Office of Inspector General

TO: Gaddi Vasquez, Director

FROM: Charles D. Smith, Inspector General

DATE: April 18, 2003

SUBJECT: Final Report on Evaluation of the Volunteer Delivery System
             (IG-02-11-E)

Transmitted for your information is our final report on the evaluation of the Volunteer Delivery System.

We have reviewed and accepted the region's response to each of the recommendations in this report and have closed all recommendations. The complete text of your response to the preliminary report is provided as Appendix B, and our comments appear as Appendix C.

We commend the agency for the depth of thought and planning demonstrated in its response. We appreciate that the agency committed extensive time, personnel, and resources to address the issues raised in our report.

Please accept our thanks for the agency's considerable cooperation and assistance.

Attachment

cc: Lloyd Pierson, Chief of Operations
       Chuck Brooks, Associate Director, Volunteer Recruitment and Selection
       Janet Brown, Director, Human Resource Management
       Carol Chappell, Acting Regional Director, EMA
       Susana Duarte, Chief Compliance Officer
       Paul Jhin, Director, Planning, Policy, and Analysis
       Gopal Khanna, Chief Information Officer
       Henry McKoy, Regional Director, Africa
       Stephen Murphy, Regional Director, IAP
       Tyler Posey, General Counsel
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       Dan Sullivan, Director, Crisis Corps
       Steve Weinberg, Associate Director, Volunteer Support

Final Report

**EVALUATION OF THE
VOLUNTEER DELIVERY SYSTEM
Peace Corps
No. IG 02-11-E
April 2003**

**Peace Corps
Office of Inspector General**

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Charles D. Smith, Inspector General

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INTRODUCTION

This study of the Peace Corps' Volunteer delivery system[1] was undertaken by Steve Buff, Assistant Inspector General for Evaluation and Inspections, and senior evaluators Alice Bunker and Jim O'Keefe from April through August 2002.

Initially, the study's focus was narrow: to assess progress in implementing recommendations from a 1999 management review of the recruitment, selection, and placement processes. It became broader for two reasons. First, the President's call to double the number of Volunteers in five years had alerted delivery system managers and staff to the need to be more effective and efficient. In fact, many were already preparing for changes in order to meet this challenge and are eager to use our study to help implement changes. Second, we noted that the agency's history of studies and incremental changes in the delivery system has resulted in almost no noticeable increase in output—producing approximately the same number of Volunteers for the last 30 years—and few changes in efficiency. We anticipate this report will have more utility and the agency will make significant improvements in the system so the doubling of members will occur with no drop in quality.

The timing of our work does not allow us to comment on the outcome of the activities and remedies we found the agency undertaking in response to the President's challenge. However, we feel that these activities and remedies, listed as current activities in the Background section below, will help the agency significantly in responding to many of the recommendations in this report.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

The Peace Corps' Volunteer delivery processes have significant weaknesses. The managers and staff we interviewed for this study advocated numerous changes; many are described in this report. They believe—and we concur—that changes are necessary without regard to how many Volunteers are fielded but would be particularly helpful to reach the President's five-year mark.

In particular, our study identified the following areas:

   a) <u>Leadership and Organizational Change</u>. A senior executive is needed to head a task force charged with responding to and implementing the recommendations in this report and such additional improvements as the task force may identify.

   b) <u>Information Flow</u>. Improved operational linkages, knowledge of the delivery process, and program information sharing among delivery system offices would enhance long-term planning, outreach, and marketing. As demand and supply

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[1] In this report, we do not use the acronym "VDS" for the Volunteer delivery system. It is too easily and frequently confused with "VRS," the acronym for the Office of Volunteer Recruitment and Selection. The consequence of equating VRS with the delivery system is to place the full weight of responsibility on VRS. That, we conclude, is not only unfair to VRS but prevents a clear understanding of the many offices and functions that make up the delivery system.

activities take place, constituent offices—regional operations, the Center, Office of Volunteer Recruitment and Selection (VRS), Office of Information Resources Management (IRM), and others—could benefit from a greater flow of information between posts and recruitment offices to guide recruitment, with particular impact on out-year planning.

Management collects Trainee demand information via the integrated program and budget system (IPBS) document, the project plan, the project status report (PSR), and the quarterly trainee request sheet (QTRS). These documents request Trainee projections from the same source (overseas posts) but do so in different formats. The result is that these data are duplicative but not comparable, consistent, or possibly reliable. Consistent and easily prepared Trainee/Volunteer demand information should be readily available to all headquarters offices concerned via the Peace Corps Volunteer central database (the PCVDBMS).

c) <u>Information Technology</u>. The 1999 report offered a vision for redesigning the delivery system to make it more transparent, more applicant friendly, and more post friendly. The agency should refine that vision, if necessary, and then develop a plan that maps the work processes of the delivery system, charts the computer "architecture" of databases and applications, and adopts current-generation information technology to support the work processes. Immediate incremental improvements for the delivery system staff also need to have high priority while longer-term changes are put into effect.

d) <u>Medical Screening</u>. While the average time to complete medical screening has decreased over time, advanced medical care and the processing of applicants with complicated medical histories have resulted in an over-all decrease in productivity. The Office of Medical Service needs a sufficient number of screening nurses to determine the medical status of each applicant within a reasonable time, to complete or update the screening guidelines, to modify the expert system, and to assess the medical status of non-traditional applicants, including those with disabilities.

The requirements of the American Rehabilitation Act as currently applied to Peace Corps applicants are a significant burden to the agency. The application of the Act needs review.

e) <u>Customer Service</u>. The 1999 and 2000 task forces called for Web-based applications to promote the marketing, recruiting, communications, and training and education needs of the Peace Corps. We commend the agency and the Office of Communications for developing the on-line application process and applicant status-check. These applications need further enhancement to provide more information on Peace Corps service, the application and medical screening processes, and pre-staging training modules—all designed to motivate and retain applicants. Additionally, better integration of the Web site with existing databases would improve information flow among Peace Corps headquarters offices, recruiting offices, and the overseas posts.

The delivery system could benefit from monitoring and evaluation tools and customer service standards.

f) Staffing and Staff Training. The Peace Corps' legislated annual 20% staff turnover under the five-year employment rule results in chronic and persistent staff vacancies that impede the work of the delivery system. Normal work is performed during extended hours and weekends, cutting into employees' personal time and enthusiasm and leaving little time for enhancing competencies such as quality customer service, training, or work improvements.

Systematic training would be helpful; currently, recruitment skills are learned piece-meal by observing co-workers or through experimentation. Inadequate training also contributes significantly to inefficiency and ineffectiveness. All working units or officers need training in software use, customer service standards, retention strategies, and team building and could also benefit from cross training opportunities. Because the delivery system is segmented, most staff do not understand the work of other units or the delivery system and everyone's role in it.

BACKGROUND

The Volunteer delivery system is the continuous cycle that enables the Peace Corps to meet the requests of host countries and Peace Corps posts for suitable, trained Volunteers. It is the agency's engine.

The delivery cycle begins with the formulation of country projects that determine the particular skills and numbers of Volunteers to be requested from VRS and ends with the swearing-in of Peace Corps Volunteers at the conclusion of pre-service training. The system includes several steps: advertising, fielding inquiries from potential applicants, recruiting, nominating applicants, medical and legal screening, selecting, placing, inviting the applicant to the country of service, and staging.

While VRS is the office most closely associated with the delivery process—providing crucial recruitment, selection, screening, and placement functions—the entire process also relies on other entities: the regional offices and posts for timely information and requests; the Office of Medical Services for medical screening; the Office of Communications for advertising, producing recruiting materials, and updating the Web site; and IRM for IT support. The delivery process is the only true production system at the Peace Corps that has quotas (Trainees delivered by a deadline), and it is also a human resource processing system in which VRS staff have to:

a) encourage applicants to make not only a career change but a major life change,
b) advise and negotiate with applicants (and posts), and
c) help inculcate successful invitees with the norms, values, and standards of the Peace Corps.

VRS is the first contact the agency has with a large constituency—those inquiring and those applying. The nature of this contact is important to the agency's mission: to ensure that enough of the right people get placed in the right jobs and that those invited enter Peace Corps service with a positive orientation and opinion of the agency. If the application process is unnecessarily complicated, a positive opinion is difficult to instill.

Previous studies

The agency has supported several studies of the delivery system in recent years.

Major Studies of the Volunteer Delivery System

Booz, Allen, and Hamilton[2]	1989
The Medical Redesign Group	1994

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[2] Booz, Allen, & Hamilton, "Peace Corps Organizational Study: Final Report," January 27, 1989. Report of the Medical Redesign Group, 1994. See also the report the Restructuring Work Group (1995) conducted "to recommend…options for Peace Corps that preserve or enhance effectiveness…increase efficiencies and reduce cost" as part of the initiative to "reinvent government."

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The PPA Nominee Drop Out Study[3]	1995
The OIG Cross Organizational Review[4]	1995
The Restructuring Work Group	1995
The Gallup Study[5]	1998
The 1999 Study Group[6]	1999
The 2000 Implementation Team	2000

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The 1999 Redesign Group and the 2000 Implementation Team

Appointed by the chief of staff in June 1999, the Redesign Group was comprised of 14 highly experienced employees within the agency. The group's subcommittees met with all the delivery system internal stakeholders, traveled to the Atlanta and Seattle regional recruiting offices and to Peace Corps posts in the Gambia, Guinea, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Panama, and Nicaragua, and visited 15 institutions—non-profit voluntary organizations, universities, and corporations—to "benchmark" their human resource delivery systems and recruitment and assessment functions. The group's mandate was to rethink and redesign the system that had evolved over 38 years and bring it into the information age.

In September 1999, the group submitted its recommendations, some of which were not actionable or were only prescriptive in nature.[7] No timetable or plans for implementation were included. Therefore, the Acting Associate Director of VRS convened another agency-wide committee in early 2000 to "refine and implement" the 1999 report recommendations. That group endorsed some of the 1999 recommendations and presented various options for implementation. The agency, however, did not endorse the implementation report. The result was no agreed-upon action plan and, in fact, two sometimes competing reports.

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[3] "Follow-up Study of Nominees Who Drop Out of the Volunteer Delivery System," Office of Planning, Policy, and Analysis, Peace Corps, March 1995. This study surveyed 113 applicants who reported that their decisions to drop out were based in part on uncertainties and lack of information.

[4] Office of Inspector General, "Cross-Organizational Review of the Volunteer Delivery System," Report No. IG 95-18, July 1995. At that time we noted partial comprehension of the system by field personnel, by headquarters, and by regional offices.

[5] The Gallup Organization's pilot effort aimed to select Volunteers through proprietary standardized interview techniques and formats such as automated telephone interviews, an Internet-based "interview" for those making inquiries, and structured phone interviews. (E. Killiam and J. Streur, Research Results, The Gallup Organization, Lincoln, Nebraska, June 2001. For a critical view of psychologists' past efforts to find effective measures of competency, see R. Haag, "Memo to VRS Evaluation Restructuring Core Working Group," August 24, 1989.)

[6] Peace Corps, Review of the Volunteer Delivery System, Final Report, September 1999. See Appendix B for the recommendations from this report.

[7] After the report was circulated, various parties reportedly raised objections to a number of task force recommendations. Some APCDs indicated that they had little interest in more direct involvement in the nomination or selection process given their already crowded schedules. The document reportedly was seen in some quarters as overly critical of VRS.

Current efforts

In his state of the union message, President Bush called for the Peace Corps to double the number of Volunteers over the next five years from 7,000 to 14,000.[8] The following table includes FY2001, takes FY2002 as a starting point, and presents the proposed budget and timetable for increasing the number of new and existing Volunteers and the Trainee input for each successive year to FY2007.

Table 1: The Peace Corps' FY2003 Budget Proposal

	FY2001	FY2002	FY2003	FY2004	FY2005	FY2006	FY2007
Dollars in Millions			320	362	404	446	448
New & Existing Volunteers	6,645	7,040	8,200	10,000	12,000	13,600	14,000
Trainee Input*	3,191	4,271	5,087	6,100	7,200	7,800	7,800

Source: Peace Corps, Congressional Budget Presentation, FY2003, *IPBS, July 1, 2002

Following President Bush's call to double the number of Volunteers in five years, the Peace Corps created several in-house working groups to accelerate or improve the recruitment and selection process. The following delivery system task forces and committees are currently in place:

- 90-day Task Force—a group whose goal is to reduce the system's processing time from application to invitation.
- Trainee Request Collaboration—a VRS committee working to overcome the "fundamental disconnect" between Trainee supply and demand (the request) by fostering better collaboration among recruitment, placement, and regions/posts, and screening by the legal and medical offices.
- Resource Allocation Strategic Investments—a VRS committee working on suggestions to direct resources and make strategic investments at the regional office, VRS/HQ, and Peace Corps national levels.
- Production Goals—a VRS committee setting new standards based on demographic data and historical/regional characteristics by which to assess production.
- A-Z Diversity—a VRS committee whose goal is to better diversify Peace Corps Trainees and examine entry, in-service, and post-service barriers and issues that may affect rates of participation of underrepresented segments of the U. S. population in Peace Corps.
- Barriers and Obstacles to Peace Corps Service—chaired by the Deputy Director, this task force's mandate is to strengthen incentives to service, increase diversity of staff and volunteers, broaden skills, and identify cultural, legal, and institutional impediments to Peace Corps service.

