

Posh Corps Podcast Ep. 13: Dysfunction
By Alan Toth
Transcript

Narration: The US Peace Corps, the volunteer program started by John F. Kennedy in 1961, is one of the most beloved and iconic programs in the United States. Peace Corps volunteers dedicate two years to service overseas, but the agency that manages these volunteers has a long history of failing to make reforms that will protect the health and safety of volunteers.

One of the most persistent problems with Peace Corps is healthcare. The quality of healthcare provided to volunteers during service varies greatly from country to country, but all volunteers face the same dysfunctional healthcare system after service. No one knows this better than Nancy Tongue. Nancy served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Chile from 1980 to 1982.

Nancy: I was in a really isolated area. I loved it, actually. I was in a very rural area. There were no other Peace Corps volunteers around. I lived in a rural farmhouse without electricity or running water and worked with the rural campesinos.

Narration: Nancy contracted tuberculosis and meningitis during her service in Chile, but she did not get a proper diagnosis until after she returned to the United States.

Nancy: I was back in New York and I had lingering malaise, fevers of unknown origin. It was a long, long, arduous struggle trying to get a diagnosis. Of course, I didn't know anything about filing a workers compensation claim. I had to prove causality, that it was related to Peace Corps. I moved in with my parents and we just were desperately trying to get me better and trying to find resources to get answers. My father spent days at the public library, one, trying to figure out what I might have had, and two, trying to figure out how to get it paid for. I got nowhere from Peace Corps. I and my parents constantly called the Post Service Unit at Peace Corps. They said I wasn't their responsibility. I really couldn't get any clear answers from anybody.

Narration: Nancy was not alone. In 1988, a Hawaii state representative sent out a survey to all the RPCVs in that state. Approximately 33% of the respondents reported that they were still suffering from medical issues related to their service, but few were able to file claims for federal assistance. The findings from that survey led to a study performed by the Government Accountability Office in 1991. The GAO study found that between 10% and 30% of returned Peace Corps volunteers were still suffering from service-related medical problems, and most of them were having difficulty filing a compensation claim. If that evaluation still holds true today, then there are at least 25,000 returned Peace Corps volunteers still struggling with post-service health issues.

One of the main problems is that returned Peace Corps volunteer healthcare is managed by a program called FECA. FECA, the Federal Employees' Compensation Act, provides benefits to federal employees who are injured on the job. FECA claims are administered by the Department of Labor. The following is from an official Peace Corps video, which is shown to volunteers at the end of their service to

educate them about FECA.

FECA Video Speaker 1: Do you know what FECA is?

FECA Video Speaker 2: FECA?

FECA Video Speaker 3: I don't even know what that means.

FECA Video Speaker 4: Federal Employees' Compensation Act.

FECA Video Speaker 5: Federal Employee' Compensation Act.

FECA Video Speaker 1: FECA is the Federal Employees' Compensation Act. A Peace Corps volunteer who sustains an injury or contracts an illness overseas while in the Peace Corps may be entitled to benefits under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act or FECA.

FECA Video Speaker 4: I've learned about advocating for myself through this process. It correlates to a real life too, advocating for yourself, so I think I've learned a lot in addition to getting healthier.

FECA Video Speaker 1: We hope that you will never need to file for FECA, but should the need arise we are here to assist you in the process.

Narration: The volunteer featured in the video certainly has an optimistic perspective on the process of filing a FECA claim, but even this positive anecdote suggests that navigating the system is far from easy.

Nancy: I can't begin to describe to you how much paperwork there is involved in trying to get a claim moving with the Department of Labor on an ongoing basis. I think one of the problems is that many people get infectious diseases overseas, tropical, infectious, that sort of thing. They're not so clearly defined in one part of the body. Many people have different multiple claims examiners and separate claims for each body part affected. You can have 8 claims examiners who don't speak to each other at the federal government level each for a different body part.

Narration: A typical FECA claim is for a post-office employee, but Post-Service healthcare benefits for Peace Corps volunteers must go through the same system. When a returned Peace Corps volunteer files a FECA claim, the claims examiner who is more familiar with claims for dog bites and back injuries is suddenly asked to determine a validity of a claim for intestinal parasites. The FECA system was not created to accommodate the kinds of ailments that Peace Corps volunteers suffer from.

Nancy was able to navigate the system and get disability payments. She's paid about \$21,000 per year. She lives in New York city where she was able to get subsidized housing. Her own struggle led her to create a support group for RPCVs like herself. She calls her group Health Justice for Peace Corps Volunteers. Nancy says that between 500 and 700 sick and injured RPCVs have been involved in her

group over the years.

Nancy: I started working on this in the mid '80s, actually, trying to find other people who were sick. One, because I was so isolated and lonely and the system is really crazy making. I think the shame and the blame and what we've gone through by the criticism of Peace Corps and the Department of Labor and trying to keep us out of the system has been as damaging as most of our health problems have been.

Narration: It can be difficult to understand exactly what sick Peace Corps volunteers have to deal with when they come back to the United States. The story of William Harless illustrates the challenge. William contracted an unidentified gastrointestinal infection during his service in Thailand.

