

# VESPRA Enabling Communities through a Community Based Psychosocial Support Program 1965-1970

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## Abstract

The objective of this report is to share with the reader, an early method of community mobilization in a then resource poor territory of the United States: Puerto Rico. The program initiated the mobilization method by recruiting youth to visit communities, engage its citizens in conversations that resulted in prioritization of problems, identification of community capitals, and action. The U.S. Federal Government provided funding for the program from 1965-1971. **Importance of the study:** Community mobilization is gaining importance within the scientific areas of psychosocial support and community mental health as the world faces natural disasters, movement of people and climate change. While this study looks at events that happened in the 1960's the results of this strategy and community experiment are used today in programs such as VISTA in the United States and Humanitarian Agencies providing community-based programs to poor people. **Method for data collection:** This is a qualitative study and so a multi method approach for collection, interpretation and analysis of data relies on the facts as gathered from a desk study of the U.S. Government, and Government of Puerto Rico Archives as well as trying to make sense of events on the ground through participant observation and interviews with former volunteers, paid staff and participant communities (1965-1971), and offering examples from newspaper reports, of the period, to relate to the reader the meaning people gave to these events in real time. **Reporting of Findings:** The findings for this study are reported sequentially from 1965 to 1971. The format is: 1) the fact, 2) impact, and 3) event. The findings include explanation of training methods, recruiting of personnel, administrative tasks, and the consequences on the ground as reported in newspapers, or follow-up quarterly reports from the field. The most important event was the formation of the Poor People's Council, and their subsequent participation in Boards of programs that impacted their future.

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Footnotes are used within text to represent additional content that supplements the text.

## **Keywords**

VESPRA, Poor-People, Community Mobilization, Self-Detremination, Community Empowerment

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## **1. Background**

In the 40's just after the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, Puerto Rico, began to evolve from a primarily agrarian society to and more industrialized and modern place. The society was divided into two segments: the skilled and unskilled labors, the rural and the urban, extended families to nuclear families, the literate, and illiterates. Migration from the country to the cities, and on to the mainland, as well as industrialization within the Island, the traditional family shrank both in size and family relations. The source of the economic life became one of wages rather than farm production. Internal migration wakened the foundation of community structures as slums began to appear around the major economic centers.

These changes created in Puerto Rico's population a sense of loss of community characterized by impotence, insecurity, and apathy. From 1940 to 1960 Puerto Rico experienced changes that shook the roots of its inhabitants. In 1940, Puerto Rico was an agricultural society with economic resources, extremely low levels of education, an alarming rate of unemployment, and severe health problems. This agrarian society of simple and stable life was changed of family and community organizations when the great migration began in the late 30's.

An awareness of poverty by most of population, has led many academics, politician and common folks alike to examine the meaning of poor, and questions: Where do we go from here? With the passage of time the common person has developed a conscience toward the intolerable nature of poverty. We as a people have reached the conclusion that poverty is offensive to the human being. Poverty was a universal problem not just a characteristic of Puerto Rico. In Puerto Rico poverty dated to 1947 and was culminated with the "War on Poverty", declared by President Johnson in 1964. The people realized that the definition of poverty was not the absence of income but was rather a concentration of factors clustered together in a geographic space: low education, poor health, nutrition, housing, and other consequences and causers of low income. The same inequalities were evident in the differences between municipalities.

Attempts were made by the government to find a solution to the chaos experienced by most of the population. The early efforts were precipitated by outside capital and new factories grew all over the Island. A program known called Operation Bootstrap, consisting of investment of outside capital into factories established all over the Island. The transition to manufacturing as the basis of production had an immeasurable impact on the family, the community, and the

quality of life in Puerto Rico.

Factories were established primarily in those locations that were more accessible to transportation, and those municipalities that offered better opportunities for work force accessibility, and municipal tax exemptions.

## 2. Introduction

Henry Barracks in Cayey, Puerto Rico, a military installation, closed in 1962 (Prewitt & Prewitt, 2016). In 1964, the actions of a group of visionaries, began to impact the destiny of the poor people of Puerto Rico. The article shares the story of six years that would change the way that the poor people visualized themselves, but also how the Government of Puerto felt the presence of the poor people, and a group who called themselves, VESPRA's.

The paper presents the sequence of events and actions that molded a project, supported by the YMCA in Puerto Rico, into a volunteer movement that included autochthonous leaders, university students, and professionals. It shares with the reader the story of a project that was designed to serve the poor and change attitudes towards themselves, their situation and their ability to meet the needs of citizens in poor areas in Puerto Rico. The program was called VESPRA (Volunteers in Service of Puerto Rico in Action). The program dates to a meeting with a group of youth leaders in Cayey, Puerto Rico, in January 1965 (Rojas, 1965a). This first article referring to the program found in *El Mundo* newspaper. The foundation of the Peace Corps of Puerto Rico, the precursor organization of VESPRA, is reviewed. "On January 8, an entity called YMCA Puerto Rican Peace Corps was formed in Cayey. The objective of this new initiative is to improve the conditions of poor communities in Puerto Rico and conduct activities that will main juveniles "civically occupied" according to Mr. Peter L. Pond Director of the YMCA located in the old Henry Barracks Post. The grounds will serve as a training facility for volunteers in this new program from throughout the Island. The article continues "A group of High School teachers, and youth leaders will meet with Gov. Muñoz Marín and his wife to discuss the objectives of the program". Soon thereafter the volunteer group separated from the YMCA, by the fall of 1966, it had evolved into VESPRA (Voluntarios en Servicio a Puerto Rico en Acción). The program was an early version of a community based psychosocial support program for "poor people".