Our report does not incorporate the work of these committees. We anticipate that their work will be useful to management in responding to this report.

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[8] In fact, the doubling of Volunteers would have to occur in less than five years because campaigns and the level of applicants and nominees for the first three quarters of FY2002 had already been set.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Leadership and organizational change

Peace Corps' history suggests that the Volunteer delivery system as currently structured, managed, funded, and supported is at capacity.

The existing system demonstrates capacity to deliver only the 4,000 annual Trainee input needed to support the current level of 7,000 Volunteers. This has been true for a long time as evidenced in the 1989 Booz, Allen & Hamilton observation that "…the recruiting system …apparently had reached its maximization point."[9]

In fact, there has been no need to be more productive. Although Congress authorized at least 10,000 Volunteers in 1989, the agency did not receive appropriations adequate to support that number, effectively reducing any urgency to improve the delivery process. Even recent efforts to review the system focused on the time required to process applications and on improving service to the applicants but not on recruiting a significantly higher number of Volunteers. The 1999 review, for example, did not directly address the issue of growth.

The Peace Corps faces considerable recruiting challenges in reversing or modifying public perception; much of the general public is unaware that the Peace Corps still exists. Others see it as only "…providing basic manual labor services in jungles or farms, not working in the new 21st century fields, such as information technology."[10] In truth, Volunteer delivery takes place in a constantly changing environment—country evacuations, post closures, Trainee class cancellations, and new country entries.

A product of evolution, today's delivery system will benefit from more systematic planning and renovation.[11] With the exception of the 1994 medical redesign, periodic studies have resulted in unimplemented proposals for change and few systemic changes.

Every inefficiency represents friction in the system and cost in time, financial expenditures, lost opportunities, or inability to get the right Volunteer into the right job. With heightened production goals, inefficiencies may become less tolerable. Our review convinces us that an early commitment to systematically fixing the problems of the delivery system will significantly empower the agency in its goal of doubling the size of the Peace Corps while retaining high-quality Volunteers and programs.

Renovating the delivery system will require senior management to provide sustained leadership.

The delivery system "…is not managed exclusively by any one office, but rather jointly by the several offices that perform different functions within the system."[12] For joint

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[9] Booz, Allen, & Hamilton, "Peace Corps Organizational Study," January 1989, section 1, p. 6.
[10] Office of Volunteer Recruitment and Selection, IPBS submission, May 6, 2002, p. 2.
[11] VRS, IPBS submission, May 6, 2002, p. 3.
[12] Thomas Tighe, Memorandum: "Review of the Volunteer Delivery System," June 23, 1999.

management to work, offices with special procedures, perspectives, and interests must cooperate and coordinate. The combined pressure to double numbers while revamping the delivery system prompted one regional recruitment manager to liken the situation to "changing a car tire while going sixty five." Added to the complexity of the task is the impact of the five-year rule and management vacancies between administrations.

Without a system overhaul, each discrete change creates problems that reverberate throughout the system.[13] Furthermore, incremental change prevents the agency from maximizing the gains that could come from systematic planning. While participants in the system understand its problems from their vantage point, they do not always comprehend those encountered by other units or the system as a whole.[14] Therefore, delivery system staff, managers, and senior management have difficulty agreeing on the scope and kinds of changes needed.

Nevertheless, we believe the agency does not need to restructure the delivery system or study it further. Instead, as the recommendation below indicates, we believe the system needs leadership to bring the appropriate managers together to address already well-known problems and implement solutions. The remaining recommendations in this report target some of the issues such a management group will need to address.

Recommendation

1. **That a senior official be appointed to chair a renovation committee composed of representatives from each major office involved in the delivery system to prepare a blueprint for delivery system process changes and continuous improvements.**

<u>The work contributed by each of the separate offices involved in Volunteer delivery is not well integrated or coordinated, hindering current operations and creating a roadblock to increased delivery capacity</u>.

Conceptually, VRS is seen as "*the* Volunteer delivery system" and carries most of the burden for "production." VRS is burdened with carrying the responsibility or blame for the success or failure of delivering Volunteers to the field. In reality, the process involves many offices of the agency, but their interrelationship and contributions are obscured by their autonomy.

Volunteer delivery begins when Peace Corps program managers design projects with host country officials and community leaders and continues through a series of "delivery" functions planned and managed by various headquarters offices and a network of regional recruitment offices. The process ends with the arrival of a Volunteer at the work site after pre-service training. This process is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

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[13] Memorandum, Ninety-Day Task Force, April 2002.
[14] This was noted in 1995. See OIG, Cross-Organization Review, op. cit., p.10.

Figure 1. Peace Corps' Volunteer Request and Delivery Cycle (The "Figure 8")
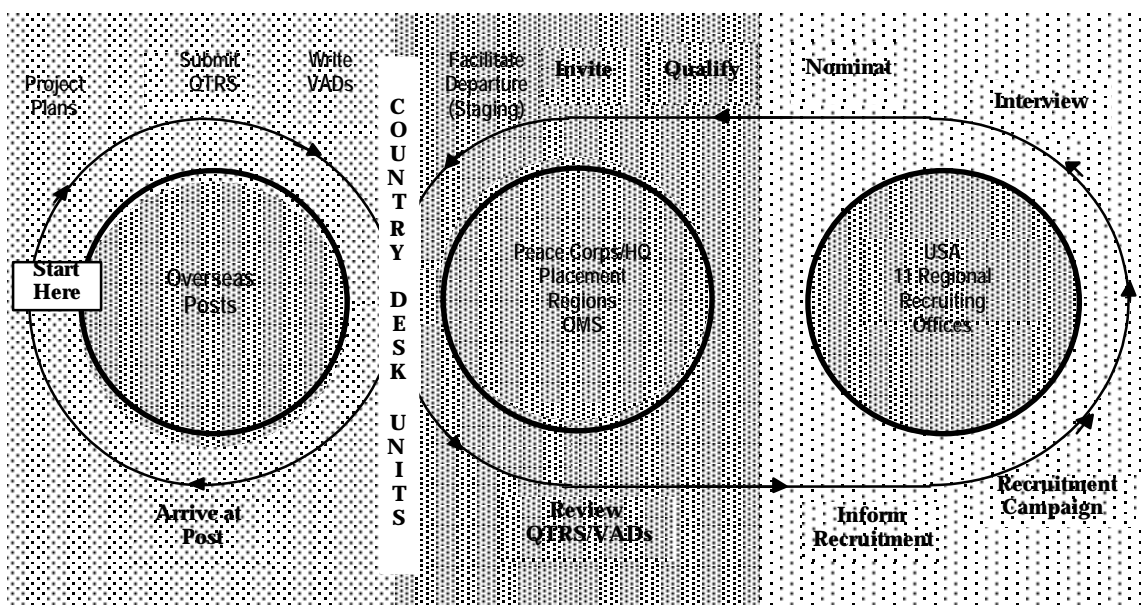
Source: Trainee Request Guidelines for FY2003

Earlier reports and management's 1999 review highlighted the need for unity among the work units, but neither the review nor the 2000 implementation task force offered corrective strategies. To be sure, changes to the system are difficult to organize and carry out. For example, the 1999 review found the assignment area (AA) classification system restrictive for posts and recruitment and a frequent source of frustration among applicants. The report stated that the current system "can hamper post's ability to think creatively about their programs… and does not adequately describe the type of Trainees needed for individual projects."[15] It also stated that the classification system hampered the agency's ability to place couples and individuals with unique skill sets or valuable practical life experience. The report encouraged wholesale revisions of the assignment area system and the applicant skill competencies established to nominate a candidate to a future training class. (It also encouraged that a new database be developed and "sophisticated and reliable Web-based technology" be used.)

Recommendation

2. **That the assignment area classification system be reviewed and changed to meet the requirements of post programs and stateside Volunteer delivery activities.**
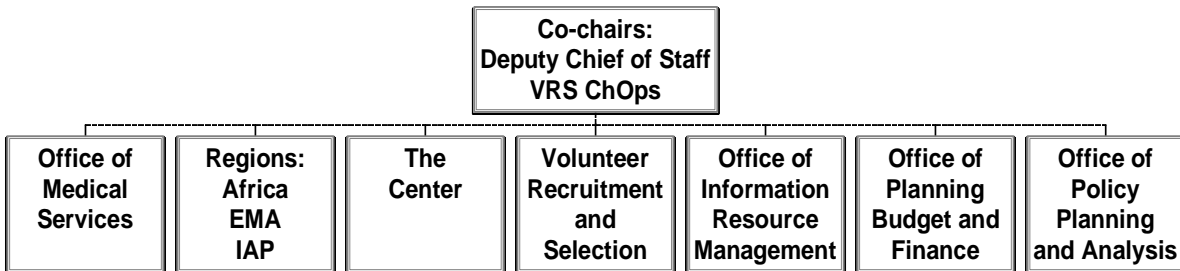

The Program Advisory Group (PAG) no longer effectively coordinates the work of the delivery system.

The PAG was formed as a cross-organizational operations group to support the delivery system. It performed the oversight function of monitoring Trainee class fill data, advising

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[15] "Review of the Volunteer Delivery System," p. 5.

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and guiding both the supply and demand ends of the delivery system, and arbitrating the allocation of "scarce skill" Trainees among country programs. When the PAG was instituted, the senior managers representing the constituent offices were knowledgeable and, more importantly, had the authority to make the decisions needed to manage and oversee Trainee allocations, training dates, and related functions. We were told that, although the PAG continues to function thanks to the attendance of country desk officers, placement officers, and other staff, the absence of senior staff diminishes its authority and capacity to play a management and oversight role.

Figure 2: PAG Participant Offices

Co-chairs: Deputy Chief of Staff VRS ChOps						
Office of Medical Services	Regions: Africa EMA IAP	The Center	Volunteer Recruitment and Selection	Office of Information Resource Management	Office of Planning Budget and Finance	Office of Policy Planning and Analysis

Source: Office of Volunteer Recruitment and Selection, 1999

An effective PAG would:

a) Supply recruitment managers with data for planning beyond the 15-month window provided by the QTRS.
b) Be a communication bridge across which information on potential applicant pools could reach post programming staff as they consider new projects and assignments.
c) Coordinate the timing of training classes to reduce the number of "spike" periods among the regions and posts.

Recommendation

3. That the agency reconstitute the Program Advisory Group with the appropriate managers.

System integration and information flow

Inadequate information sharing among the delivery system work units impedes coordinated Volunteer delivery, long-term planning, outreach, and marketing.

The 1999 review called for the collection and dissemination of reliable and timely program and Trainee request information among overseas posts, headquarters, recruitment offices, and prospective applicants. This is not happening. Detailed information on future Trainee requests collected from the posts for the agency's IPBS function is not available or used in

the agency's Volunteer delivery function. Both functions plan for the same outcome, but the processes require, collect, and use different data and different forms.[16]

The post's production of a project plan and a request for Trainees is the starting point for Volunteer delivery and the meeting place for the agency's program and training system (PATS) and the Volunteer delivery system.[17] These two processes, PATS and the delivery system, need quality communications and interrelation. The quality of the description of the assignment is crucial to matching the request with the right Volunteer and to his or her satisfaction and effectiveness. Dissatisfaction with or unrealistic expectations of the assignment duties or working conditions are common reasons why Volunteers leave Peace Corps early. All early terminations require additional Trainee input to attain and maintain the desired number of Volunteers in the field.

The 1999 report found that post staff often have insufficient knowledge of the delivery system operations and an incomplete understanding of how and where VRS offices use their program-related documents. Post staff also have limited knowledge of the delivery system, e.g., the challenge of recruiting highly skilled candidates and the timeframe to produce Trainees at post. The post's QTRS and Volunteer assignment descriptions (VADs) are intended to guide the recruitment and selection of Trainees for their projects, but the limited content and quality of information in these documents, as we will show, frequently handicap VRS in delivering the Trainees the post wants.

VRS's Trainee "supply" data sent to the posts are usually not clear, concise, or current. The VRS-produced Trainee request guidelines handbook, for example, intended to deliver general information on the delivery process and specific, updated Trainee "supply" data to posts was not revised from 1998 through 2001. A moderately revised handbook was issued in Spring 2002, but posts report that it is difficult to use.

Since the 1999 review, some progress has been made in the redesign of the VADs and country handbook. However, until they receive the VADs, the only information recruiters have is the QTRS, which is not only insufficient for them but for applicants and placement officers as well.

Too little too late may accurately characterize the information on work assignment, skill requirements, and living conditions provided to recruiters, who have the most contact with future Volunteers. The VADs, which contain those details, are transmitted from posts to VRS nine months before a Trainee arrives at post, but VRS begins recruiting and assessing prospective candidates for service as much as 15 months before training begins. The placement office typically solicits from posts, both during and following each QTRS submission, additional detail on assignment duties and skill requirements, but this is still inadequate for reviewing candidate skills. Post staff are usually unaware that recruiters do

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[16] It is notable that, while delivering qualified Volunteers to meet host government's requests is a core agency goal, no process is currently in place, beyond raw Trainee fill rate data, to monitor and measure the quality of Volunteer delivery or the performance of the system.

