

PEACE CORPS: Budget shortfall leads to fewer opportunities abroad

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definitely nominated and that she was going to find me a spot in Africa," Casto said.

Over the next six months, she visited an array of doctors to complete the famously thorough Peace Corps medical clearance process. Although she passed without much trouble, others have had to have wisdom teeth removed and costly blood work done to gain medical clearance.

But last month, about six weeks before she was expecting to leave for 27 months of service, Casto received an e-mail informing her that her program was full. Along with about 125 others, she was told she would have to wait until another program could be found.

"There is just a sense of frustration," said Casto, who turned down several summer internship offers to prepare for deployment. "I am really committed to this. I have wanted to do this for so long that I am willing to put my life on hold ... but at what point do I just move on?"

The Peace Corps usually nominates twice as many people as it needs, so delays are not uncommon. Recruiters also make it clear that a nomination does not guarantee a formal invitation.

But this year, as the agency cuts volunteer positions to save money, a greater number of competitive applicants like Casto, who have spent considerable time and money to join the Peace Corps, are finding themselves sidelined at the last moment.

With the bar suddenly higher, some of these delayed applicants have enrolled in extra classes and volunteer programs to improve their chances. After Dorian Connelley, 24, found out she would not be leaving in October as planned, she began studying French to make her application stronger. She is waiting to hear if that has made a difference.

"You have to go at it full steam, with no guarantees, because that is the only way you will be qualified," said Connelley, a 2007 graduate of California State University, Long Beach. "That is why people are frustrated. They have jumped through all these hoops and now the Peace Corps is saying, 'Not in this economy.'"

The agency, which has a budget of \$330.8 million, is preparing for an \$18-million shortfall over this fiscal year and next, primarily because of the declining value of the dollar and increased food and fuel costs worldwide. It estimates its foreign-currency losses from 2008 alone to be \$9.2 million.

"We are preparing for the \$18 million, but that is a worst-case scenario," said communications director Richard Parker.

The budget for fiscal 2009 has not yet been passed. The House Appropriations subcommittee that sets Peace Corps funding has supported the Bush administration's request for \$343.5 million, and its Senate counterpart has approved \$337 million. But until Congress passes that budget -- which could be delayed until after the presidential inauguration in January -- the agency must operate at its existing funding levels.

Even though the new budget is likely to mitigate some of next year's shortfall, the current funding problems are real. In addition to cutting volunteer positions, the agency has asked its managers in Washington and its 11 regional offices to reduce their budgets by 15.5 percent.

In what Parker called a move toward a more efficient recruiting model, the agency is planning to merge its Minneapolis office with Chicago's and its Denver office with Dallas'.

Although the Peace Corps has made an effort to insulate current volunteers, the budget cuts have been felt overseas as well.

This year, the agency plans to stop

providing copies of Newsweek to volunteers -- a magazine it had provided since the 1980s -- because subscription costs are expected to rise \$140,000.

Foreign posts also have taken measures to reduce spending.

In some cases, two or more employee positions have been folded into one, and volunteer training time reduced.

"This all adds up to less training and less support for volunteers on the ground," said Sunaree Marshall, who served in Mongolia as a volunteer from 2005 until August.

Despite the cutbacks, Parker said, each foreign post still must meet Peace Corps competency requirements in such areas as safety, language skills, and cultural and technical training.

"Our priority would be to make sure we get as many volunteers out there as we can, but to support them," he said. "We believe that quality, safety and security is much more important than quantity."

About 190,000 volunteers have served in 139 countries since the program began in 1961. Long a symbol of U.S. efforts in person-to-person international relations, the Peace Corps now supports 8,079 volunteers in 74 countries -- more than in the last 37 years but well off the 1966 peak of

about 15,000.

"Congress loves the Peace Corps ... and in most cases accommodations are made to give it a little bit more," said Maureen Carroll, who went to the Philippines in the first wave of volunteers in 1961 and still helps with training.

"But if they think it is a good thing or a nice thing, it seems they don't think about it enough to double or triple its funding. There are a lot of competing forces."

In fact, while the actual dollar amount appropriated to the Peace Corps has risen steadily, when adjusted for inflation it has remained relatively flat for the last 30 years.

"We are trying to do as much or more than we did before, but with less," said Parker.

Those waiting on invitations are still hoping they might come through with a new administration, but they aren't going to wait forever.

"The Peace Corps application process is kind of like roulette -- you don't know what you're going to get," said Rocio Enriquez, who was supposed to leave in September and is now working at a nonprofit in New York City.

"You have to have Plan A through D."

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TRANSITION: Men find it harder to reach out when in need

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starting men's discussion groups to help men learn to talk about their emotions and how to seek help when they need it.

At the University of Connecticut, the numbers show that young men are more likely to wind up with disciplinary issues. Catherine Cocks, the director of community standards, said that of the 2,489 students referred to the office during the last academic year, 65 percent were men.

There are experts who believe that any crisis affecting boys in general is overblown, but O'Neil feels the signs are clear. He notes the trends he finds troubling: a higher percentage of boys in special education than girls, more male high school dropouts, more males in prison, fewer young men enrolling in colleges, more males

dropping out of colleges and a higher suicide rate among young men.

These trends make it crucial, he said, that parents, educators and professionals take steps to intervene in much the same ways that were done for girls in the past 20 or 30 years when they were not achieving as much as boys.

O'Neil believes that just as women's centers at colleges were established, there should be men's centers that offer safe places for them to discuss their feelings. Birge said that at Fairfield they have tried to destigmatize counseling for boys and have a male therapist on staff. "We put (him) out in front to showcase that here is a guy who is smart, a skilled professional, but has emotional availability."

There are also other ways to make it easier for a guy to seek therapy. Chris Kilmartin,

professor of psychology at the University of Mary Washington in Virginia, said young men aren't very comfortable talking directly about their feelings but can be encouraged to tell stories about what's been happening. "What I try to listen for are the emotional themes of the story. ... It's the Columbo routine."

Mark Stevens, director of the counseling center at the California State University, Northridge said he uses "guy-to-guy" language and is careful not to have an overly feminine waiting room. "If you've got scented candles out there and Zen stuff all over," he said, "the guys aren't going to relate to that stuff."

Senior Information Specialist Christina Bachetti contributed to this story.