VESPRA (Voluntarios en Servicio a Puerto Rico en Acción), a volunteer based organization that postulates that through community organization, and empowerment of the citizenry to become engaged in community actions until such time that the neighbors change their perceptions, and attitudes of depending on government to do for them, into a desire for actions among the community members to change the system to address their needs. The objective of VESPRA was to capture their energy and initiative of young people and communities to challenge the culture of poverty and bring the poor people to assert their rights. VESPRA's greatest success was to help organize the Poor People Federation of

Puerto Rico. The three specific actions that VESPRA encourages are 1) community organization, 2) development of leadership, and 3) attitudinal change.

This article was based on newspaper reports between 1965-1971, interviews with over 100 VESPRA volunteers, 32 focused groups in the impacted communities and archival data from the National Archives (NARA) in Washington, D.C. In preparing this report only data that could be triangulated was included.

Some sections are explicitly presented to highlight unique activities or strategies developed during this period. The paper will also discuss the growth of the Foundation for Community Development and the emergence of the Poor People Federation.

### 3. The YMCA Puerto Rican Peace Corps (1965-1966)

The initial steps were taken by a 30-year-old North American pastor named Peter Pond. Upon graduating from the Yale Divinity School, he began working with the YMCA (Young Men Christian Association) in Aguirre, Puerto Rico. Like any religious allowance he received a salary, subsistence and a home.

He immediately gathered a group of young people and began to implement the principles of the YMCA: 1) take voluntary actions, understanding the situation of others and collaborate in solving it. 2) free commitment to himself and the community to carry out actions that enhance the quality of life. 3) assume responsibilities to help others voluntarily, developing with others an action plan to identify resources, join forces to make any intervention helpful, safe and efficient. Take actions that produce resounding changes in our societies in pursuit of a more just world and with opportunities for all.

Rev. Pond meets many community leaders in the Southern part area of the Island and in San Juan. One of those leaders was Don Luis Muñoz Marín, the first elected governor of the Island. Between 1964 at the end of 1965 they met several times at the Governor's Residence in Jacome and at the Treasure Island Hotel in Cidra.

One of the concerns of Rev. Pond was to have enough space for recreational activities for children and youth in the region. About 30 kilometers away from Aguirre, there was a property of the United States government called Henry Barracks, which had ceased its work in 1958 and whose lands, now in disuse, had been handed over to the General Services Administration for disposal (Parsons, 2010). On the efforts of the Governor and a Cayey advisory group. The initial members of the Advisory group were: Rvdo. Dennis Crespo (1era Iglesia Bautista), Hon. Rafael Coca Navas (Mayor), Mr. Miguel Meléndez Muñoz (escritor and civic leader), Lic. Victor Pons (Civic Leader and President of the Popular Party), Mr. Pablo Rivera (Superintendent of Schools), and Dr. Roberto Correa (Physician) (El Mundo, 1964). Rev. Pond moved with his family and four volunteers in October 1964. In addition to his home he had A swimming pool and a tennis/basketball court on the north side and two residences, on the south side the YMCA had use of a bowling alley.

The program began immediately to include children and young people in recreational activities of the “Y”. In December 1964-January 1965, the first camp for boys and girls was held in Cayey. The activities included swimming, music and hiking and other sports activities. The leaders for this camp were composed of young High School students and teachers (Rojas, 1965c). This activity became a laboratory where the first group of leaders was trained and then under the direction of the Rev. Pond would be part of the first version of the Peace Corps of Puerto Rico. The first training exercise lasted three days and consisted of: 1) YMCA principles, 2) group dynamics, 3) leadership skills, 4) holding community meetings and listening sessions.

A group of High School students under the supervision of Mr. Alberto Pares, trained and took over the role of volunteers’ firemen. In the group there is Mr. John Napier a student from Yale Divinity School, Mr. Trinidad a local policeman, and member of the YMCA, and the Fireman in charge of the Henry Barracks Fire Station (See Figure 1). This group had a very important role in that they augmented the number of people that would respond in the event of a fire and provide first aid during in car accidents. This group was recognized for saving more than one life in the two years they were operational.

### 3.1. The YMCA Cuerpos de Paz (YMCA Peace Corps)

In an article about the newspaper *El Mundo*, a meeting was held that was held on January 18, 1965 to organize the Peace Corps of Puerto Rico (Rojas, 1965b). “On January 8, an entity known as the Peace Corps of Puerto Rico, sister of the



**Figure 1.** First Group of YMCA-Peace Corps-1965. Their initial function was to serve as Auxiliary to the Fire Station of Henry Barracks (Foto cortesía Colección de Don Visación Ortiz).

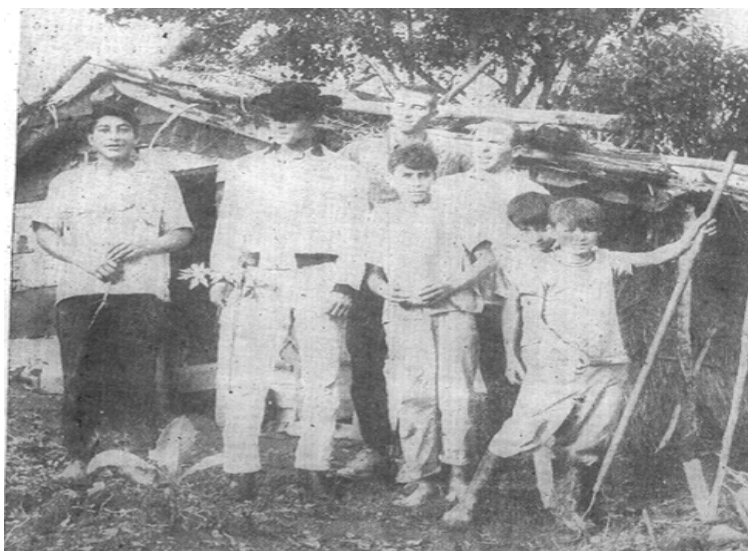
YMCA, was established in Cayey, which has been operating there in programs aimed at improving community conditions and eradicating juvenile delinquency as reported Mr. Peter L. Pond of the YMCA.” Adults and youth began to volunteer in several activities.