[17] See the OIG cross-organizational review for an analysis of how the PATS intersects with the delivery system.

not have the VAD "in hand" as they interview and assess candidates, and they do not place enough program and work-related details in their QTRS to help guide and inform recruitment.

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Recommendations

4. **That VRS redesign the Trainee request guidelines handbook for clarity and content and distribute an updated version to posts and regions on an annual basis.**

5. **That VRS redesign the QTRS to capture more detailed information on the work duties and skill competencies required for future assignments.**

6. **That the Office of Planning, Budget, and Finance redesign the IPBS document to collect posts' Trainee request data with the specific assignment areas for a three-year period and that this data serve as the primary source of Trainee request data for the delivery system offices and agency planners.**

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<u>Most Volunteer delivery staff do not understand the work of other offices in the system</u>.

Poor information flow among offices reduces the efficiency with which applicants are guided through the medical clearance process, placed in assignments and at sites, and supported in the field. Our interviews support the 1999 review finding that recruiters do not understand the medical clearance process sufficiently to fully inform and support candidates during the most time-consuming and complex portion of the delivery system. Additionally, placement officers and post staff are not provided basic health-related information on applicants with medical accommodation needs, which leads to delays in the time applicants spend submitting medical reports and, ultimately, in placing an applicant in a program. These delays cause frustration on the part of some applicants, increasing the number of dropouts. Information from OMS to posts regarding accommodation placements, delivered within confidentiality limitations to program staff with a need to know, is spotty or non-existent. Medical confidentiality blocks post program staff from information that they may need for effective training, site selection, and support. (For more on medical screening, see page 20.)

<u>Trainee request data in project and annual plans and in project status reviews are not collected and analyzed for marketing and recruitment</u>.

The agency is missing opportunities to collect and analyze data that are essential to guide recruitment planning, marketing, and outreach. The posts submit Trainee request data to the three regional offices and the Center but not in a consistent format. The data are not collected, assembled, and reported to VRS and other offices. To do so in their current form would be difficult, if not impossible.

Posts submit Trainee projections in four documents: the QTRS, the project and training status reports, the IPBS, and the project plan. (See Figure 3 below.) Only the information in the QTRS is used to inform recruitment, although the other documents have similar information.

A post's project plan has project goals and objectives, descriptions of work, training plans, and Volunteer assignment descriptions. The PATS project plan process generates projected Trainee numbers by assignment area for the life of the project—typically a six-to-eight year period. It goes to the region and stops there. A post's IPBS request is a multi-year strategic plan that includes "V year charts" projecting Trainee requests for three years. It is used by the region to create the annual IPBS request plus any enhancements. The project and training status reports are annual submissions on over 200 Peace Corps projects and include a projection of the number of Volunteers to be fielded in the project for two years, as well as a list of the AAs to be requested. These reports go to the Center and regions and stay there. If the Trainee numbers in these documents were associated with numbers of Volunteers by project and assignment area, these data could be tools for agency medium- and long-term marketing, outreach, and recruitment planning. Such an integrated database could be used, for example, to produce an annual worldwide Trainee request report by assignment area for recruitment and planning.

Figure 3: Trainee Information Sources from Post
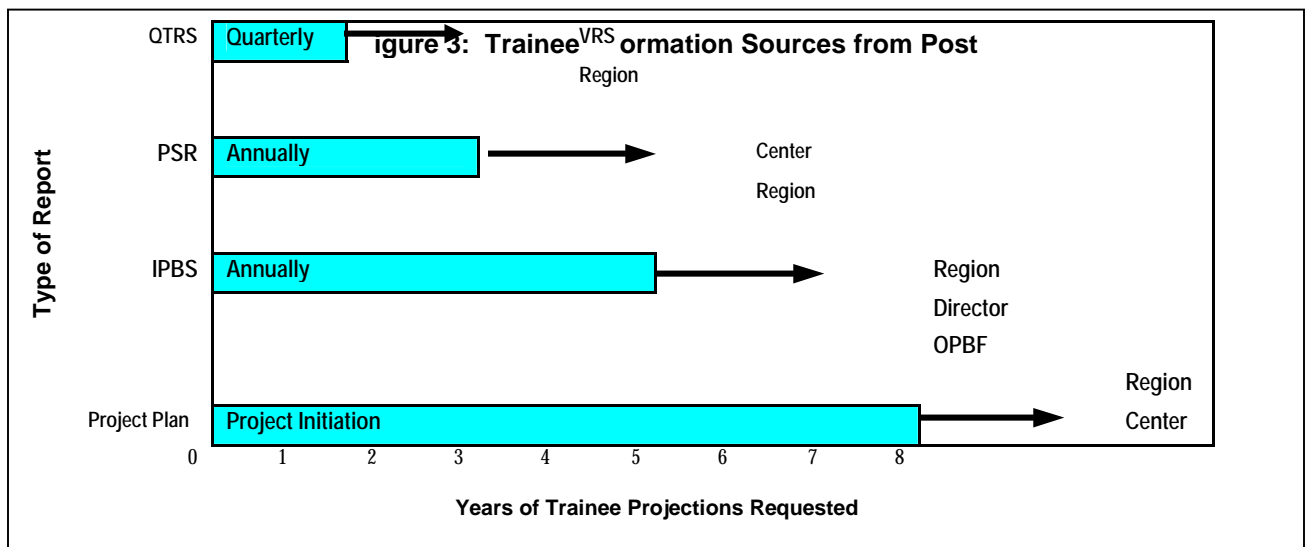
Source: Reviews of Project Plans, IPBS submissions, PSRs, and QTRS, FY 2001

Delivery system managers can benefit from the feedback of posts and host country representatives on the product delivered. New assessment tools may need to be created; others may exist and need minimal changes. For example, with some re-engineering, the annual PSRs might serve as a source of feedback and as a platform for dialogue between the field and VRS offices regarding new skill competencies needed for future training groups. The Center's annual project and training status global summary could include an analysis of trends for assignment areas in each project sector and for Volunteer skill competencies. This analysis could be useful to agency planners and to the placement, recruitment, and communication offices.

<u>The agency does not collect data on the core competencies and personal attributes of successful Volunteers to guide marketing and outreach and to develop candidate assessment tools</u>.

The 1999 review recommended that the agency systematically collect data on core competencies and personal attributes of successful Volunteers and develop objective candidate assessment criteria and tools. The Gallup contract to develop a "talent screening model" based on the attributes of high achieving Volunteers was discontinued before all the necessary data were collected from the field and did not result in redesigned candidate assessment tools. At present, limited systematic feedback on the performance of Trainees and Volunteers is delivered to VRS offices sporadically and anecdotally, if at all.

Research on Volunteer performance may support modifications in the assignment areas classification system and the candidate assessment process, both of which were suggested for re-engineering in the 1999 review. Such data may support greater consideration of applicants who do not have bachelor's degrees, a largely untapped pool of potential Volunteers. Modifications in the assignment area classification system and in candidate assessment dimensions may also support agency initiatives to recruit and field those who have been historically underrepresented including ethnic minorities, married couples, and people over the age of 50.

12. That the Office of Planning and Policy Analysis create assessment tools and conduct studies to generate systematic feedback on the performance of Trainees and Volunteers, core competencies and personal attributes of successful Volunteers, and the causes of Volunteers' early termination from service.

13. That the agency develop institutional linkages and partnerships with universities and colleges interested in conducting formal research regarding the performance of Trainees and Volunteers, core competencies and personal attributes of successful Volunteers, and the causes of Volunteers' early termination of service.

Information technology

<u>Our findings on the computer system-related deficiencies in supporting the functions of the Volunteer delivery staff are basically the same as those from every review of the Volunteer delivery system since 1989</u>.

During our review, staff from all components of the Volunteer delivery system identified the computer technology and related databases as impediments to their efficiency and productivity. They reported that complex and unproductive procedures have had to be created to compensate for the problems in the software and databases. They also complained of insufficient training for all users and expressed extreme frustration. These findings are basically the same as those documented by Booz, Allen, & Hamilton in their 1989 study—limited access to certain computer programs, little formal training, staff frustration with the system(s), and limited and inadequate information for managers even though substantial data are available.[18]

Both the 1999 review and the 2000 implementation report encouraged improvement of the technology to enhance productivity and transparency of communications throughout the Peace Corps. Both reports cited the need for technological improvements in communications among the delivery system components. The 1999 report recommended the consolidation of databases, the use of the Web, and on-line interactive programming to allow applicants to check the status of their applications. The 2000 report again focused on the potential of Web-based technology to inform applicants of the Peace Corps and to facilitate the application process. (See Appendices B and C.) The Implementation Team also noted the need for centralized computer systems architecture, a reliable database, and Web portal technology to facilitate customized and secure access by applicants.

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[18] Booz, Allen, & Hamilton, Inc., "Peace Corps Organizational Study," January 1989, section 3, p. 56.

Existing software often hinders the work of the Volunteer delivery staff.

The issues facing the agency as it adapts to modern technological advances are described in a concept paper on the potential benefits to the Peace Corps of Web-based technology.[19] The Peace Corps' hardware and software development over the last 20 years reflects the influence of Macintosh environment beginnings, frequently inadequate budgets or staffing, enthusiastic (if not wise) adaptations of the newest computer technology, and frequently changing management. Generations of internal programmers and vendors created and modified software applications. Agency offices and various working units developed software to meet their own needs—at times unaware of the system-wide impact or of other system options. These creations and modifications took place with varying degrees of planning, coordination, or collaboration among offices or working units. Because software and hardware become outdated and because little consensus exists on which programming environment should become the standard, different parts of the delivery system have been moved into a variety of software environments—Oracle (in the client-server environment), Web-based ColdFusion, or Microsoft Access.

Current software slows down the recruiters.

The recruiting staff now use five distinct and non-integrated systems to accomplish their tasks. Each software function requires a unique logon and password from the user. The software for each system that interfaces the user with the system (data entry screens, viewing screens, and report creation screens) appears and functions differently. Users find some programs technically difficult. Other programs lack data validity safeguards to prevent errors in data entry. When the IRM staff convert obsolete applications to newer software, they—possibly due to insufficient training—believe that many of the functions of systems they previously used are unrecognizable or "lost."

Within VRS, a few technically knowledgeable staff meet with IRM support staff on an ad hoc basis to discuss and plan software and database issues. However, they have no budget and no decision-making power. (Recently, the recruiters petitioned IRM to address immediately needed remedies for particularly irksome technical problems.) With the advocacy of these ad hoc groups, IRM support staff met many of the short-term requests. These efforts, though, do not address the underlying and long-term technology needs of the recruiting offices.

Current software complicates the medical screening process.

The medical screening unit depends on a computerized process, the expert system, to scan and assess the Health Status Review submitted by applicants. The expert system, created in 1995 and integrated into the screening procedures in 1996, was the cornerstone of a major reorganization of the medical screening process.[20] The expert system checks applicants' responses to 92 health-related questions and automatically produces a series of letters and

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[19] IRM and Communications Writing Group, "Investing in Web-based Technologies at the Peace Corps," November 2000.
[20] "The Report of the 1994 Medical Screening Process Redesign Team," 1994.

medical forms for the applicants and their physicians. This system decreased the amount of time spent reviewing the medical records by 40%, from an average of 59 days in 1993 to 33 days in 1997.

Nevertheless, the expert system has a number of deficiencies. Most notably, a recent version was not sufficiently tested and debugged before it was distributed to the screening unit. As a result, the screening nurses must review the letters and forms produced by the expert system for accuracy and suitability. If the output of the expert system is not correct or sufficiently clear, the nurses must transfer the instructions and letters to word processing software for modification and editing. We learned that the screening nurses make changes on 75% of the forms or letters produced by the expert system, and we calculated that this additional work is equivalent to 1.5 FTEs annually. If these deficiencies in the expert system were corrected and the expert system made available on the Web, applicants could print their medical forms from home, work, or school without the screening nurses' intervention.

The technical staff supporting the expert system are aware of the problems. In order to make the appropriate programming changes, the technical programming staff need the counsel of knowledgeable users to identify specific problems and test and validate the changes.

Current software hinders the placement process.

The difficulties with the information technology used by the placement process mirror the problems described for the recruiting and medical screening processes. Compared to the recruiting and medical units, the placement staff have created even more manual and paper systems to circumvent the lack of technological resources.

The placement process consists of a complex series of communications involving the post staff, the country desk officers, the placement officers, and, sometimes, the recruiters. Every quarter, the process of reconciling the available applicants with the requests of the posts is repeated to allow adjustments in the next four quarters of scheduled Trainee classes, as suggested by the placement officers or the country desk officers on behalf of the posts.

The number of interactions, the number of people involved, and the length of time needed to establish the date and composition of each training class are significant. The software capabilities are not sufficient to support this process. Furthermore, the current process does not allow the post staff to view the results or to be aware of progress except as relayed by phone, email, or fax by the country desk officers. The post staff do not feel in control of the number and kind of Trainees being recruited and placed. In addition, numerous opportunities exist for errors in these many exchanges conducted by phone, email, cable, or paper.

