Peace Corps-AOL Time Warner Peace Packs Program

In 2000, the Director of Peace Corps announced an Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Initiative and called upon U.S. high-tech corporations to help Peace Corps[1] extend the reach of information technology to their Volunteers and the rural communities in which they live. The idea was to build information and communications technology capacity in underdeveloped communities so they could benefit from the knowledge-sharing capabilities of information technology. The Peace Packs program was borne out of this e-Initiative with the objective to explore models of how information technology could be used in developing communities to meet local health, economic, education, and civic goals. The Peace Packs program awards cash grants to Peace Corps Volunteers who have proposed innovative ways to use information technology to improve the communities in which they serve. The Peace Packs program is intended to:

- Expand the reach of development and ICT efforts into remote areas through the work of Volunteers.
- Integrate ICT into current Peace Corps projects.
- Spur innovation at the grassroots level.

Who are Peace Corps' partners in this e-Initiative?

America Online (AOL), now AOLTime Warner, partnered with Peace Corps in October 2000, pledging $1 million over two years to Peace Corps' e-Initiative through its philanthropic AOL Time Warner Foundation. AOL Time Warner is a U.S. media and entertainment company, whose businesses include interactive and e-services, cable systems, filmed entertainment, television networks, music, and publishing. The AOL Time Warner Foundation is a nonprofit organization that seeks ways to use online technology to improve lives.

What does the partnership hope to achieve?

Through "Peace Packs" grants provided by AOL, Peace Corps Volunteers in remote areas in countries such as Ghana (see photo, below) obtain basic computer equipment and services to advance health, education, small business, and other development priorities in their communities. According to Peace Corps Director Gaddi H. Vasquez: "This generous grant from the AOL Time Warner Foundation will have a major impact during the next several years as increasing numbers of teachers, students, and community members are trained using this new equipment and new information technologies. Already, we are encouraged by the results we have seen from this program."

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[1] Peace Corps and its nearly 7,000 Volunteers serve in 76 countries around the world, providing assistance in teaching, protecting the environment, promoting health and nutrition, and supporting small businesses. Since 1961, more than 165,000 Americans have joined the Peace Corps.

What are the responsibilities of the partners?

Peace Corps administers and manages the Peace Packs program, provides guidance on implementing proposal activities, and monitors reporting processes. Peace Corps Volunteers work with community groups, cooperatives, schools, and nongovernmental organizations in-country to develop proposals that integrate information technology into local health, education, micro-enterprise, and other community development projects. Since all computer equipment purchased under the Peace Packs program becomes community property, community members must include a plan for how their Peace Pack activity will be self-sustaining long after their Peace Corps Volunteers have left.

The AOL grant enables Peace Corps Volunteers and their community partners to locally purchase the information technology devices needed for their proposed projects. A typical Peace Pack costs about $8,000 and consists of three computers with modems; a printer, digital camera, or other computer peripherals; and up to two years of Internet connectivity in some areas. The $1 million endorsed by AOL for the Peace Packs program has been matched to date by nearly $972,000 from grant-recipient community organizations and third-party donors in the form of cash, labor, equipment, supplies, and facilities.

Grant recipients try to ensure the financial sustainability of their operations and continued use of technology. A school in Ghana, for example, plans to rent its Peace Packs computer facilities to neighboring schools and community groups. Other groups propose to institute small fees for use of systems and software, and for classes in computer use.

How are the Peace Packs program communities chosen?

Volunteers send completed Peace Packs proposals for their communities to Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, where they undergo competitive rounds of project assessments and reviews. Up to 60 project proposals are considered each year for funding consideration under the Peace Packs program. Proposals are judged by their potential to advance development goals, achieve sustainability, and engage the local community in which the Peace Pack would be administered.

Once a project has been approved, the Peace Corps Chief Administrative Officer for the Center for Field Assistance and Applied Research transfers funding authority to posts. Checks are then issued to community groups or the appropriate vendors to purchase needed equipment and supplies. Peace Pack

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coordinators at post report the progress of project activities – like this Peace Pack computer lab in Kazakhstan – to the program management team in Washington.

How are Foundation monies accounted for at Peace Corps?

Peace Packs coordinators direct financial reporting procedures at Peace Corps offices overseas and report to the program management team in Washington. Peace Corps then prepares an annual report for the AOL Time Warner Foundation. The report explains how the funds are spent, reviews the progress being made toward accomplishing the proposal's goals, and evaluates the overall effectiveness of the Peace Packs project.