Within the next three months Rev. Pond had recruited two volunteers to work with him full time (Victor Ortiz, and Joseph O. Prewitt) in the mobilization of several poor communities (**Figure 2**). The initiative didn’t receive a lot of positive visibility for the program Rev Pond called the “volunteers:” catalytic leaders in communities and towns (Douglas, 1965). The new volunteers were trained in groups of 8 - 10. They received an orientation in Henry Barracks for ten days. During that period, they participated in insensitive physical training, and group discussions. The physical program included hikes, rock climbing, and water safety survival. They also received technical training in approaching people in rural communities.

### 3.2. The Training Model for YMCA Cuerpos de Paz

During their group discussion they practiced being a Y-club (YMCA Youth Club). They identify the nature of leadership, and they practice how to be a club leader. After this initial period the group moves to CISLA in Bo. Monacillos in Rio Piedras. Under the leadership of a psychiatrist they look at leadership from a different optic. The volunteers begin to analyze how they can help the progress off the group, and how they can help each other identify values, and attitudes that will be helpful for the group and in the community, where they will eventually work in (Rojas, 1965b: p.16).

The third part of the training continues in Henry Barracks. This part of the training was a joint effort between personnel from the Division of Community Education of Puerto Rico, the Agricultural Extension Service, and a young



**Figure 2.** Peter L. Pond third from the right (back), Joseph O. Prewitt and Victor Ortiz with young volunteers in the Cercadillo Community, Cayey (1965).



Cayeyano, Joe Prewitt, who had just returned from a summer with the “Experiment for International Living Program”. In this phase the volunteers formulate their job Description, map out a workplan, focused on community mobilization skills. Community mobilization aimed at mobilizing and engaged community members to address the problems generated by poverty. The objective was to involve the volunteer in organizing the community so that they could contribute from the definition of the problem through generation of adequate solutions utilizing community capitals. The entire training period last about three weeks and the new volunteers are assigned to different areas, most of the time to their own “barrios”.

Once in the “barrio”, the full-time volunteer organizes groups of his own and begins to orient other into the training scheme. The purpose is to stimulate development of values and attitudes on this “new” member that have joined the group of their own accord. This final stage of training is to develop leadership. Leadership is paramount, whether the project is social, educational, or recreational. Pond called the process a “leadership laboratory”.

### 3.3. A Summer with YMCA Cuerpos de Paz Volunteers

The summer months were very busy for the development of volunteers. In addition to training, the volunteers (high school and college students) went about visiting communities helping the neighbors identify their problems, and priorities moving forward. The picture (**Figure 2**) was taken in Barrio Cerrcadillo where a Sanitation project supported by the Department of Health had been undertaken by the young volunteers and community members. By the end of the summer 37 homes had sanitary facilities and had received health education on appropriate use of the facility, hand washing, and cleaning for the community to reduce mosquito borne diseases.

The second major project was the construction fo a school in an isolated community. The volunteers canvassed the community (only available through a mountain path, 5 miles (8 Km) from PR-1. A local draftsman made the plans for the little building: one classroom, a kitchen that would provide breakfast and lunch for the children, a room that would serve for monthly medical checks-ups by an itinerant doctor, and two volunteers. The material was provided by the Ministry of Health. Volunteers recruited from the local high school carried the materials from the road to the community. The community and volunteers constructed the little facility.

The original VESPRA group was made up of its volunteers. They learned about community mobilization, developed leadership skills, changed their behaviors and attitudes, accepting responsibility for their lives. These volunteers were trained, understood their call and returned to their communities to challenge and change the “culture of poverty.”

By the end of 1966, there were over 100 VESPRA volunteers, and 20 VISTA volunteers working in tandem in selected communities. By mid-1967 an article in the “VISTA Volunteer” magazine reported the value of the joint venture

(Holland, 1967). By utilizing the potential of other local workers, by interesting them in the future of their communities, VESPRA found that a neighborhood has the human resources to tackle its own problems. VISTA is taking a close, hard look at the VESPRA operation. Not only because it's a challenging new operation, but because its working said Deputy Director Padriac Kennedy.

VISTA's new Citizen Corps reflects the merit VISTA has found in the concept of the part-time volunteer working alongside a full-time volunteer. "From VESPRA we also know that to think volunteer service as simply a phenomenon of the middle class is erroneous. The accomplishments of VESPRA have proven this. The idea of motivating the poor to work either full-time or part-time in their communities is important to the entire War on Poverty. In the coming year (1968) we will be developing programs in the mainland based on the experience and success of VESPRA" (Holland, 1967: p. 21).

#### **4. Encampment for Citizenship Joins in with the YMCA Peace Corps (1966)**

Because of the work of the Encampment in training youth for public responsibility, Mr. Luis Muñoz Marín, former Governor, encouraged the Mr. Pond and Mr. Lesser to conduct the activity in Cayey in conjunction with the YMCA Peace Corps. This suggestion fit right in with the plans for a Puerto Rican Peace Corps, having a group of young leaders from Latin America not only gave the needed visibility to the program in Puerto Rico, but also the idea would be shared in several programs in Central and South America. The Encampment for Citizenship brought many Latin American youth leaders its project in Cayey, Puerto Rico in 1966. After securing funding from the US Department of State, VISTA, Office of Economic Opportunity-Puerto Rico and the Government of Puerto Rico, and the enthusiastic support of Mr. Pond and the YMCA-Cuerposde Paz, the six-week experiment took place in Cayey.