The databases may not be adequately maintained, may seem inaccessible to users, are not sufficiently reliable for managers, and are not well integrated with other software applications.

The PCVDBMS, the major repository of basic data on Volunteers, contains information used by most of the agency staff to track an applicant, Trainee, or Volunteer from the application

stage to close of service. The mainframe-based PCVDBMS dates back to the first computers at the Peace Corps, and since computer technology is modified significantly about every two years, the fact that the PCVDBMS is outdated is not surprising. Other databases, such as those for returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCV), the Crisis Corps, and the United Nations Volunteers, can be linked to the PCVDBMS (as well as to other databases) by means of a Volunteer identifier, a fact that is not well understood by most of the database users.

While the PCVDBMS and other databases can be linked, the data structures, or the way the data are arranged in each database, may differ. For example, the various databases originated in different environments and at different phases of technological development, so important data tables may contain errors or arcane codes generating reports that contain inaccurate counts and unreliable or unintelligible information. Data entry and edit functions do not have validity checks to circumvent or prevent errors. Over time, users throughout the Peace Corps have lost confidence in the information generated by databases or believe the data flawed or useless. A recent report from a task force of recruiting office managers states, ". . . the current status of our mainframe system [the PCVDBMS] is unconscionable."[21]

In order to use the PCVDBMS information to create useful and comprehensible reports for day-to-day operations, the delivery system offices require the services of analysts with specialized programming skills to navigate within the databases, to reconcile data errors, to generate the information, and to edit the result.

<u>Individual offices independently contract with outside vendor programmers to create new systems or to modify current systems</u>.

Data collected, used, and stored by the various offices of the delivery system (including country desks and posts) may often be unique to and maintained autonomously by that office. The information systems produce generally does not facilitate a transparent interface among other offices. As experienced staff leave the agency, detailed knowledge about the data may be lost, contributing to the deteriorating quality of the information.

<u>Web-based technology is a promising solution, but its potential is not fully utilized in the Peace Corps Web page</u>.

The 1999 review emphasized the flexibility, coherence, and ease of use inherent in Web-based technology. The Web-based applications currently supporting the delivery system include the on-line application process and status check and Web information linking countries of service to various assignments. All data in the on-line application (except the essays and resumes) are captured in the PCVDBMS, but some of the information is not electronically accessible and must be converted to paper documents for assessment and processing.

The recently inaugurated and well-received on-line status check allows applicants to refer to information already collected in the PCVDBMS. However, updating the information requires that staff manually enter data in a timely manner. Also, the PCVDBMS contains

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[21] Report of the task force: "Resource Allocation/Strategic Investments," April 2002.

insufficiently detailed information to handle specific applicant questions and the medical screening process, thereby generating more phone calls for nurses and recruiters, often during periods of peak work demand.

The RPCV page on the Peace Corps Web site is a clear example of inadequate integration of the Web site with the databases. A page on the Web site encourages RPCVs to update contact information. Because the critical portal technology is not in place, the information cannot be stored directly in the RPCV database. Instead, it is captured in a file and sent via email to the coordinator of RPCV services. There, the information is manually entered into the RPCV database when someone is available to do the data entry work. Recruiters rely on the centrally managed RPCV database to provide accurate contact information since they receive important assistance from RPCVs. Because the information is unreliable, some recruiters reported that they have stopped using the RPCV database and have created their own redundant, but more dependable, local database of RPCV contact information.

The delivery system information management system should be unified and consistent across offices, incorporating all systems (Web, Intranet, PCVDBMS, OMS, recruiting and placement functions, and other Volunteer delivery offices' reporting and information needs). Current efforts to address user needs are reactive to complaints, mediated by ad hoc committees, and scheduled by IRM as limited time and resources allow.

No authorized plan exists that addresses a comprehensive review of how the delivery system works, how the information flows, or what the management requirements are. Industry-wide information management planning, such as the enterprise information architecture, has not been applied to the technology issues of the Volunteer delivery system. The current information structure continues to reflect the balkanized delivery system, and until it is remapped and re-engineered, computer technologies will be disappointing.

Recommendations

14. That the Chief Information Officer address inefficiencies in the Volunteer delivery system, such as:

    a)   the need to sign on to each of the agency's major applications with a separate password,
    b)   software documentation and training process,
    c)   the OMS expert system, and
    d)   automation of the RPCV database.

15. That the Chief Information Officer, in consultation with agency users and managers:

    a)   define software and hardware requirements of the Volunteer delivery system,
    b)   integrate existing operations that interface with the Volunteer delivery system,

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| c)	document the current inventory of the agency's software and databases,
d)	conduct a needs assessment using enterprise information architecture to determine where the agency should be over the next few years, and
e)	centrally coordinate the internal and external Web-based development activities so each can build on areas of shared vision and processes.

Medical screening

<u>The perception of the medical screening process as overly time-consuming may be exaggerated, but it could be made faster and more applicant friendly</u>.

In interviewing delivery system staff, we found that most non-medical staff view medical screening as the main obstacle to efficient and timely processing of applications. The major studies of the delivery system we reviewed document the difficulty of making the medical screening process faster and more responsive to the applicant. The 1999 review proposed that OMS improve the process by piloting new medical screening methods, providing supplemental medical staffing to the screening unit, and improving communications to the applicant regarding the screening process.

We find the perception of medical screening as overly time-consuming to be exaggerated. Figure 4 indicates that the time required by the screening nurses to render a disposition of an applicant's medical status is 44 days, or 14% of the average 316 days from the time of nomination to staging. Applicants take almost twice as long (83 days) to return medical information; only one other delivery system phase—waiting for the staging date—consumes more time—96 days, or 30% of the entire time.

Figure 4: Average Timing of Application Process—FY1999-2001
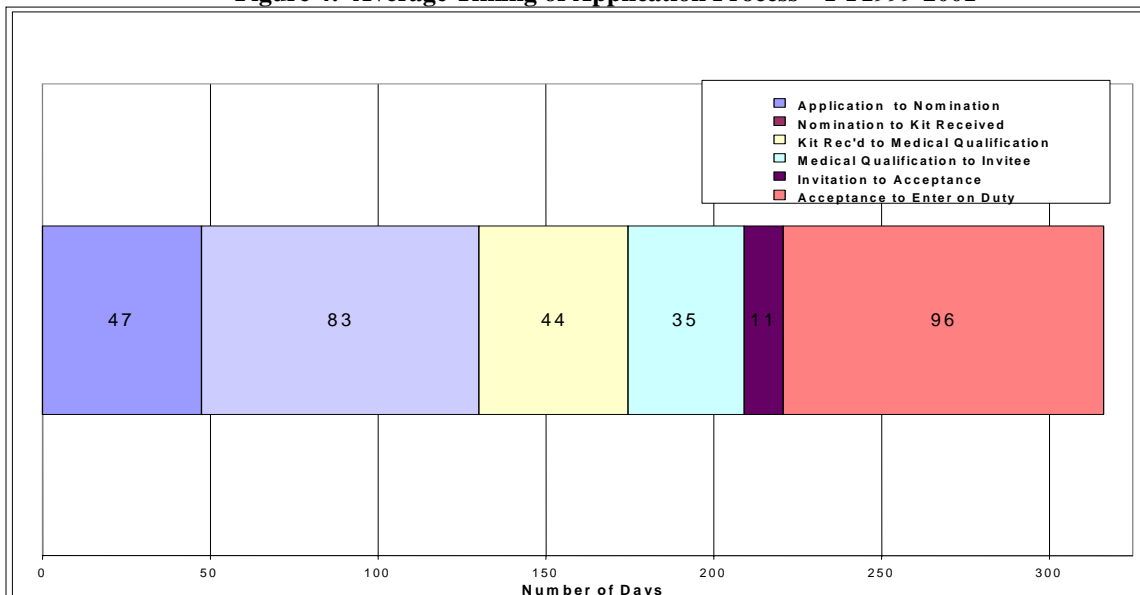
Source: PCVDBMS for FY1999—FY2001, Office of Volunteer Recruitment and Selection, July 2002

Applicants feel differently about medical screening than about recruiters or placement officers. A rigorously maintained policy of protecting the confidentiality of the applicant's

medical information isolates the medical screening process. Consequently, the recruiter's role as the applicant's chief source of information, advocate, and guide through the process is reduced when the applicant must shift to a more distant, anonymous, and busy source of information—the screening nurses at headquarters. During medical screening, the applicant feels less important, and the recruiter feels powerless to help the applicant. This distance, coupled with a chronic shortage of staff, contributes to complaints of poor customer service by some applicants, recruiters, and other VRS staff. All these features add to the perception, however unfair, of medical screening as a bottleneck.

<u>The length of time to complete the medical screening of qualified applicants has decreased, but the productivity of the screening unit has also decreased due to a greater number of applicants with medically complex conditions</u>.

Figure 5 indicates that the average time necessary to medically clear applicants has decreased almost 50% from approximately 60 days in 1993 to little more than 30 days in FY2001. For example, the number of days to send medical kits decreased from a high of 21 days in 1994 to an average of 6.2 days in FY2001—a 70% decrease. One reason is the introduction of the expert system in 1995, and another is the medical screening unit began segmenting the tasks involved in screening.

Figure 5: Average Days for Medical Screening by Year—FY1993-FY2001
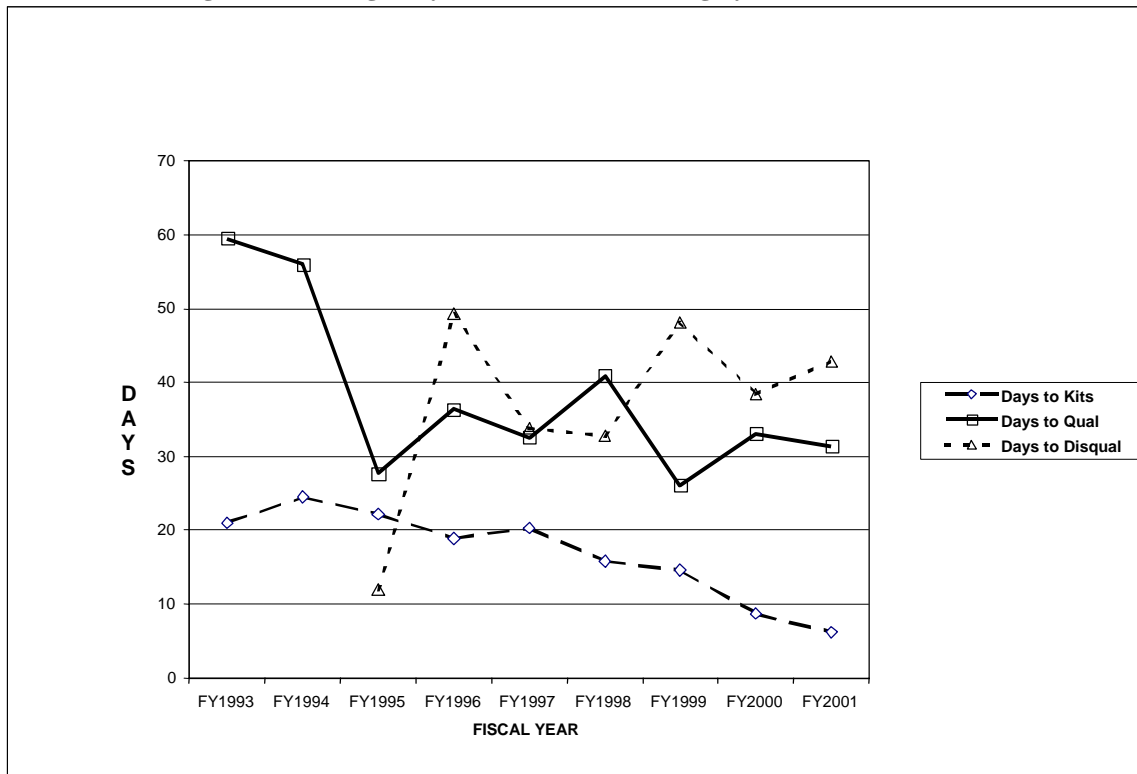
Source: Office of Medical Services, 2002

Figure 5 depicts the dramatic impact in 1995 of a legal challenge under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 against Peace Corps' medical screening practices.[22] The number of days to process an eventually medically disqualified applicant jumped from a low of 12 days in 1995 to 49 days in 1996. Overall, the time to medically disqualify an applicant has only decreased from about 50 days in 1996 to a little more than 40 days in 2001. On average, the time to assess those who ultimately are disqualified is 10 days longer than that to process a medically qualified applicant.

A higher proportion of complex medical histories within the applicant pool has been evident in recent times. For example, applicants with complex medical problems increased 5% from FY1999 to FY2000, which also results in a higher proportion of applicants medically disqualified. The number of applications with conditions identified during the screening process but not reported on the original health survey is growing. These conditions require applicants to submit additional information, resulting in an 8% increase in the number of medical reports submitted in FY2000.

As demonstrated in Table 2, the efficiency of the screening unit is affected by the increase in complicated medical conditions. The medical assessment for these applicants has become more time-consuming, requiring more tests and cycles of communication with the applicant and the medical providers.[23] To accommodate a wider variety of conditions and to maximize the accommodation of many more medical conditions, the lists of countries that can support specific medical conditions has grown from 14 to 32 in the past year. Nurses screen applicants against these lists to provide the placement unit with more specific, accurate information concerning where Volunteers may safely be placed.