William: I was having a lot of pain down in my left leg and hip. I was having really bad stools. The pain got worse and worse and worse and probably food [poisoning 00:06:54], but I don't know, caused some ... Some illness caused some nerve damage down in my left leg and down in my back and also caused a whole host of digestive problems.

Narration: The story of the medical care he received during service in Thailand is, frankly, horrific. William firmly believes that the process of trying to get treatment upon his return to the United States was worse. William was still suffering from the effects of the illness when he returned to the United States in 2010. Peace Corps gave him vouchers which would allow him to get general diagnostics, but he was told that he would need to see a specialist to get proper treatment.

William: That year was really a nightmare year because that's when I started to have to interact with the Department of Labor. None of the hospitals I tried to see would accept my workers compensation. Several of the hospitals even refused to see me as a patient. The neurologist office, I don't know whether this was during [inaudible 00:07:51] refused to accept the workers compensation, were not allowed to even treat you. I didn't get to see that neurologist. It was a really hard year.

I spent a year ... Every single day I just spent on the phone trying to convince hospitals to see me. I wrote letters to doctors, I wrote letters to hospitals, I wrote letters to my congress people. It was not a very fun year. I was living with my parents in a city where I didn't have friends anymore. I was putting off graduate school for an entire year. I went to my savings. I called the Peace Corps a lot and at that point in time, they just generally didn't return my calls or didn't email me back. I, literally, just wasn't seen.

Narration: Several years later William was eventually able to see a specialist who was familiar with the kind of nerve damage that his infection had caused. A specialist performed a biofeedback treatment which began to relieve some of William's pain. William believes that if he had been able to receive this treatment right after his service he would have avoided years of chronic pain and he would have been to work. Instead, William spent all his money paying medical bills out of pocket. He was too sick to

work and he was forced to get on disability. His inability to access health benefits forced his life into what can only be described as a downward spiral of medical and financial hardship.

William: I don't trust anything the Peace Corps says. I don't think anybody should. The Peace Corps isn't really advocating for us at hospitals. The Peace Corps isn't changing how ... as far as I'm aware the Peace Corps is not retaining what it says to volunteers when they recruit them about the equality of medical care. The Department of Labor still remains almost impossible to work with. The FECA claims examiners treat returned Peace Corps volunteers like they're terrible, miserable, [inaudible 00:09:40] people who are just trying to steal money from the government. Several volunteers, including me, have been told that when were trying to get benefits, we [didn't have 00:09:50] a retirement plan in different parts of the country, so we're assuming it's a [inaudible 00:09:54].

Narration: According to Nancy Tongue the story of William Harless is not unique. Most of the members of Health Justice for Peace Corps Volunteers have remarkably similar experiences.

Nancy: They end up more injured, damaged by their contact with the Peace Corps and the Department of Labor and it is so hard for me to convey that message. People have been victimized, they've been blamed, they've been shamed, they've been demeaned by people on at the Department of Labor and by the Post Service Unit for so many years.

Narration: In 2011, Tony Barclay was elected chairman of the Board of Directors of the National Peace Corps Association. NPCA is the nation's largest Peace Corp alumni organization. Nancy have been trying to convince the NPCA board to work with her group for many years. She contacted Barclay, hoping that he might be able to do something to help.

Nancy: He contacted me right away and was shocked that this was going on, that people had health issues, nobody was addressing it. We met right away when he came to New York, met in a restaurant. He stayed for hours and was just shocked at this. By the time he got back to D.C. he had texted Carrie, he's an old friend of Carrie Hessler Radelet, the director, and he contacted her. By the next day she contacted me, wanted to meet with me. Came to New York within a couple of days. Came to my apartment and met with me. She got on it right away and I thought was taking it seriously and asked us not to go to press and to give her a year to try to see what she could do. We honored that and tried to work with her. It's now 3 and a half years later and we haven't seen the reform we were hoping to see.

Narration: In 2012, the Government Accountability Office, again, investigated the issue of post-service healthcare for Peace Corps volunteers. Like the report that was published 20 years before, GAO found that Peace Corps volunteers were not well educated about their FECA benefits and that they were having trouble accessing them. Peace Corps director Carrie Hessler Radelet did make changes at Peace Corps headquarters in

response to the report. She instituted a post-service health task force to study the problem, but Nancy Tongue is unimpressed by their efforts.

Nancy: She formed a task force, really at our request. There's no oversight of that committee. It's comprised only of people who work for the Peace Corps. There are no outside specialists to work on specific health issues. I feel that all they're doing is taking our material, regurgitating it, passing it back, saying they're working on it, asking us for more material, looking at it, sending it back, saying they're working on it.

Narration: Nancy believes that the health task force creates only the appearance of transparency. The task force was officially incorporated into the Peace Corps management structure, but the only official mandate for the group is that they study the healthcare problems of RPCVs. The task force is exclusively composed of senior members of Peace Corps management. The minutes of the committee are not published. Only one annual report has been made available. That report dismisses some simple improvements that could benefit the volunteers greatly.