The EFC's programs provided an ethnically, geographically, religiously, and economically diverse group of young people with an experience in self-governed, democratic living as well as more traditional learning opportunities. Program participants were encouraged to examine current political, social, and economic issues through a curriculum designed to develop critical thinking and leadership skills. A variety of subjects were explored such as social and economic justice, health and poverty, criminal justice, international relations, human rights, the environment, labor politics, education reform, racism and sexism, community and economic democracy, and youth empowerment (Lesser, 1965). In 1966 the program Paired with the YMCA Peace Corps in Cayey, Puerto Rico to include internship and community service projects, field trips, and community government participation. See **Figure 3** the campers with the Mayor of San Juan.

The Encampment for Citizenship in Cayey began with two weeks where the participants and the Encampment staff developed a self-government and participated in visit to distinguished members of Government. The second part of the





**Figure 3.** The encampment participants meet with Dona Felisa Rincon de Gautier, the Mayor of San Juan and a world renowned expert in Urban Development. (Photocopied with permission from Community Education. Vol. 3(3). 8. Accessed from NARA.

encampment included several days of training in topics related to community mobilization, development, and action.

The participants worked in three major projects: a self-help construction project in Barrio Borinquen in the outskirts of Caguas, an alphabetization project in Barrio Jajome in Cayey, and a health awareness project in Barrio Matón in Cayey. In all projects the participants spend their time with the neighbors trying to understand the culture of poverty. In the evenings the discussions gyrated on themes related to how leaders could be influenced to address the needs of the poor people. At the end of the summer seventeen campers decided to stay and become VESPRA volunteers (**Figure 4**).

## **5. Early Training-Joint Group of VISTA/VESPRA (September 1966)**

From September to the end of October 1966, the first joined groups of VISTA/VESPRA volunteers are trained. This group presents a challenge because they through to the training diverse cultural, linguistic and contextual characteristics. The group consisted of forty (40) participants recommended by the Encampment, communities in Puerto Rico and from mainland US (non-Spanish speakers). VISTA was not part of the Office of Economic Opportunities (OEO)-Puerto Rico. It received all their direction from VISTA-Washington. VESPRA at this time was receiving financial assistance from OEO-Puerto Rico, and VISTA Washington. Had they not obtained this financial resource they would not be able to fund the volunteers.

### **5.1. The Training Model**

The process began with the selection of volunteers in the community with an activity either formal (a meeting), or informal, orientation in a small group (these can be a club, a team, a gang) (Lawson, 1967: p. 19). VESPRA's role is to recruit young people from poor neighborhoods and begin training on leadership in small groups. Once a young person with the ability to lead a small group is identified, a process called pre-training begins (Lawson 1967: p. 3).



**Figure 4.** Picture of the encampment for citizenship participants. UPR Cayey, P.R. August 16, 1966. Accessed from the Joe C. Prewitt Collection.

#### 5.1.1. Induction

The induction process was divided into three steps: 1) invitation to become a member, 2) participation in group and community activities and 3) confrontation. Completing these three steps takes approximately twelve weeks. At first, the VESPRA volunteer gets to know the person by inviting him or her, to a meeting with the supervisor so that he or she can learn how VESPRA function and the role in the target communities. The second step is that the individual takes active participation in community mobilization pre-training activities for between ten to twelve weeks. These activities included: 1) community meetings; 2) listening groups; 3) door-to-door sessions; and 4) developing community coalitions.

The third step of the induction process is confrontation. That is exploring how behaviors of the candidate's attitudes block his ability to help the community. This step begins with the leaders in the community process participating in confrontation sessions related to their attitudes. The future volunteer is expected to develop the ability to listen and absorb the criticism presented by his peers, and he or she begins to change his or her attitudes. The optimal end of this third step is that the future volunteer makes a commitment to himself or herself that he will change and improve his or her leadership styles (Lawson, 1967: p. 7). That is they are making a free decision to identify and change those attitudes which render ineffective the individual's job in the group, community or action.

Through the induction process some of the members of the community will decide to serve in VESPRA for one year, receiving a substance allowance but without pay. The candidate based on his/her functioning in the community will be invited to enter into the VESPRA pre-training. Prior to a final selection the candidate will be interviewed by a Social Worker, and is administered a battery of Psychometric Test.

#### 5.1.2. Behavioral Training

After completing the pre-training activities with the community Group, normally over a three (3) month period, the candidate begins an intensive training phase under the guidance of O.E.O. (Office of Economic Opportunity) funded Institute for Community Development. The second phase to become a volunteer

consisted of intensive training that lasted between three and four weeks. The first two weeks were spent at Henry Barracks. The focus of the first week was the “T groups”, theory and practice of community work, and physical exercises in the pool and in the course of obstacles in the camp. Each activity was planned to encourage group work and altruistic behavior among its members. In community work, he or she is concentrated on helping to identify the most pressing problem and what people could do to get the authorities to listen to their requests. The group also participates in physical exercises, obstacle course and drown proving.

The volunteers spend two periods of five days learning and practicing Saul Alinsky’s techniques. Saúl Alinsky and his organization the “Industrial Areas Foundation” (IAF), which stood out in Chicago with the appearance of the “Fight against Poverty” (War on Poverty) a program of the Federal Government of the States United. Alinsky and its foundation set up a process by which the “poor” are helped to organize themselves, so that their potential can be developed and directed towards constructive purposes and that their struggle can be channeled in a way that allows them to improve their conditions, acquire a more appropriate self-image of themselves and improve their conditions and those of their communities.