Table 2: Productivity of Screening Unit, FY1998-FY2001

Fiscal Year	FTE Employees	Temporary Employees	Applicants Qualified/FTE	Medical Dispositions/FTE
1998	9	1	456	665
1999	9.6	1.8	489	666
2000	11.7	1.1	402	505
2001	10.9	.5	389	456

Source: Office of Medical Services, 2002

Because of these complexities, the number of applications each nurse can effectively screen within a year is decreasing, from an average of 666 per year in FY1999 to 456 per year in FY2001. If recruiting strategies were to target non-traditional applicants, such as seniors (see Figure 6), more aggressively, the amount of time to conduct thorough medical assessments likely would increase.

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[22] <u>Mendez v. Gearan</u>, 956 F. Supp. 1520 (N. D. Ca. 1997).
[23] See also "External Evaluation of the Peace Corps Volunteer Health System: Final Report," Pugh Ettinger McCarthy, Contract PCORPS-02-3-0002, August 8, 2002.

Figure 6: Average Days to Complete Medical Screening by Age Group by Year, 1999-2001
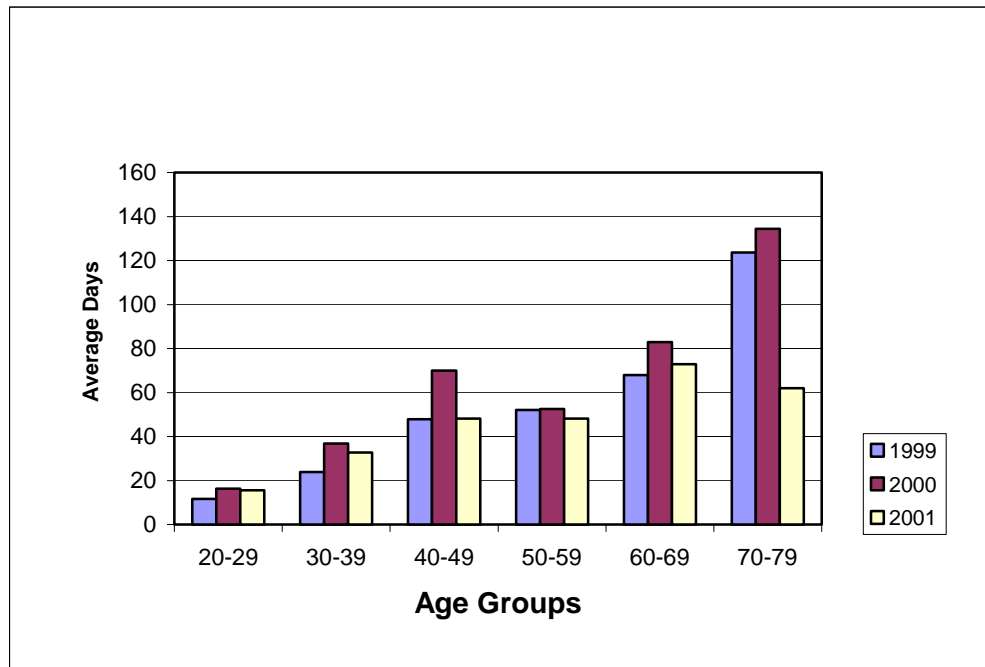
Source: Office of Medical Services, July 2002

With the current systems, resources, and constraints, such as the current interpretation of the Rehabilitation Act, it is unlikely that OMS will be able to be more flexible or further reduce the time to process applicants.

Three resources necessary to conduct medical assessments require enhancement:

   a) the screening guidelines,
   b) the expert system, and
   c) the number of screening unit staff.

Guidelines are used by the medical staff to make screening decisions for approximately 400 medical conditions that might affect the health status of a Volunteer serving in the Peace Corps. These guidelines are derived from current best medical practices as determined by the Centers for Disease Control and other U.S. Department of Health and Human Services information.

The medical guidelines, however, are based on the standards of medical practice in the United States. OMS staff must adjust the medical guidelines to take into account the standards of medical care in countries of Peace Corps service, the capability of the Peace Corps Medical Officers (PCMOs) to provide medical care specific to the condition, and the impact of service on the long-term health of the Volunteer. These adjustments require that OMS staff continuously survey and assess the quality of medical care at each post, research medical literature to identify any qualifying circumstances, provide continuing medical education to PCMOs overseas, and review and rewrite the guidelines to address recent

medical advances or new contingencies. Each set of guidelines requires research, consultation, and deliberation.

We discussed the deficiencies of the expert system earlier in this report, but updating this software requires simultaneous updating of the screening guidelines. Together, the expert system and the screening guidelines enhance (or inhibit) the productivity of the medical screening nurses.

<u>Insufficient reimbursements for applicants' medical screening expenses may be a barrier to service</u>.

Discussions with recruiting staff suggest that an increase in reimbursements may motivate applicants to respond to requests for medical information. In particular, recruiters suggest that minority applicants may not have the financial resources to complete the medical screening portion of the application. The consensus among the recruiters is that older applicants usually have adequate insurance coverage. In FY1999, only 19 applicants indicated they withdrew because of the costs of medical processing. However, an additional 598 applicants withdrew during the medical screening process. An unknown number of those may have been due to the costs of the medical screening.

The reimbursement schedule was last changed in 1995 when the dental allowance was raised from $40 to $60 and again reviewed but not changed in FY2000. Most recruiters told us that the reimbursement schedule is inadequate. Table 3 shows the current reimbursement schedule.

Table 3: Current Schedule of Medical Screening Reimbursements, FY2002

Examinations and Tests	Allowed
Females under 50	$165
Females over 50	$290
Males under 50	$125
Males over 50	$175
Dental Exam and X-ray	$60
Eyeglass Prescription	$12

Source: Medical Screening Kit, FY2002

A 1995 study of applicant dropouts indicated that a major reason for dropping out of the application process was the cost of exams and tests. That same study identified medical or dental obstacles as a leading cause of dropouts among minority applicants.[24]

<u>Other medical screening resources have not been sufficiently explored or tested</u>.

The 1999 review recommended that the medical screening unit grant contingent approval to applicants who do not appear to have a complicated medical history. In FY1999, an experiment with contingency approvals resulted in an increase in the number of medically

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[24]"Follow-up Study of Nominees Who Drop Out of the Volunteer Delivery System," Office of Planning, Policy, and Analysis, March 1995. The interviewees were randomly selected from 10% of a roster of all 1,143 nominees who dropped out between April 1 and September 22, 1994.

qualified applicants in a shorter amount of time. However, the time to render a medical disposition on those applicants who were eventually disqualified increased substantially. (See Figure 5, page 21.) Applicants who were given "conditional clearance" appeared to be less motivated to complete the medical examinations, believing they were accepted in the program and not understanding the urgency of meeting the screening unit's deadline.

The 1999 review also suggested that recruiting offices explore ways to reduce the 83 days turn-around for applicants forwarding medical information and to motivate them to complete the information more timely. The Los Angeles and Texas recruiting offices are experimenting with Veterans Administration services, which would have the additional advantage of providing services free of charge to the applicant. Department of Defense clinics have also recently been proposed as an alternative with potentially rapid processing. Some recruiting offices are identifying RPCV doctors and dentists, but sufficient time has not elapsed to evaluate the results of these efforts.

For many medical providers, routine physical examinations are not a priority, and they may not regard as important questionnaires and confirmations requested by the Peace Corps. Because most American medical practitioners have little experience or understanding of the medical resources available in Peace Corps countries, they may disagree with the Peace Corps' request or may question the need for requested documentation.

Recommendations

16. That the Office of Medical Services increase the number of screening nurses to further reduce the screening time, update the screening guidelines, and provide advisory services to support modification of the expert system.

17. That the agency review its coverage under the American Rehabilitation Act and determine whether it can bring greater flexibility into its decisions about accommodating applicants with disabilities.

18. That OMS review the reimbursement schedule and reimbursement policies to reduce out-of-pocket costs for medical screening.

Communication and retention

The Office of Communications, in collaboration with other delivery system offices, has improved communications to applicants.

Following the 1999 review recommendations, the communications office designed an integrated invitation kit containing the VAD and country information that is mailed to the applicant with the invitation to service. Formatted professionally and attractively, the kit helps the invitee organize all relevant application and service information prior to coming to the staging. The communications office published much of the country information but not the VADs on the Web site. The office also launched the on-line status check, allowing the applicant to see the application progress. The on-line status check, which has been

enthusiastically received by applicants, is an abbreviated and early version requiring on-going changes in data entry procedures by recruiters and screening nurses.

<u>Data and analysis of dropouts from the applications process are not sufficient to help the agency improve retention.</u>

Figure 7 represents all applicants during FY1999. We selected this cohort so we could track applicants through the entire application process extending to their completion of Volunteer service. The graph shows two major applicant stages—initial applicants and nominees—of the process where a significant number, 41%, do not progress to the next stage. Twenty-five percent of the initial applicants were not nominated. Of these, most (11%) did not respond to Peace Corps communications, 10% actively withdrew, and 4% were rejected. Thirty-two percent of those in the next stage—the nominees—were lost during the medical screening process: 18% did not respond to requests for further information, 9% actively withdrew, and 5% were rejected.

Figure 7: Retention Throughout the Process
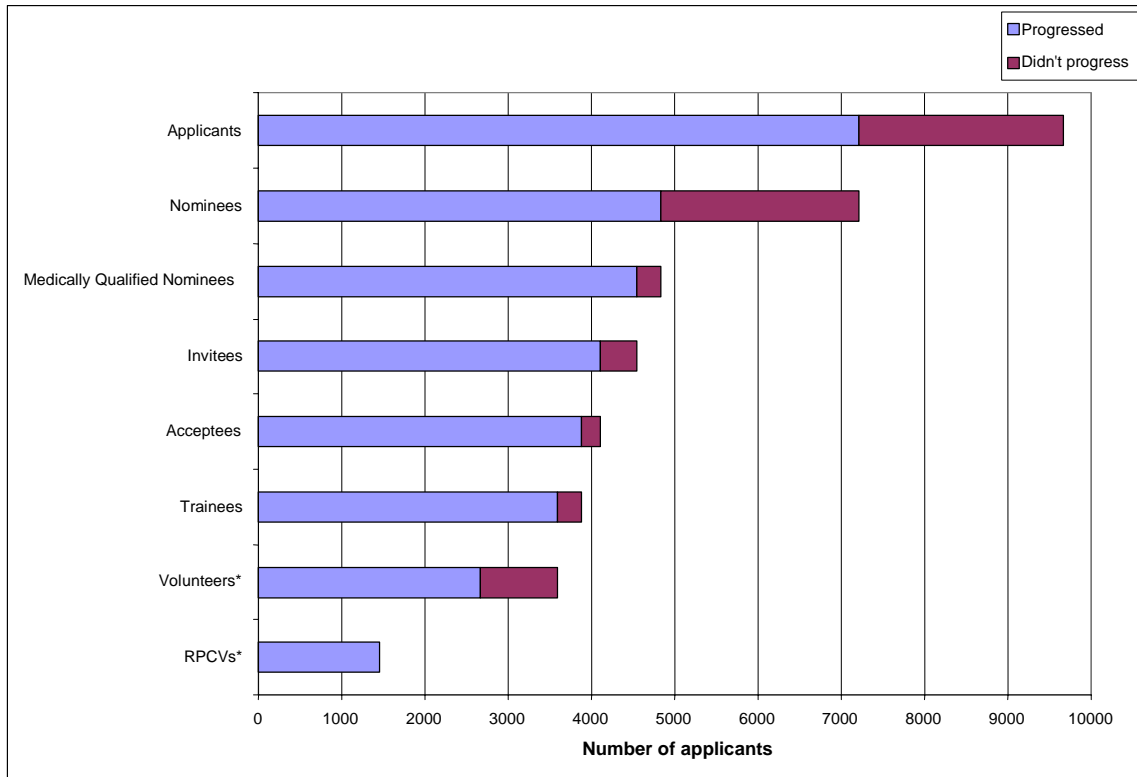
Source: PCVDBMS data of FY1999 applicants, June 2002

Of the 4,834 applicants medically cleared for service, 20%, or 960, did not arrive at staging.[25] In all stages of the application process, the applicants who actively withdrew said they accepted other career offers. But the reason for a large proportion of applicant loss (2,673 or 28%) that occurred between the beginning of the application process and the training stage is

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[25] The 960 applicants dropped out after medical qualification, either before responding to the invitation to service or after acceptance of the invitation to serve.

unknown to us, because many of the lost applicants have ceased communications with the Peace Corps. VRS staff record the reasons applicants withdraw or drop out using categories defined in the PCVDBMS. These pre-determined categories are designed to fulfill system and staff needs and may, therefore, not alone provide sufficient understanding of applicants' true reasons for dropping out of the process.

To gain more insight as to why applicants drop out, we must rely on the only in-depth study available, a telephone interview in 1995 of over 100 lost applicants. When asked why they dropped out of the application process, 37% answered "other opportunities," which included school or career prospects influenced also by "financial responsibilities." An additional 26% of the survey respondents cited "medical or dental" difficulties. Another 26% also cited "length of process." The latter respondents indicated that lack of information, lack of flexibility, and the uncertainty of receiving an invitation from the Peace Corps prompted them to take advantage of other opportunities.

