President John F. Kennedy spoke about recruiting qualified Americans to serve as volunteers in foreign service on the campaign trail in the early 1960's, with a continued focus on volunteer service throughout his campaign. In March of 1961, just weeks after President Kennedy's inauguration, he issued an Executive Order creating the Peace Corps. Three days after the Executive Order, Sargent Shriver was named the first Peace Corps Director, a position he held for five years.

In August 1961 the first group of Peace Corps volunteers began service in Ghana and Tanzania. In late September 1961 Congress formally approved the Peace Corps, and by December of that year there were 750 volunteers serving Brazil, Chile, Colombia, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, St. Lucia, Sierra Leone, and Thailand.

Since its inception in 1961, the Peace Corps' overall mission has changed very little. Its three goals have been and still remain: 1) to provide volunteers who contribute to the social and economic development of interested countries, 2) to promote a better understanding of Americans among the people whom volunteers serve, and 3) to strengthen Americans' understanding about the world and its peoples.

Unlike other government programs, the Peace Corps is designed to work with people and communities on an individual basis, rather than working through foreign government channels. A volunteer's mission is to become part of a community and work from a grass-roots level to change the living conditions of a community, using resources available within a community to solve local problems.

Early response to the Peace Corps and its mission was outstanding. In the 1960's, the Peace Corps began sending volunteers with liberal arts education to third world countries. By 1966 there was a record number of 15,000 volunteers serving the Peace Corps in teaching positions and community development jobs.

In 1971 the Peace Corps agency was transferred from the Department of State and placed under the direction of ACTION (an agency created by President Nixon to bring together all federal volunteer organizations). During the early 1970s, due to directorship transfers, a changing desire to have highly skilled volunteers, and budget cuts; the Peace Corps' image began to change, and the number of volunteers dropped dramatically.

The Peace Corps' administration worked hard in the 1980s under the direction of Loret Miller Ruppe to rebuild its image and attract new volunteers. In response to a demand that the Peace Corps operate more autonomously, the agency was recognized as an agency within ACTION, rather than under ACTION's direction. Finally, in February of 1982, the Peace Corps was re-established as an independent agency.
In the 1980s, in order to improve the quality of service in foreign countries, the Peace Corps began to turn away many people with general skills and started seeking more skilled laborers and professionals. The focus of the Peace Corps changed from strictly helping developing countries, to a mission more in-line with the United States' foreign policy.

While the Peace Corps' most visible activities relate to volunteers serving in foreign countries, the Peace Corps also works with returned volunteers, American school children's world education, and crisis relief. An important segment of the Peace Corps is the Office of Returned Volunteer Services, which communicates with returned volunteers and provides career and educational support and information. One such program designed to help returned volunteers began in 1985 and is called the University Fellows Program. The program was started at Columbia University in New York and eventually was instituted in universities across the country. The program gives returned volunteers the opportunity to earn a Masters Degree in Education while teaching in urban schools. In return for teaching, volunteers receive a fellowship to attend the university, yearly school board salaries, university-subsidized housing, and upon completion of the program they receive accreditation. The program has expanded since its beginning to include smaller universities and rural teaching opportunities.

The Peace Corps also works with educational institutions to prepare students for Peace Corps volunteer work. The Master's Internationalist, Peace Corps Preparatory, and Community College programs train volunteers with skills in areas of high demand. The program also works to recruit more minority volunteers into the Peace Corps. Students participating in the Master's Internationalist program receive course credit toward earning their degree.

The Peace Corps' third statement of mission is “to strengthen America's understanding about the world and its peoples.” In order to bring about this goal, the Peace Corps started the World Wise Schools program in 1989. The program matches Peace Corps volunteers serving in foreign countries with students in schools across the United States. During the school year students and volunteers communicate and exchange letters. Participating schools are provided videotapes and teacher guides to help students learn about culture, geography, and people in the country in which the volunteer is serving.

In 1996 the Peace Corps developed a new program called the “Crisis Corps.” It is a program that draws on current and returned Peace Corps volunteers to use the culture and language skills they acquired while in Peace Corps service. Volunteers are sent to places around the world in times of crisis to assist non-governmental agencies with disaster aid.

Peace Corps programs continue to expand in foreign countries, with new countries being added to Peace Corps service every year. The Peace Corps functions as a highly regarded United States organization. Volunteers continue to serve in an ever-changing world and provide a link between the United States and individual communities throughout the world.

**Peace Corps Directors 1961-1995**

Sargent Shriver 1961-1966
Jack Hood Vaughn 1966--1968
Joe Blatchford 1969-1971
Kevin O'Connell 1971-1972
Donald Hess 1972-1973
Nicholas Craw 1973-1975
John Dellenback 1975-1977
Carolyn Payton 1977-1979
Richard Celeste 1979-1981
Loret Miller Ruppe 1981-1989
Paul Coverdell 1989-1991
Elaine Chao 1991-1995

Other Reading


The Peace Corps Home Page: http://www.peacecorps.gov/

Other Peace Corps Collections

National Archives (Record Group 490)