Alinsky used five strategies to help the community have self-talk that it is capable of confronting the power structure: 1) a realistic analysis of the situation, 2) the preparation of leaders and participants alike, 3) the creation of an indigenous structure and the 4) planning of feasible objectives to achieve. 5) In parallel, a continuous process of training, of capacity development, is carried out through different educational methods that they implement that empower the poor and open the conditions for action. Alinsky reaffirmed that once the local community acquires the autonomy of its own structure, and it is affirmed and defined as such, the IAF has concluded its work in that place and withdraws from the scene.

### 5.1.3. CISLA

The third week the candidates are in CISLA (*Centro de Investigación Sobre la Adicción*) their instruction and supervision is in charge of Dr. Rafael Morales Boyer, the Head of Psychiatry at the Center. The trainees spend the night in CISLA with the addicts in the rehabilitation program and assume the role of observers while they participate in their sessions (See **Figure 5**). Training in CISLA encourages the volunteer to assume personal responsibility. The therapeutic process allows the therapist to focus on the topic and direction of the conversation. The group creates a reality that completely involving in time and space each aspect of the person at the psychological and social level facilitates the creation of a new relational universe that allows to build individual and social communication patterns, for the person and the group. Recreating a family universe in which it is possible to express conflicts and reconstruct self-aggressive mechanisms.



**Figure 5.** Dr. Rafael Morales Boyer with a group of volunteers from the dominican republic. Candidates spent 30 hours learning about how their attitudes may impact their behaviors.

An important value in CISLA's experience is that the future volunteer observes and practices the therapeutic principles. Although the trainees explored their attitudes in therapeutic groups in CISLA and the role of the group through the "T-Groups" in their first week of intensive training at the Institute in Henry Barracks, these two methods in a short period of time created confusion in the volunteers.

The experience in CISLA is perhaps the most significant in the entire training process. Volunteers describe the experience at CISLA as the deepest and most significant experience of their lives and the first serious look at their lives (Lawson, 1967: p. 24). CISLA's experience for these volunteers is a traumatic exposure to the extremely intense experience of a former group therapy addict with the purpose of exploring and rehabilitating their social attitudes (Lawson, 1967: p. 68).

The volunteer tends to measure his commitment to that of the former addict. The volunteer can feel and visualize how hard, long and difficult the process of changing attitudes is. He/She notices the extensive commitment, which he/she must have, if they wish to work effectively in their neighborhoods. It is there in CISLA, the place where volunteers have the deepest introspection to their motivations and potential to volunteer for VESPRA. Those who can internalize this experience are those who can reflect on the human performance standard, that they experienced in CISLA (Lawson, 1967: p. 71).

Volunteer candidates spend part of the day as observers in the groups of former addicts who are in the final stage of their treatment. Part of the treatment requires that these former addicts spend several months working at the Day Hospital where addicts come for help. The addict who "cured" helps him who is starting treatment. This exercise helps the VESPRA candidate to observe and understand the dramatic change in attitudes that the addict must do (Lawson, 1967: pp. 13-25).

Both Lawson (1967) and Bennett (1967) reported at least three significant differences between the two types of training. The first difference was around the definition and practice of the role of the leader in the group. In T groups, the leader is rather a process facilitator, which only facilitates communication and proper functioning of the group. In the case of attitudinal training, the leader is an external expert (the therapist) who although tries to clarify and focus the group process, also includes a structure to the process and content of the conversation.

The second difference relates to the personal and group techniques that are accepted in each modality, confrontational training on attitudes and the “T groups” approach related to the functioning of the group. In the case of “T groups” any conversation related to the feelings of the individual in the group is permissible.

In the attitudinal group, conducted in CISLA the individual is motivated to express their feelings freely regardless of the impact they have on group functioning. The purpose is to reach the confrontation of the unacceptable manifest behaviors that impede the functioning of the group. The existential goal of the group of attitudes is to confront the individual. In the case of VESPRA, the version of attitudinal training is limited to confronting attitudes that affect the functioning or that interferes with the group’s goal.

The difference between the “T” group and the attitudinal confrontation group impacted their effect on the group, and both techniques solved their effect on the group, in a different way. In the attitudinal confrontation group, differences between members were not important if they did not affect group functioning.

In the case of the “T” group, trying to resolve the differences between two members of the group was a legitimate exercise and of great value to achieve group goals. The point that merits comment is that VESPRA was an experimental program and that some of the experiments in important areas created confusion in the volunteers. The third significant difference between the two groups was what was permissible as a topic of discussion. In the “T” group any topic was acceptable. There were no areas that were taboo.

In the case of the attitudinal confrontation methodology, the criterion for discussing a topic was: “what does this issue have to do with the proper functioning of the group and how it contributes to reaching the group’s goal. The leader managed the agenda of those issues that he determines are irrelevant.

This discussion took almost a year. The participants in the discussions, usually the leadership, realized that the discussion revolved around modifying a clinical therapeutic community program, with its pathological consequences, with a community development program among poor people, a social evil and economic. Finally, both therapeutic approaches turned from towards integration.

At the end of the day both approaches were of importance to the volunteer in the community. The process taught by the “T” group was used in the first months of the program, where the goal was to bring community members to-



gether to identify their problems, prioritize them, and develop leadership behaviors. The attitudinal confrontation process was used when the group was more mature and there was a need to help members identify how their behaviors impacted community welfare (Lawson 1967: pp. 15-16). The vision of the two types of group: the development of a democratic and effective group leader.