When asked what the Peace Corps could have done to keep them, 30% of the respondents indicated that better and more frequent communication would have been helpful.[26] Lack of communication from the Peace Corps may lead some applicants to conclude that the Peace Corps is not interested in them. Lack of communication from applicants may lead VRS staff to conclude that the applicant lacks motivation. We know, of course, that the applicants' assumption about the Peace Corps' interest is not correct; delivery staff assumptions about lack of motivation on the part of applicants may be equally unfounded.

At each stage of the application and screening process, the loss of applicants represents costs to Peace Corps and hinders its ability to bring new Trainees into the system. The recruiting, interviewing and nomination, and medical screening processes incur costs for the Peace Corps, and, increasingly, for the applicants. Of the 3,582 Volunteers in the 1999 cohort sworn in to service, 40% completed their service. Another 35% have not yet completed service—possibly delayed by entering service later than their original cohort, serving a third year, etc. However, 25% of the Volunteers terminated service before the completion of their tour, and these represent the loss of an even greater financial and organizational investment.[27]

<u>The delivery system staff does not have well-articulated and consistent standards for customer service as a strategy for applicant retention</u>.

The 1999 review recommended that:

   a) the application process be sensitive to different circumstances of individual applicants, and
   b) the Peace Corps publish "customer service standards" regarding the application, selection, and placement process, timing issues, and communication protocols

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[26] "Follow-up Study of Nominees Who Drop Out of the Volunteer Delivery System," Office of Planning, Policy, and Analysis, March 1995.
[27] See "Peace Corps Report on Early Terminations," Office of Planning, Policy, and Analysis, May 1999, and "Peace Corps Report on Early Terminations," Office of Planning, Policy, and Analysis, June 1996.

The Peace Corps published customer service standards as part of the initiative to establish them within all federal agencies.[28] Our interviews indicated that most delivery system employees, except for the few who remembered the 1995 effort, did not know of those standards. At a recent planning meeting for key recruiting office staff, the 1995 standards were introduced and briefly discussed. No action was taken at that time.

The application process is "unfriendly."

Applicants find the Peace Corps application process complicated and not customer friendly. The bureaucratic structure, processes, and terminology of the delivery system are confusing. Some examples include:

a) the countdown of the delivery process that works backward from the time a training class is scheduled rather than forward from the time an application is received,
b) redundant letters sent to applicants by the recruiting office, a contractor for the recruiting office, and by the screening unit,
c) repetitive, outdated, or irrelevant information (such as the request for high school attended for an applicant over 50),
d) multiple supplementary questionnaires during the process,
e) requests for expensive medical verifications that the applicants or their physicians may not understand, and
f) lack of responsiveness or regular contact with the Peace Corps.

The complexity and length of the application process have generated a common misperception among Volunteers that the process itself is a "test" of the motivation, persistence, patience, and flexibility of the applicant.[29] In the course of our research, we discovered several unofficial Web sites that comment humorously (albeit critically) on the application process, one of which is entitled, "Ways to pass the time when you are terrifically excited and deliriously impatient."[30] Another Web site author comments: "Although there have been recent rumors that Washington is trying to improve the application process, we tend to believe that the annoying application process is a great tool for weeding out prospective volunteers who really shouldn't join up."[31]

Developing, implementing, and monitoring customer service standards are processes well known and well described in management literature. In the Peace Corps, beginning with the application itself, neither the quality nor quantity of customer service is monitored in the delivery process. No routine measures of response time or quality of interaction exist nor is there provision for customer feedback or evaluation. Some past efforts to improve customer service have been reactive, using a few complaints to target a corrective action.

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[28] "Putting Customers First '95: Standards for Serving the American People." National Performance Review, U.S. Government Printing Office, October 1995, ISBN 0-14-048321-2. See Appendix D for customer service standards written by OMS and VRS.

[29] This problem was also recognized by the 1999 review team who recommended that, "The application, screening, and placement process itself should not be viewed as a means to test the flexibility of applicants."

[30] http://www.geocities.com/MeagsDream/MeagsDream.html.

[31] http://www.soyouwanna.com/site/syws/peacecorps/peacecorps2.html.

Consequently, efforts to improve customer service may be initiated without a full understanding of customer needs.

Recommendations

19. That the agency establish customer service standards for the principal delivery system offices having direct communications with applicants and appoint representatives to respond to complaints and evaluate customer service.

20. That the Center develop information and learning tools that applicants can access on the Web site prior to staging.

21. That the agency simplify and reform the unfriendly aspects of the application process.

Staffing and training

<u>From FY1999 to the present, the average length of a vacancy in a management position in the delivery system is 13 months</u>.

The five-year rule, the lengthy process required to fill vacancies, the impact of change in administration, hiring freezes, and periodic reductions in staff create persistent staff shortages.[32] A result has been reliance on lower level staff to hold two jobs—the one they were appointed to and their vacancy in an acting role.

Table 4: Key Management Vacancies Affecting the Delivery Process, FY1999 to FY2002

Management Position	Approximate Months
Associate Director/Volunteer Recruiting Services	18
Chief of Operations, VRS (eliminated)	
Director of Recruitment (eliminated)	
Director of Placement (eliminated)	
Associate Director/Volunteer Services	8
Deputy Director	0
Medical Director	10
Chief Information Officer	15
Director, IRM	18
Chief, IT Planning and Program Support	0
Chief, International Technical Support	30
Chief, Systems Development and Support	6
Director, Communications	11
Press Director	11
Deputy Press Director	26

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[32] A recent report from the General Accounting Office, "Peace Corps: Initiatives for Addressing Safety and Security Challenges Hold Promise, but Progress Should Be Assessed," comments on the impact high staff turnover has on the ability of the Peace Corps to implement its safety and security policies. GAO-02-818, July 2002, p. 25.

Marketing Director	27
Internet Communications Director	0
Regional Director, Africa	14
Regional Director, EMA	5
Regional Director, IAP	18
Director, Policy, Planning, and Analysis	30
CFO, Office of Planning, Budget, and Finance	13
Director, The Center	2
Average Length of a Position Vacancy*	13.2

*Eliminated positions are not included in the calculations.

Table 4 demonstrates the gravity of this problem in the delivery system. For a three-year period, from FY1999 through FY2002, the average vacancy period for key management staff was 13.2 months. While acting managers may fully meet their responsibilities, they may not have the authority to make decisions or may delay decisions, pending management appointments.

Persistent staffing deficiencies impede the efficiency and productivity of the delivery process.

Managers reported that staff vacancies are a continuing concern. In addition to the vacancies generated by the five-year rule, a hiring freeze was in effect from January 20, 2001 until August 2001 for all employees. FP-3 and higher positions continued to be frozen until February 15, 2002. While the most dramatic impact of the hiring freeze prevented the filling of management positions, the lack of management attention to filling all staff vacancies may have contributed to further staff deficiencies. The offices most directly concerned with Volunteer recruitment, selection, and placement—VRS and OMS—report high turnover (VRS) or difficulties competing for highly skilled staff (OMS).

Each unfilled position has a production cost:

a) The Booz, Allen, & Hamilton study reported that the lower the recruiter-to-applicant ratio, the higher the conversion rate from applicants to nominees.[33]
b) OMS' screening unit has documented that a full-time and fully trained medical professional can process about 440 medical assessments annually.
c) According to the performance appraisal standards for placement officers, each placement officer assigns 10 applicants per week or approximately 500 applicants placed per year.

In the past, Volunteer delivery system employees extended their working hours, worked weekends, and did their utmost to meet recruitment, placement, and screening goals. While the employees have shown laudable commitment, absence of key staff detracts from quality decisions, customer responsiveness, work process innovations, and the training needed to enhance the quality, as well as the quantity, of productive work.

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[33] Booz, Allen, & Hamilton, "Peace Corps Organizational Study," January 1989, section 3, p. 45.

<u>Training opportunities for most delivery system staff are inadequate</u>.

Each of the offices comprising the delivery process estimate that staff are not fully productive until after six-to-eight months on the job. Given the agency's rapid turnover of staff and frequent and prolonged vacancies, early and adequate training and well-maintained procedure manuals are essential to bring a new staff member to productivity. Dedicated training time is brief. For example, recruiters' formal training totals about 50 to 60 hours, even though they must be skilled in campaign planning, advance work, public speaking, interviewing, screening for and documenting suitability, document reviews, and counseling.

The training provided to placement officers and recruiters is inconsistent. This is most evident in the training of recruiters in interviewing and assessing candidates. Most of their training is "on the job" and depends upon the more experienced staffs' skills and capacity as trainers. The medical screening supervisor reports that the employment market for nurses places the Peace Corps at a disadvantage in hiring well-trained nurses who perform specialized medical assessments. Most nurses require six-to-nine months before they can process medical assessments efficiently. New training consists mostly of mentoring by the supervisor and peer interaction, which reduces the productivity of colleagues doing the training.

A 1999 study found inefficiencies and lack of productivity caused by inadequate software and untrained users to be 90% higher in the Peace Corps than in any comparable government agency.[34] The idiosyncrasies of the various software programs in the delivery process are difficult to learn. Lack of adequate training constrains work and often results in data management errors, inefficiencies, and frustration. Without adequate training, users may abandon a useful but complicated capability entirely or believe they must create laborious manual solutions to do their work. Until the agency reaches consensus on a consistent programming standard, users must familiarize themselves with the specific quirks of each application, usually by experimentation and looking over the shoulders of colleagues, thereby reducing productivity and efficiency of all.

As we have mentioned earlier, most staff do not clearly understand the entire delivery process and the role of other offices. Few opportunities exist for cross training or for team interactions designed to improve communications and to facilitate efficiency. In one exception, recruiters and the screening nurses attended a medical review board meeting that demonstrated the complexity of the medical reviews performed by the screening nurses. A cross-training visit, in turn, by screening nurses to the recruiting offices demonstrated to the nurses the multifaceted nature of recruitment work in producing events, interviewing and assessing candidates, and maintaining applicants in the process. Both groups valued the interaction and felt they had enhanced their knowledge and commitment to work more productively and more cohesively. However, these training opportunities were not continued.

<u>The recruitment, placement, and medical screening staffs are subject to numerous pressures as they perform candidate assessment and selection</u>.

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[34] The Harris Corporation, "Wintel Migration and Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) Study," June 23, 1999, p. 29.

Earlier in this report,[35] we discussed the agency's tendency to isolate the role of recruitment, placement, and medical assessment, to burden these staff with much of the responsibility for the success or failure of the Volunteer delivery process, and to blame them when problems occur. We believe that this isolating and high-pressured operating environment has had an impact on the staff and may be a cause of friction among the placement, recruitment, and medical screening offices.

Past studies of the delivery process calculated that the average length of employment of recruiters was approximately 18 months.[36] High staff turnover is rooted not only in the five-year rule, but also in the position ranking, pay scales, poor training, and lack of opportunity for professional development or promotion. Most recruiters are hired at the entry level and bring the zeal and enthusiasm of their own successful Volunteer experience to their work. It would be in the interest of the agency to retain recruiters for a longer period.

The medical screening staff is isolated professionally and within the delivery process. They lack the personal interaction common in the traditional practitioner-patient relationship, and they find the pressure to function in a production mode stressful. They are also isolated by strict medical confidentiality rules that prohibit them from communicating freely with their Volunteer delivery colleagues about applicants.

The recruiters, placement officers, and the medical screening staff also experience pressures exerted by other offices. There is "headquarters" pressure to fill every Trainee class slot and pressure by the posts for high quality Trainees, leaving VRS in the middle of a three-way dilemma: the posts claim they would rather have a shortfall in a training class than receive unsuitable candidates; regional and senior management want every budgeted slot filled; and the medical screening staff insist that the health, safety, and confidentiality of every applicant must take precedence over all other considerations. One consequence of this environment is some reluctantly issued invitations by placement officers or screening nurses to "borderline" candidates that recruiters may have had reservations about nominating in the first place. These pressures are likely to increase as the agency seeks greater numbers of Volunteers.

Recommendations

22. That the agency address staffing vacancies and turnover in the delivery process by filling vacancies promptly, developing up-to-date procedure manuals, and providing training for each position.

23. That HRM conduct an audit of the VRS staff positions to confirm that personnel ratings, salary, and career opportunities are commensurate with job responsibilities.

24. That the agency use available awards and recognition to acknowledge sustained superior performance and special acts.

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[35] See discussion, p. 8.
[36] Booz, Allen, & Hamilton, Peace Corps Organizational Study, January 1989, section 3, p. 45.

Appendix A

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation relied on extensive document analysis, structured and unstructured interviews, and a review of medical in-processing. The review involved reading studies and reports that preceded and informed the 1999 study as well as working documents more directly related to delivery system functioning.