Howard L. Graham is a disability and social security lawyer. He served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Costa Rica in the 1960's. Over the last 40 years, he's helped many returned volunteers file FECA claims. He wrote a two-volume book designed to help federal workers challenge FECA claims that have been denied by the Department of Labor.

Howard: The biggest problems in the Peace Corps is a lack of training and a lack of supervision on what to do with injured workers. Whereas as a federal worker, in almost any other work site, union reps and [inaudible 00:13:52] will educate all these people because that's what they do. These Peace Corps folks come together for 2 years, they're idealistic and once it's over, they're gone. It's not like we have this word of mouth, education that occurs in a normal federal workplace.

Narration: Howard believes that one of the most important things that could be done to help returned volunteers get better care is to provide them with some of the same treatment forms as other federal employees. The form is called a CA-16.

Howard: If you're not in the Peace Corps and you're just a regular federal worker, if you have a traumatic injury, you're supposed to be provided the form CA-16 within 4 hours of the time you report the injury to your supervisor. Basically, it guarantees for 60 days payments of any medical bills for your physician, diagnostic tests or referral to a specialist like an orthopedist or a neurologist for 60 days, whether or not your claim was approved OWCP guarantees the payment. The federal worker then has the ability to have an early diagnosis and hopefully an appropriate care. That's missing for these Peace Corps volunteers, that part of the picture.

Narration: Returned volunteers are currently provided with forms which cover only evaluations and diagnostics. Returned volunteers must then file a FECA claim before they get treatment. The Peace Corps post-service healthcare task force address the

idea of using the CA-16 form in their 2015 report. The report simply stated that they researched the use of the form and they do not recommend it.

Howard: I just saw several issues I disagreed with. The main was the CA-16. They said that the CA-16 was not realistic to give to people because it couldn't be used in the country. That wasn't the point. The point was when they come back to the United States, you give them the form CA-16 that guarantees medical care and diagnostic tests for 60 days once they're in the States. You don't have to go to hand them out in Panama or Mali or anywhere. You've got to hand them out when they get back to the States.

Narration: Howard says he's contacted Peace Corps management many times over the years and offered to help them better train their employees.

Howard: Again, it's a matter of training and education on the Peace Corps's part. I've offered a 60 page training document that I had used to train union reps. There aren't any takers and it's like lip service.

Narration: This recent lackluster effort on the part of the post-service healthcare task force is not unique. Nancy has documents from numerous Peace Corps directors going back over 30 years. They all made promises to study the problem and find a solution.

Nancy: I guess one thing that frustrates me is in going some of my old material recently is looking at how long people have been working on this issue. In 1989, there was somebody, a returned Peace Corps volunteer who lived in Arizona. He was disabled. He ended up trying to help a bunch of other people who had come back sick. He lived on a ranch, he opened up the ranch to house homeless, returned Peace Corps volunteers.

He started working with the Peace Corps at that time, trying to write a reform. I read all the material that he had worked on. All the material that have been written by Peace Corps to try to get a reform, that's disappeared. When I look at how many times Peace Corps and others have tried to reinvent the wheel, it disgusts me. That material, I feel that I'm the only historian left and the only institutional memory. Where does this material go? How many times does it have to be redone?

Narration: Nancy was referring to an effort that took place in the early '90s. In 1992, there were enough sick and injured RPCVs to warrant the creation of a Peace Corps rehabilitation facility in Arizona. Several RPCVs started the center to provide homeless RPCVs with a place to stay while they attempted to get treatment, but the rehabilitation facility was never able to get much financial backing. Eventually the center was forced to close down.

Nancy: I feel Peace Corps follows a path of least resistance. They're trying to get their numbers up, they're trying to get ... I feel that Carrie's big issue right now is just to get more volunteers in the field. I have nothing against that except we can't put more people in the field, unless we can take care of those who come back.

Narration: Nancy doesn't believe that there is much that can be done for RPCVs like herself, who are already trapped in a dysfunctional system, but she vows to continue advocating. She's hoping to make things better for future volunteers. She believes a legislative solution is the only way to achieve meaningful reform.

Nancy: I think we feel so much more betrayed than we would be a regular health insurance company. It's a betrayal so much different than anything else because we had passion and we went to work for an agency that we gave our lives and ourselves and our belief systems to. We expected to come back whole and to be supported by them. When we weren't, our whole belief system was shattered.

Narration: Peace Corps director Carrie Hessler Radelet was contacted regarding this story in January of 2016. She was offered the chance to be the first person interviewed for the story. A Peace Corps spokesperson declined on behalf of director Hessler Radelet and issued a statement via email: "The agency has conducted an extensive analysis of post-service volunteer healthcare issues and collaborated with the U.S. Department of Labor to create solutions that address concerns related to volunteer claims under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act. Peace Corps has established a strong working relationship with the U.S. Department of Labor to improve FECA communication and streamline processes and hired new staff in the Peace Corps' Post Service Unit to accelerate FECA case resolution." The statement was directly copied from a Peace Corps fact sheet first published in 2015.