## **5.2. Sequence of Skills in Community Development**

The Institute's curriculum in community mobilization, development, and actions were geared to provide skills and knowledge in human-relations, problem-solving, leadership development, community organization, and internal and external resources for community development. All volunteers practiced the key actions (with community members identify needs, assess and map the community, share information, and offer information). The Field experiences in poor rural communities supplemented the theoretical instruction related to community development. Experiential techniques were used, such as role-play, simulation and actual planning and development work to provide practice in doing, before the trainee is exposed to a real situation as a full-time volunteer.

Once the candidates completed their intensive training, then he returns to his community as a VESPRA volunteer, under the supervision of the area supervisor. He/she begins working in a community by organizing groups, conducting community mapping, and assessing needs. The volunteer assists the community members to prioritize their needs, and to develop a work plan. The community group defines what their cultural and social capital, what tools and materials they have, and what they need.

Occasional meetings, either individually or in groups, were held with the Staff psychologist and social worker, to get coaching for their daily work, or address personal problems that may arise while doing the community work. When the volunteer is reaching the end of their contract, they are required to attend vocational counseling sessions that prepared them for entry into the world of work.

The concern of the volunteer should not be the amount of community projects but the process of community interaction. The volunteer receives supervision visits at least once a week and meets with the volunteer group in their area at least every fifteen days for supervision and training. For the most part all volunteers have become group leaders (Lawson 1967: p. 30).

## **5.3. Case Studies of Community Mobilization**

The following are three cases of community mobilization projects:

- 1) The funds assigned to volunteers for community projects was used by the volunteers of Guayama, to leverage the contribution of the Municipal Government to construct a road that would connect this isolated community near the Olimpo Mountain in Guayama with the main road. The need for the road was a health and safety issues. If someone got sick in "El Caimital" the neighbors would have to make a rustic stretcher to carry the sick to the Olimpo. The Mu-



municipal Government was resistant and wanted to involve the Central Government, the VESPRA volunteers and the community was insistent. On March 16 the municipal government had provided the plan, VESPRA provided a grant of \$500, and seventeen (17) members of the community had committed to work one day a week until the job was completed. The neighbors decided that they could construct the road themselves.

2) During the month of February (1966), several men were seen marking houses in “El Polvorin” neighborhood. The rumor was that the Central Government was going to destroy the homes, displace the families and build a Public Housing project. Many families have lived in this area for over forty years, their children had been born, and grew up there. The neighbors felt they didn’t have the resources to pay for public housing. VESPRA volunteers and community members met and decided to send a letter to the Central Government to cease and desist. Over 150 families signed the letter. The response was that a local politician was sent to appease the neighbors. This strategy didn’t work. The volunteers with the assistance of the Foundation’s staff prepared an instrument to elicit and codify their priorities, and dreams.

3) The “Magueyes” community in Ponce had been asking the local Government to install plumbing so that they could access clean water. The community requested an examination of the water flow from the Department of Health, their suspicions were true, the water was contaminated. Two VESPRA volunteers and members of the affected community came together and decided that they would install the tubes to sources of clean water. The members of the community and the VESPRA volunteer identified the tasks that were needed, the availability of social capital, materials and financial resources. The pipes were obtained from local gifts, elicited by a radio program, the manpower was provided by the neighbors, the meals from the workers were prepared by the women, and VESPRA provided financial support to for a pump, and the plans for the project.

The three cases present herein are exemplary of the work in community mobilization undertaken by the volunteers. There are other more formal interventions undertaken by the volunteers leading to the development Of the Council of Poor People of Puerto Rico that will be presented later in this paper.

## 6. The Institute for Community Development

The Foundation for Community Development and its unique client, VESPRA presented initial conflicts related to the training of volunteers. The original model, like the Division of Community Education, a government of Puerto Rico agency that provided civic education in the poor isolated communities. It was ascribed to the Department of Education of Puerto Rico, was based identifying communities (a geographical place with people that share social ties, common worldview, and engage in same work activities). The basic community tasks were on preparing volunteers to carry out community surveys, identifying the most

pressing problems in the community and serving as a link between the community and local government agencies that could help the community. In this dynamic process, two parallel intro-personal growth techniques were needed: 1) the development of personal and group responsibility within a group, and 2) the changes in attitudes necessary to be a productive member within the community.

The training Branch of the Foundation was the Institute for Community Development directed by Dr. Samuel Silva Gotaya renowned sociologist, Chaplain to the University Christian Student Movement, and Dean of Students at the University of Puerto Rico, came up with the idea of training the capacity of VESPRA and VISTA volunteers. Funding for training was the only contact between VESPRA and VISTA. Because of the merger VESPRA lost its indigenous character, and VISTA acquired one.

Sammy, as we all knew him, had been advising Peter since the transition of the YMCA to Cuerpos de Paz de Puerto Rico. He came to VESPRA with experience in working with migrant in Connecticut, directing programs for talented youth, and serving as Faculty, and Dean of Students at the University of Puerto Rico.

VISTA volunteers did not go through the induction process but were recruited and hired from university campuses and employment offices in several states of the United States. VESPRA volunteers were developing three strengths that attract them to the program: 1) VESPRA techniques in their leadership training, is that the leader works in the group on a par with the members, 2) the volunteers are interested in establishing and strengthen natural groups, instead of just discovering them, 3) the conviction of developing strategies to show that the culture of poverty and poverty itself can be mitigated if all the poor so desire.