We interviewed two staff members directly involved with the 1999 study and six staff directly involved with the 2000 refinement. We interviewed the Associate Director for Volunteer Recruitment and Selection (AD/VRS), the Associate Director for Volunteer Support (AD/VS), the Director of Communications, and managers and staff in the Office of Placement and the Office of Recruiting. The team visited the Denver, Minneapolis, New York, and Washington, D. C. recruiting offices to interview regional managers, public affairs officers, recruiting coordinators, and recruiters. We also interviewed the regional manager in San Francisco by phone. We conducted numerous interviews in the Office of Medical Services, the Office of Management/CIO, and IRM. For perspectives from regional offices and posts toward the delivery system, we interviewed an acting regional director of EMA, four former country directors, one programming and training officer, and two desk officers. We also attended numerous meetings of the VRS Regional Office Planning Conference on June 17-21, 2002.

Table 6: Summary of Interviews

VDS Offices	Number Interviewed
Volunteer Recruitment and Selection	33
Office of Medical Services	10
Information Resources Management	6
Office of Communications	3
EMA, IAP, and Africa Regions	5*
Office of Policy, Planning, and Analysis	1
The Center	2
Total	**60**

Two interviewees served in VRS management and as country directors.

To ensure that the agency officials and staff had ample opportunity to discuss our findings with us, we conducted four debriefings for managers and staff from VRS, OMS, Communications, IRM and the Chief Information Officer, General Counsel, and the regions. We also debriefed the Director, the Chief of Staff, the Deputy Director, the AD/VS and the new AD/VRS, managers from the Center, and the regional directors.

Appendix B

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE REVIEW OF THE VOLUNTEER DELIVERY SYSTEM, 1999

Determining the needs and requirements of the Peace Corps

- A trainee classification system should be created that allows for posts to describe their needs for Volunteers in a framework that effectively matches job descriptions with applicants' abilities. This approach should use common language understood by both overseas and domestic staff as well as applicants.
- A classification system for assignments should give more weight to personal attributes and practical life experience in determining the likelihood of a successful Volunteer.
- After general suitability and basic competencies are met, selection for "generalists" should be based more on interest in the assignment than on specific academic credentials.
- The Volunteer delivery system should be responsive to short- and long-term needs and should reflect the strategic planning (3-5 years) of Trainee projections provided during the IPBS.

Searching for, attracting, and retaining candidates

- To be effective in recruiting and retaining applicants with unique backgrounds, the Peace Corps should recruit and place these applicants in a distinct fashion.
- The Peace Corps should be more open with applicants about available options.
- The delivery system should have the capacity to record and track applicant preferences—skill areas, geographic, language, etc.—so that they can play a greater role in the placement/matching process.
- The application, screening, and placement process itself should not be viewed as a means to "test" the flexibility of applicants.

Assessing and selecting candidates

- The Peace Corps should develop objective and quantifiable assessment criteria to effectively screen out applicants who do not have the potential to be successful Volunteers. The criteria should be used to evaluate desirable applicants according to a well-established rating system.
- More time and effort should be spent on evaluating the core competencies and personal attributes of being a successful Peace Corps Volunteer.
- The Peace Corps should re-evaluate the current utility of personal references and other means of collecting information on applicants. The Volunteer application, references, and other documentation should be designed to solicit information about candidates that reflects the assessment criteria used to identify successful Volunteers.

The medical screening process

- Communication to applicants regarding the medical screening component should be improved.
- The Peace Corps should provide supplemental medical staffing to meet medical screening demands and avoid bottlenecks during peak periods.
- The agency should pilot new medical screening methods such as:

  - o decentralizing screening qualification through a network of physicians and dentists, and
  - o inviting applicants to service prior to medical qualification.

Effectively communicating to all participants

- The Peace Corps should consolidate its various databases that contain information on applicants and Volunteers into a central database that allows for the efficient collection and dissemination of information.
- The central database should support the use of sophisticated and reliable Web-based technology that links headquarters, recruitment offices, overseas posts, and prospective applicants to relevant, timely, and accurate information.
- Prior to the arrival of Trainees, posts should receive information describing each Trainee's talents and aspirations.
- The Peace Corps should reorganize the all-in-one country and job description documents (VADs) to make the information more accessible and readable on the Web site.
- As part of an expanded Web site, an on-line graphic display of the entire delivery system process should be available to applications in order to provide them with more detailed program and country-specific information.
- The Peace Corps' Web site should provide an interactive means for applicants to check their status in the application process.
- The Peace Corps should recognize and be sensitive to different circumstances of individual applicants.
- The Peace Corps should publish "customer service standards" regarding the application, selection, and placement process, timing issues, and communication protocols.

Appendix C

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE REVIEW OF THE VOLUNTEER DELIVERY SYSTEM (MAY 2000)

Recommendations for refinement and implementation

- Adopt Position Announcements to provide greater flexibility and efficiency in matching applicants' overall competencies with job requirements.
- Expand access to program information using a Web-based publishing system.
- Provide staff with timely access to supply and demand information via the Intranet.
- Explore the use of specialists who can more effectively perform the distinct functions of outreach and assessment.
- Increase use of the Internet for targeted outreach and marketing.
- Explore additional strategies for chronically hard-to-fill slots.
- Expand general, country-specific, and program information on the Web to allow for more informed decision-making on the part of applicants.
- Institute regular, targeted communication, such as newsletters and confirmations of/requests for information, to inquirers and applicants.
- Refine and better integrate tools for assessment and education, such as personal references, written statements, the interview, and a potential self-assessment.
- Re-assess timing and format of personal reference checks.
- Evaluate predictive value of in-person vs. phone interviews.
- Further develop the on-line application.
- Employ information from the Health Status Review earlier in the process.
- Provide applicants with option to conduct automated status checks.
- Develop central customer service point of contact.
- Create a process for ensuring mutual placement matches between applicants and Peace Corps.
- Use technology to increase efficiency of identifying mutual matches.
- Explore impact of offering earlier invitations to applicants.
- Ensure better integration of medical assessment and the matching process.
- Maximize equitable, consistent fill rates across training classes and ensure efficient management of special requirements.
- Improve quality and coordination of invitation kits.
- Institute customer service standards to ensure timely, consistent, and quality communication with all applicants throughout the selection process.

Appendix D

1995 REPORT: PUTTING CUSTOMERS FIRST: STANDARDS FOR SERVING THE AMERICAN PEOPLE[37]

Office of Medical Services

Medically screens all applicants for Peace Corps service.

- Your interest in serving as a Peace Corps volunteer is important to us. You can expect courteous and respectful treatment from us.

- If you contact the Office of Medical Services by phone, a customer service representative will take your call in turn. If the representative is unable to answer your inquiry, he or she will refer you to someone who can. If you choose to leave a message, we will return your call within 48 hours.

- When you submit medical records to us, we will maintain them in the Office of Medical Services and handle them in a professional, confidential manner.

When we communicate with you, we will use letters, forms, or terms that are clear, concise, and easily understood.

Upon receipt of complete, accurate dental and medical records, we will make a determination of your medical eligibility for overseas service within 10 working days.

In the event we determine you are not medically eligible to serve overseas, we will notify you in writing and explain why. We will also inform you of our appeal procedures. Should you choose to appeal, a decision will be made within 60 days of your written request.

Office of Volunteer Placement

Selects, places, and delivers qualified applicants to Peace Corps host countries.

Every employee represents the Peace Corps. As our customer, you can expect that we will:

Upon receipt of your application from Recruitment, maintain contact with you at least every 30 days during our decision process and provide you with complete and accurate information on the status of your application.

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[37] http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/npr/library/nprrpt/csrpt/cusfir95/index.html. The following Peace Corps offices also submitted customer service standards, which are not reproduced here. They are Office of Human Resource Management, Office of Returned Volunteer Career Services, Peace Corps Fellows Program, and World Wise Schools.

Give our names and be prompt, courteous, and clear with each caller, redirecting your calls when necessary.

Provide telephone coverage throughout the day; answer all phone calls by the third ring, using automated voice systems only when necessary.

Respond to requests for information within one business day.

Apologize if we make a mistake and correct the problem. Help customers with special needs related to vision, hearing, mobility, health status, literacy, language, and other factors obtain access to services and information.

Provide forms that are easy to understand.

Utilize new technologies to provide customers with more efficient access to our services and information.

Perform surveys to evaluate customer satisfaction.

Office of Volunteer Recruitment

Recruits people interested in volunteer opportunities with the Peace Corps.

You can expect a Peace Corps recruiting office to be:

Courteous and respectful: Your interest in Peace Corps activities is important to us, and you can expect professional treatment.

Clear: We will explain our programs, how our recruitment process works, whether you are eligible, and how you can apply. Our letters and printed materials will be professional in appearance and written in plain English.

Accessible: We are available to talk with individuals and groups about our programs. When you visit our office, you will be assisted by a knowledgeable staff person. If someone you wish to talk with is not available, we will arrange for this person to contact you. Follow-up phone calls will be made to ensure that you have received the information sent and to respond to your questions.

Fair: Our selection process will proceed without discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, sexual orientation, disability, or political affiliation.

Ethical: We will ensure that your privacy is protected.

Efficient: We will mail requested information to you within three business days. We will acknowledge your application within five business days and provide information regarding the status of your application within 10 business days. When you ask a question, we will

provide an immediate answer whenever possible. If we cannot, we will give you a firm commitment as to when an answer can be provided.

Open: We will measure your satisfaction through use of customer surveys, focus groups, and public comments. We encourage you to tell us how we can improve our service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That a senior official be appointed to chair a renovation committee composed of representatives from each major office involved in the delivery system to prepare a blueprint for delivery system process changes and continuous improvements.

2. That the assignment area classification system be reviewed and changed to meet the requirements of post programs and stateside Volunteer delivery activities.

3. That the agency reconstitute the Program Advisory Group with the appropriate managers.

4. That VRS redesign the Trainee request guidelines handbook for clarity and content and distribute an updated version to posts and regions on an annual basis.

5. That VRS redesign the QTRS to capture more detailed information on the work duties and skill competencies required for future assignments.

6. That the Office of Planning, Budget, and Finance redesign the IPBS document to collect posts' Trainee request data with the specific assignment areas for a three-year period and that this data serve as the primary source of Trainee request data for the delivery system offices and agency planners.

7. That the Center redesign the project status and training status reports to capture feedback on Trainee and Volunteer performance and the skill competencies under consideration for future training classes.

8. That the Center redesign the project plan and project framework documents to capture the specific number of Volunteers projected per year per assignment area for the life of the project and that this information be available for long-term delivery system marketing and outreach activities.

9. That VRS and the regions collect projected post Trainee request data and maintain it on the PCDBMS for the development of analytic reports.

10. That the Center include in the annual project and training status global summary report an in-depth analysis of program trends as well as assignment areas and the skill competencies required for assignments.

11. That the renovation committee consider how Trainee and Volunteer demand information from the posts might be collected for the IPBS, PSR, QTRS, and project plan processes via a single format that is regularly updated and incorporated to eliminate duplication and achieve comparability and consistency.

12. That the Office of Planning and Policy Analysis create assessment tools and conduct studies to generate systematic feedback on the performance of Trainees and

Volunteers, core competencies and personal attributes of successful Volunteers, and the causes of Volunteers' early termination from service.

13. That the agency develop institutional linkages and partnerships with universities and colleges interested in conducting formal research regarding the performance of Trainees and Volunteers, core competencies and personal attributes of successful Volunteers, and the causes of Volunteers' early termination of service.

14. That the Chief Information Officer address inefficiencies in the Volunteer delivery system, such as:

   a) the need to sign on to each of the agency's major applications with a separate password,
   b) software documentation and training process,
   c) the OMS expert system, and
   d) automation of the RPCV database.

15. That the Chief Information Officer, in consultation with agency users and managers:

   a) define software and hardware requirements of the Volunteer delivery system,
   b) integrate existing operations that interface with the Volunteer delivery system,
   c) document the current inventory of the agency's software and databases,
   d) conduct a needs assessment using enterprise information architecture to determine where the agency should be over the next few years, and
   e) centrally coordinate the internal and external Web-based development activities so each can build on areas of shared vision and processes

16. That the Office of Medical Services increase the number of screening nurses to further reduce the screening time, update the screening guidelines, and provide advisory services to support modification of the expert system.

17. That the agency review its coverage under the American Rehabilitation Act and determine whether it can bring greater flexibility into its decisions about accommodating applicants with disabilities.

18. That OMS review the reimbursement schedule and reimbursement policies to reduce out-of-pocket costs for medical screening.

19. That the agency establish customer service standards for the principal delivery system offices having direct communications with applicants and appoint representatives to respond to complaints and evaluate customer service.

20. That the Center develop information and learning tools that applicants can access on the Web site prior to staging.

21.   That the agency simplify and reform the unfriendly aspects of the application process.

22.   That the agency address staffing vacancies and turnover in the delivery process by filling vacancies promptly, developing up-to-date procedure manuals, and providing training for each position.

23.   That HRM conduct an audit of the VRS staff positions to confirm that personnel ratings, salary, and career opportunities are commensurate with job responsibilities.

24.   That the agency use available awards and recognition to acknowledge sustained superior performance and special acts.

AGENCY'S FINAL RESPONSE TO THE VOLUNTEER DELIVERY SYSTEM RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **That a senior official be appointed to chair a management committee from each major office involved in the delivery system to prepare a blueprint for delivery system process changes and continuous improvements.**

   Concur. This function will be integrated into the Program Advisory Group (see #3 for specifics of PAG activities).

