Peace Corps got me back to the basics, and I realized that every day is to be used wisely.

Yet, more is needed to boost the Peace Corps. The continued call for service by President

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Obama is an important first step, but in order to heal America's reputation around the world and better tackle emerging global crises, we need the Peace Corps to be bigger, better, bolder and more diverse. What better time to reinvigorate the Peace Corps than as it celebrates its 50th anniversary?

By bigger, I mean we need to double the number of Peace Corps volunteers. We have 8,655 volunteers enlisted, serving poor and needy communities throughout the world and promoting better understanding between Americans and host country populations. Since JFK's call in 1961, when the Peace Corps was officially established, more than 200,000 volunteers have served in more than 139 countries.

With more than 8,000 volunteers, we are now in 76 countries. By doubling this number, we could double the placements and the number of countries served. Doubling-up, however, requires more funding--but not much, comparatively speaking. Peace Corps funding for 2011 is only \$400 million, relatively little in light of the benefits to our country in diplomacy, outreach and service to poor populations. What we spend in Afghanistan in one day would fund our 8,000-plus additional volunteers for an entire year of service--a clearly doable goal.

We can continue to improve on the Peace Corps by equipping our volunteers with the technological and cultural expertise that they need to be successful in their placements. The top six sectors served by Peace Corps volunteers are education, health, business development, environment, youth and agriculture. As global poverty rates increase and natural disasters fueled by climate change continue to wreak havoc on the impoverished, the Peace Corps will continue to be called on to play a pre-emptive role in preparedness strategies.

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If trained and equipped appropriately, our volunteers can ensure that the poor are better prepared for the next tsunami, bird flu or malaria outbreak. Peace Corps placement, then, becomes not only a service opportunity but also an informal internship that results in a more knowledgeable volunteer capable of joining the advising institution post-service.

There are also benefits of an age- and race-diversified volunteer corps. A more race-diverse Peace Corps would allow for greater understanding in regions of the world with which the volunteer may be familiar, given their family's country of origin. To achieve this, though, we must create incentives for Americans in their 30s to 60s to pursue the Peace Corps. Recognizing the benefits of public service, we need to be creative in thinking of ways the public and private sectors can provide service opportunities to their employees.

In founding the Peace Corps, Sargent Shriver recognized the need for promoting public service by spearheading this nation's first war on poverty. Headquartered in the U.S. government's Office of Economic Opportunity, the war-room mentality was ever-present, and Shriver foresaw the looming security threat facing America. In creating the Peace Corps and Volunteers in Service to America--or VISTA, the domestic version of Peace Corps--Shriver understood that poverty is inextricably linked to the security of our national and global community.

Now is no different. President Obama is poised to recast the public service message, but he cannot do it single-handedly. That is why, as a former volunteer, I am calling for a Peace Corps that is bigger, better and bolder. I am not alone. Former Peace Corps volunteers like me, returning to America the richness of our experience, stand ready to encourage new recruits.

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If America makes this a priority, we not only help the global poor become more self-sufficient, stable and secure --which in turn makes our country more secure -- but we increase good will toward the United States through this development-based diplomacy.