Who oversees the technical logistics of the program?

Peace Corps provides most of the technical support to the program. In the fall of 2002, Peace Corps published two training manuals – the *ICT Training Facilitator's Guide and Reference Manual* and the *ICT Training Participant Handbook* – to assist Volunteers in transferring technology skills to their local communities. Peace Corps' new IT Specialists, hired at each post following migration from the Mac to PC platform, are often called upon to assist Peace Pack recipients with technical, logistical, or service related concerns, in addition to their regular duties. Additionally, computer skills training workshops for Volunteers were held at 40 Peace Corps offices overseas. Workshops covered everything from hardware/software troubleshooting to utilizing Internet resources for teaching English to innovative technologies for environmental projects.

AOL Time Warner Foundation also provides some support; it established an online meeting group for Peace Packs recipients to communicate electronically with AOL employees who are returned Peace Corps Volunteers. The online group is a means through which best practices and challenges to utilizing information technology in developing communities can be shared and addressed in a mutually supportive way. Peace Pack recipients may also benefit from online technical support from AOL employees.

What were the outcomes of the partnership?

Since the inception of the Peace Corps/AOL partnership, over 340 Peace Packs proposals have been received and processed. Of that total, 129 proposals in 45 different countries were recommended for funding. Examples of approved projects include setting up epidemiology databases, connecting women's craft cooperatives with electronic-commerce markets, and monitoring vaccine delivery programs. Volunteers also use the Peace Packs program to teach computer skills and to exchange advice or ideas with other Peace Corps e-communities.

In 2001, Peace Packs grants were issued to Peace Corp Volunteers and 24 community groups in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Belize, Haiti, the eastern Caribbean, Paraguay, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Moldova, Romania, Uzbekistan, Jordan, and Tonga. The Peace Corps Center for Field Assistance and Applied Research reported that by the end of the year over 50,000 members of local communities around the world benefited from improved access to information technology.

Peace Corps projected that at the end of 2002, the Peace Packs program would have benefited more than 200,000 host country citizens. At present, there are 75 ICT-trained Peace Corps Volunteers worldwide. Peace Corps headquarters has received requests from posts for 103 ICT Volunteers for 2003.

The partnership with the AOL Time Warner Foundation proved invaluable to Peace

Corps objectives to improve development efforts in poor communities and to bridge the digital divide. Peace Packs have been used to conduct research to improve agricultural productivity in Belize, to teach computer literacy to students and adults in Jordan, and to provide access to health information in the national language to youth in Romania. In the picture at left, a Peace Corps Volunteer helps a Mauritanian woman learn the software program *Microsoft Paint*.

What challenges did Peace Corps and the AOL Time Warner Foundation encounter during their partnership?

Balancing the corporate vision of the AOL Time Warner Foundation with developing country limitations necessitated a shifting of program priorities in 2002. The Foundation wanted the maximum amount of Peace Packs communities to gain access to the Internet as quickly as possible. But, limited telecommunications infrastructure in many developing countries, coupled with the rural site placements of most Peace Corps Volunteers, made such a goal difficult to achieve.

Other problems encountered were mainly logistical. Most groups reported delays in receiving funding or equipment delivery. The remoteness of many Peace Corps posts made Internet connection a trying and costly task. In some countries, faulty hardware and computer viruses presented additional challenges to Volunteers.

How did they resolve problems?

Peace Corps worked with the Foundation to ensure that the needs and expectations of the partners were met. Eligibility requirements for applying to the program were modified so that Peace Packs grants were awarded to those communities that could demonstrate an ability to connect to the Internet within three months of receiving the funding. As a result, the percentage of Peace Pack communities connected to the Internet nearly doubled and the focus of the Peace Packs program shifted to better value the ability to communicate and collaborate with a global community.

Will this program continue in the future?

The close of 2002 marked the end of the AOL Time Warner Foundation $1 million grant that serviced the Peace Packs program. Peace Corps is currently discussing the possible continuation of the program with the AOL Time Warner Foundation.

The Peace Packs program is expected to have a favorable cumulative effect in the near future as increasing numbers of Volunteers, host country community groups, nongovernmental organizations, and youth increase their knowledge of and skill in ICT use. Peace Corps plans to improve the program with the counsel of the AOL Time Warner Foundation by incorporating key lessons learned from past experiences into ongoing program development. Utilizing ICT for development efforts, and expanding the reach of those efforts into remote areas, remains a primary objective, as does encouraging sustainability of ICT use through education and training.