2. **That the assignment area classification system be reviewed and changed to meet the requirements of post programs and stateside Volunteer delivery activities.**

   Concur. The Agency has tasked the newly constituted Program Advisory Group to review and revise the assignment area classification system and make recommendations to the responsible divisions (Volunteer Recruitment and Selection, Regions, The Center for Field Assistance and Applied Research).
   Assignment area classification system review is already complete, and we estimate 3 years for full implementation of changes. Procedures and changes are being integrated into PAG.

3. **That the Agency reconstitute the Program Advisory Group with the appropriate managers.**

   Concur. The Agency has reconstituted the Program Advisory Group as a Senior Director level forum established to discuss programming issues and allocate trainee resources among the three Regions and VRS. Its primary responsibility is to monitor the Agency's supply and demand functions with respect to recruitment, selection, and training in support of Trainee issues. It has held its first planning meeting and will continue meeting monthly. (Several specific activities have been identified, including management of 3 yr. out Trainee Request Summaries against the VRS 3 yr. projections.)

4. **That VRS redesign the Trainee request guidelines handbook for clarity and content and distribute an updated version to posts and regions on an annual basis.**

   Concur. VRS will lead the revision of the Trainee Request Handbook in collaboration with the Center in 2003. Proposed completion date is Q4, 2003. VRS will review the Handbook annually for clarity and content and distribute to Agency staff accordingly.

5. **That VRS redesign the QTRS to capture more detailed information on the work duties and skill competencies required for future assignments.**

   Concur. VRS and Regions have made continuous improvements to the Quarterly Trainee Request Summary form over the last several months. In addition, the Agency has tasked the Office of Information Resources Management (IRM) to design the optimal new QTRS mainframe form. Expect implementation of the new form by Q4, FY 04.

6. **That the Office of Planning, Budget and Finance redesign the IPBS document to collect posts' Trainee request data with the specific assignment areas for a three-year period and that this data serve as the primary source of Trainee request data for the delivery system offices and agency planners.**

   Concur. For FY03, regional IPBS guidance to posts includes instructions to incorporate information on out-year recruitment currently captured in Project Status Reports.   There are 2 strategies in place: Long term strategy includes adjusting the Peace Corps Database Management System to be able to enter the Trainee Status Report/Program Status Report data, which will track the 3 yr. IPBS document, against VRS projections. Until that time, through PAG, short-term solutions are being developed to bring together the data into one tracking system. Expect completion in Q4, 2003

7. **That the Center redesign the project status and training status reports to capture feedback on Trainee and Volunteer performance and the skill competencies under consideration for future training classes.**

   Concur. The Center will redesign the PSR/TSR reports to collect required performance information and skills projections. (The current PSR form contains two questions that link Volunteer training to project performance.) Project outcome reporting will also demonstrate the quality of Volunteer performance and provide indications of needs for changes in Volunteer training. Redesign will be completed by Q2, 2004.

8. **That the Center redesign the project plan and project framework documents to capture the specific number of Volunteers projected per year per assignment area for the life of the project and that this information be available for long-term delivery system marketing and outreach activities.**

   Concur. By Q3, '03, the Center will insert these information fields into project plan and framework documents. In addition, it will develop written guidance for staff to help them make skills projections over the life of the project, or three years if project is longer. (Est. completion by Q4, 04.) The Center will assist posts to incorporate this information into their project plans and frameworks, and, through the ongoing TSR/PSR quarterly meetings, will share this information with Communications and other groups responsible for the Agency's marketing and outreach activities.

9. **That VRS and the regions collect projected post Trainee request data and maintain it on the PCDBMS for the development of analytical reports.**

   Concur. (See #6) The Agency is undergoing a full enterprise architecture updating and upgrading to meet the long-term objectives. An integral part of this project is the more efficient collection and availability of Trainee request data in order to project long term needs and challenges, as well as to effectively analyze the data and generate reports through the PCDBMS. The Regions and VRS will assist IRM in the development of this part of the enterprise architecture updating.

10. **That the Center include in the annual project and training status global summary report an in-depth analysis of program trends as well as assignment areas and the skill competencies required for assignments.**

    Concur. The Center will conduct an in-depth analysis of PSR/TSR reports and will redesign the global summary report format to reflect this information. We will produce the 2003 report in this new format.

11. **That the renovation committee consider how Trainee and Volunteer Demand information from the posts might be collected for the IPBS, PSR, QTRS, and project plan processes via a single format that is regularly updated and incorporated to eliminate duplication and achieve comparability and consistency.**

    Concur. The Agency's newly reconstituted PAG is charged with producing a business model to delineate the appropriate processes in order to review and coordinate the trends, developments, and indicators pertaining to recruitment/TI flow and suggest adjustments where necessary. Also see #'s 3, 6, and 9.

12. **That the office of Policy, Planning and Analysis create assessment tools and conduct studies to generate systematic feedback on the performance of Trainees and Volunteers, core competencies and personal attributes of successful Volunteers, and the causes of Volunteers' early termination from service.**

    Concur. The Agency is currently developing resources, such as the Close of Service Evaluation, Host Country National Survey, and other evaluative tools to generate systematic performance assessments, core competencies and personal attributes of successful Volunteers. We are presently in the process of enhancing our analysis of early terminations and will continue to collect, analyze and report on the underlying causes for resignations within the context of early terminations.

13. **That the agency develop institutional linkages and partnerships with universities and colleges interested in conducting formal research regarding the performance of Trainees and Volunteers, core competencies and personal attributes of successful Volunteers, and the causes of Volunteers' early termination from service.**

Concur understanding this to mean that the Agency, through its office of Policy, Planning and Analysis, will consider and review all independent research possibilities. PPA has established studies and surveys to determine the causes of Early Termination, as well as better honing in on the core competencies and personal attributes of successful Volunteers. (see #12).

14. **That the Chief Information Officer address inefficiencies in the Volunteer delivery system, such as:**

   a) **the need to sign on to each of the agencies major applications with a separate password,**
   b) **software documentation and training process,**
   c) **the OMS expert system,**
   d) **and automation of the RPCV database.**

Concur. The need for employing "Single Sign-On" technology has been researched and the determination has been made that the agency does not have the funds to pay for this technology at this time. Action to address the software documentation and training process has also begun. Additional procedures and tools have been acquired or are under development that will improve efficiencies in this area. Substantial work has been done to improve automation support of the RPCV database and additional work is planned for it as well as the OMS expert system software. We will continue improving these systems as funding becomes available.

15. **That the Chief Information Officer, in consultation with Agency users and managers:**

   a) **define software and hardware requirements of the Volunteer delivery system,**
   b) **integrate existing operations that interface with the Volunteer delivery system,**
   c) **document the current inventory of the agency's software and databases,**
   d) **conduct a needs assessment using enterprise information architecture to determine where the agency should be over the next few years, and**
   e) **centrally coordinate the internal and external Web-based development activities so each can build on areas of shared vision and processes.**

Concur. On October 23rd, 2002, the Office of the CIO formally launched an Enterprise Information Architecture (EIA) Program that, among other things, will address all of the issues associated with this recommendation. VDS has been identified as a key initiative of the EIA program and its highest priority focus area. The existing business processes as well as the system relationships and interdependencies will all be documented and mapped. The Agency intends to complete work on the "AS IS" portion of VDS, develop a detailed project plan, and complete a number of enhancements to high priority components of the existing VDS software outlined in this recommendation by the end of FY 2003.

16. **That the Office of Medical Services increase the number of screening nurses to further reduce the screening time, update the screening guidelines, and provide further advisory services to support modification of the expert system.**

Concur. The Agency is committed to reducing the time to process applications. OMS has recently hired two new screening nurses. OMS has a staffing formula that analyzes staffing needs based on productivity standards and number of nominations. Screening guidelines are being updated on a routine basis. The screening process has been revised and has reduced the amount of time it takes to make a decision by one hour per applicant. OMS has also reorganized the nurses by region, thereby making further reductions in screening time (see #14 and 19).

17. **That the agency review its coverage under the American Rehabilitation Act and determine whether it can bring greater flexibility into its decisions about accommodating applicants with disabilities.**

Concur. The Office of the General Counsel (OGC) is reviewing the Rehabilitation Act and the related jurisprudence concerning coverage of Peace Corps Volunteer applicants. Within that framework, the Agency will re-examine Peace Corps regulations (22 CFR Part 305) to ensure that they are in compliance with the statutory and case law. As necessary, OGC will work with American Diversity Program and OMS to help them apply the law to the Agency's medical screening practices, including with regard to reasonable accommodation of disabilities.

18. **That OMS review the reimbursement schedule and reimbursement policies to reduce out-of-pocket costs for medical screening.**

Concur. OMS has reviewed the reimbursement schedule and will present findings in 2003. In addition, staff has been working with the Office of Private Sector Initiatives in order to increase our current budget allocation with additional funding to defer costs of necessary clinical procedures/testing.

19. **That the Agency establish customer service standards for the principal delivery system offices having direct communications with applicants and appoint representatives to respond to complaints and evaluate customer service.**

Concur. The Agency places a high priority on ensuring satisfaction in customer service. OMS and VRS initiated a plan in January 2002 to address customer service and training on these issues. Training has already occurred and will continue. VRS has plans to hire a Retention Coordinator in 2003, and one of the functions of that position will be the first point of contact for customer service relations. OMS has a customer service complaint tracking system that is currently being revised for efficiency.

The screening and placement staff has been recently organized into regional teams. The teams will provide an institutional structure for a coordinated approach to customer service. The manager of each clinical team is the first point of contact. The Agency has established routine meetings with screening, VRS and the Regions, to address customer service issues and standards for all entities along the Volunteer delivery system.

20. **That the Center develop information and learning tools that applicants can access on the Web site prior to staging.**

Concur. The Center, in collaboration with representatives from the Regions, VRS, and Communications, is working on the Training Framework Project to develop the initial part of a training system and recruitment support tools. These will begin with recruitment and go through application, nomination, invitation and staging. The project focuses on the design and implementation of instructional product (including Volunteer Voices video clips) via distance learning, to develop better informed, motivated, committed trainees who will be effective, healthy, and safe throughout their service as volunteers. Proposed completion is Q4, 2003.

21. **That the agency simplify and reform the unfriendly aspects of the application process.**

Concur. The Agency's 90-day task force report and the previous OIG VDS study made recommendations on how to simplify the application process. In 2003, OMS and VRS will review these recommendations and identify major areas to simplify and revise the process as needed. OMS and VRS will work with the Office of Communications to identify areas for improvement in the application materials. The Office of Communications will commence redesign of the print materials associated with the application and invitation stages in Q4 of 2003. The Agency has also posted the application on-line, which has made the application process much easier to use as well as to track.

22. **That the Agency address staffing vacancies and turnover in the delivery process by filling vacancies promptly, developing up-to-date procedure manuals, and providing training for each position.**

Concur. HRM has recently updated Peace Corps Manual Section 620, Peace Corps Merit Section and Promotion. The updated section is now with OGC for review and comment. A Supervisory Training Module was developed and implemented for new supervisors and managers. The seminar covers EEO, employee/labor relations, performance management, merit staffing, classification and recruitment, addressing poor performers, awards, and workers compensation. HRMA is working with Volunteer Support to establish an applicant supply file for hard to fill nursing and physician position. The application submission requirement on vacancy announcements has been revised so that applicants must now address each required and desired qualification requirement on a separate sheet of paper. This has

streamlined the number of applicants being referred to an office and subsequently curtails the length of time it takes to issue a roster.

23. **That HRM conduct an audit of the VRS staff positions to confirm that personnel ratings, salary, and career opportunities are commensurate with job responsibilities.**

   Concur. HRM's audit of VRS is currently underway. A review of each employee's benefits and service computation dates has been completed (recruitment, health and life insurance, TSP, and supporting documentation). All data found to be in error will be corrected by April 30, 2003 and the employees notified. Once this phase has been completed, HRM will proceed to examine the staff's salaries, personnel ratings, and career opportunities. HRM will follow suit by auditing the Official Personnel Folders of remaining agency staff

24. **That the agency use available awards and recognition to acknowledge sustained superior performance.**

   Concur. The Agency has an awards panel, per Manual section 662- Awards Policy, which is currently being updated and should be completed by Q3 '03. The panel convenes once per month to determine awards and awardees. Guidance will be given to the panel that as they review the incentive awards for the work force to give special consideration to sustained superior performance possibilities. Fully instituted into meeting agendas by Q3 '03.

OIG COMMENTS ON THE AGENCY'S RESPONSE

The agency concurred with all 24 recommendations. We have accepted the agency's response and have closed the recommendations.

In its response, the agency describes actions it is taking or intends to take to address the issues that prompted each of our recommendations. We wish to note that in closing recommendations, we are not certifying that the agency has taken these actions, nor that we have reviewed their effect. Certifying compliance and verifying effectiveness are management's responsibilities. However, when we feel it is warranted, we may also conduct follow-up to confirm that action has been taken and to audit the impact.

The OIG commends the agency for the depth of thought and planning demonstrated in its response. We appreciate that many offices committed extensive personnel, time, and resources to address the issues raised in our report.