In August 1966, Dr. Silva Gotay, and Héctor Concepción, the Associate Director of VESPRA traveled to Washington to meet with VISTA staff. These efforts were successful, VISTA-Washington agreed to fund VESPRA operations to October 1967 by the stated growth rate not to exceed 214 volunteers by the end of the funding period (Ramsey & Ehman, 1967).

## **7. VISTA Takes over Funding for VESPRA (January 1, 1967)**

Rev. Pond submitted a request for funding to provide training 50 volunteers from VISTA and VESPRA during the summer of 1967. At this point both VISTA and VESPRA had assumed the responsibility of the identification and training of indigenous leadership. They also accepted the responsibility of developing the expectation was that this fifty (50) volunteer may together help strengthen the indigenous volunteer of the community, the goal of recruiting community volunteers (Pond, 1967). This proposal was the first effort to expand participation of university students as VESPRA volunteers. The reader can surmise that the participants in this program are university students, and because of their studies were unable to serve on a full-time basis. The university students

would train as part-time community volunteers.

The three objectives of the training program were: 1) an extension of the induction process for the already working community volunteer, helping him or her to train and enter deeper and with greater skill into the work of the community; 2) short-term community action program, with a major intent of identifying indigenous leadership, that could be inducted, and trained in assuming a greater amount of responsibility within the community; and an extension of the concept of voluntarism within the University community where in Puerto Rico, such a concept is barely to be born. The fifty volunteers were concentrated around University Centers in the metropolitan areas of San Juan, Ponce, Mayaguez, and San German.

The volunteers served in supportive and non-directive roles. The organized peer groups (in barrios); seek to involve University students; and assume community responsibilities. The experience of the group will allow the volunteers the opportunity to identify indigenous leadership potential in the target sites. The volunteer will inculcate the spirit of voluntarism in the University community and implement the community development methodology learned in the VESPRA training. The terms of the proposal were as follow: 1) three hundred VESPRA volunteers to be phased in between the dates of May 1, 1967, through April 30, 1968, this volunteer increase development of poor communities through voluntary services; 2) The Foundation assumed the responsibility of selection, training and supervision of all VESPRA volunteers; 3) The volunteers will receive a subsistence allowance of \$150 a month and medical insurance.

In 1967, VESPRA emerged, under the umbrella of the Foundation of Community Development of Puerto Rico receiving its funding from VISTA (VISTA/VESPRA, 1966). Reports from evaluators indicate that by September of 1967 there were 214 volunteers working in communities around the Island.

In January 1967, VESPRA merged with VISTA, in the sense that VESPRA volunteers went on VISTA's Washington roles and received their compensation from VISTA funds. VESPRA is involved in a strategic alliance with VISTA in January 1967, which opens the doors for volunteers to receive benefits and medical benefits similar to their counterpart in the United States. In addition, the operating budget increased to about \$900,000. This was good news for volunteers who received \$30.00 per month of subsistence, and the staff would receive a stable salary and on a par with their work in the common market. The union between the two organizations provided different results; VESPRA lost its "Puerto Rican" character, while VISTA won the brunette face of our native "Taino" (The name given to the indigenous population that lived in the Island prior to colonization.) (Bennett, 1967: p. 22).

VESPRA began its operations under the premise that the human being was responsible for itself based on the Puerto Rican reality of the moment. In Puerto Rico even the poorest had the legal and social responsibility to make all the decisions that affected their behavior. VESPRA formulated itself, the goal of confronting the poor with this reality, to provide and facilitate the poor with the

training tools and the space with which the poor could modify and change the traditional responses to the ravages of their social, economic and cultural environment. By the end of 1966 there were more than 100 VESPRA volunteers in Cayey, Guayama, Coamo/Ponce, San German and Mayaguez.

The original VESPRA group was made up of its volunteers changed their behaviors and attitudes, accepting responsibility for their lives. These volunteers were trained, understood their call and returned to their communities to challenge and change the “culture of poverty.”

Peter acted without consulting his peers, he was accused of assuming a paternalistic role in his decision making. A closer look brought up the role of field supervisors, and the program administrators, since they were not willing or able to confront Peter (Bennett, 1967: p. 5). On the other hand, Mr. Rafael Torregrosa, the Director of OEO-Puerto Rico was partial toward Rev Pond, and was able to support Peter until he left VESPRA in April 1967. Lawson (1967) reported that “evaluators and external visitors to the VESPRA program have lost their objectivity and have become emotionally attached with program operations. The implication was that Peter L. Pond and energetic and visionary Director was managing the program with his emotions.

VISTA volunteers volunteered to offer service in government offices with a focus on extending their services to the community. They had needed to improve their communication process, learning aural-oral skills in Spanish and understanding the social environment of a culture of poverty in Puerto Rico. Already for the month of January 1967, VESPRA and VISTA merge into a single organization supported by the economic and political resources of VISTA/Washington. This union marks the moment when VESPRA lost its indigenous Puerto Rican character.

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At the end of November 1966, the VISTA Office in Washington, DC and the Office of Economic Opportunities in Puerto Rico commission an evaluation of the program, to be conducted by Meridan Bennett, and a parallel evaluation related to the training conducted by David Lawson, an expert psychologist in community mobilization. Ms. Bennett is an anthropologist with extensive experience in community mobilization and ethnographic methods.

By the end of 1966, there were over 100 VESPRA volunteers, and 20 VISTA volunteers working in tandem in selected communities. By mid 1967 an article in the “VISTA Volunteer” magazine, Holland (1967) reported the value of the joint venture. By utilizing the potential of other local workers, by interesting

them in the future of their communities, VESPRA found that a neighborhood has the human resources to tackle its own problems. VISTA is taking a close, hard look at the VESPRA operation. Not only because it's a challenging new operation, but because its working said Deputy Director Padriac Kennedy. VISTA's new Citizen Corps is a reflection of the merit VISTA has found in the concept of the part-time volunteer working alongside a full-time volunteer. "From VESPRA we also know that to think volunteer service as simply a phenomenon of the middle class is erroneous. The accomplishments of VESPRA have proven this. The idea of motivating the poor to work either full-time or part-time in their communities is important to the entire War on Poverty. In the coming year (1968) we will be developing programs in the mainland based on the experience and success of VESPRA".

## **8. Evaluation Report of Meriden Bennett and David Lawson-1967**

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The VESPRA volunteers had developed three strengths that they brought to the program: 1) the VESPRA training techniques require that the Potential leader is part of the group, and therefore have begun to practice collective leadership skills; 2) the VESPRA volunteers are interested in establishing and help in the development of natural groups, instead of just discovering them, and 3) the conviction that there strategies to approach the culture of poverty, and poverty itself can be mitigated if the poor people so desire (Bennett, 1967: p. 65).

VISTA volunteers, on the other hand, we prepared to become part of a government Office workforce with a focus of extending the offering of the Office to the poor communities. They all had a need to improve their communication

tools, by learning colloquial Spanish, and understand the culture of poverty in Puerto Rico.

An agreement was signed between the Foundation for Community Development in Puerto Rico and VISTA. The signatories were Mr. Norman Veve, Peter L. Pond, and Hector Concepcion. The proposal was negotiated by Dr. Samuel Silva Gotay and Hector Concepcion and approved in the amount of \$632, 100 per year. With the approval of this proposal the Institute would train and place a total of 300 VESPRA volunteer within 10 months after the proposal start date of May 1, 1967. Prior approval was received from Community Action Agency and excellent coordination was anticipated between VISTA liaison Officer, VESPRA and the Foundation (Crook, April 28, 1967). The VESPRA program would continue until FY 1968 in cooperation with the Community Action Program. The implication is that since VESPRA and the Institute would be receiving funds from two sources, the expectations and reporting requirements would change.

On May 19, 1967, Rev. Perter L. Pond was notified that contract negotiations were set for June 7, 1967 (Crook, June 30, 1967). The major concerns were related to a review of any difficulty that may have been experienced in the current relationship, and to establish the quota for VESPRA volunteers for FY 68. The negotiations finally were completed and memorialized by Jack Ramset (June 16, 1967). Representing VESPRA were Hector Concepcion, and Dr. Samuel Silva Gotay. The topic of negotiations fluctuated a bit. The meeting focused, for the most part, on a review of the Bennett Evaluation Study, which had just been completed and forwarded to the VISTA program.

The study was conducted and paid for by VESPRA and the Foundation for Community Development. There was agreement that the evaluation was a most useful document in that it provided a basis for which VSEPRA could look at itself. Many questions were raised concerning the existing operation. The major concerns were as follow: 1) Need for VESPRA to establish goals and objectives with enough specificity so that these could be measured and evaluated in the future; specific criteria established by which the Volunteers productivity and the agency's expectation could be measured; and, 2) establishment of goals, objectives, and criteria for evaluation detract from one of the major missions of VESPRA impact the VISTA experience had on the individual volunteer. VISTA tried to communicate that this was one of the goals of VESPRA; in some cases, the primary goal. It then should be specified and the allocation of resources or volunteer hours that would be expended in this way should be defined in advance. In the same way, the goals and objectives for community action should also be defined and volunteers and staff should be aware of these in the conduct of the program.

The Bennett report expressed a concern that the Induction phase of the program was being strained due to the rapid growth of the program during the previous year. The *Bennett Report* had not been available previously so that the Foundation itself could have made recommendations, and to take appropriate



and responsible action concerning each of the items pointed out in the report.

### **9. University VESPRA-VISTA Associates Program (1967-1969)**

This section provides a sample of the positive impact of university student involvement in VESPRA. Through its summer program VESPRA, achieved involvement of some seventy-five (75) students from the major universities in community mobilization work. The students underwent a preliminary induction process, and training process like the regular volunteer. In the summer of 1967, a University student program was initiated. The program lasted three summers until 1969. A total of 75 students were trained, the majority from the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus. This group was different from the regular VESPRA volunteer in that their training lasted just three weeks, and they were recruited from the Campus. These students were identified as VISTA Associates. They received training and worked full-time in the communities (Ortiz & Concepcion, 1968).

Of the 75, thirty-six (36) have decided to work full-time during the summer of 1968 and 1969. A significant number of these students have continued working on community projects with their community counterparts' year around. Some work near the university and have been able to continue their full-time student status. Others have decided to give up a year to the community where they are working or have moved to live in the barrio altogether. The status of university students in their communities was contingent on problems that have risen in the communities themselves. The task of getting people of a community to assume responsibility for their own problems is perhaps a volunteers' greatest challenge.

The VISTA-VESPRA Associate program was organized as an experimental summer program for university students in 1967. The rationale for this program was the evident lack of knowledge, motivation, and experience in the field of community organization among the student body and even among the professional groups in the Island. The University campus didn't go beyond theoretical speculations in relation to poor people, their needs and their capacity for growth. Aware of such needs VESPRA sought to undertake the task of developing a summer program for university students that would participate in an intensive period of training and move into the target communities, where they would become links between the poor people and the university community.

In association with VISTA-Washington, the VISTA-VESPRA Associate program for university students summer program was organized in 1967. The rationale for this program was the evident lack of knowledge, motivation and experience of students to the poor people of Puerto Rico. This summer project began with 50 students.

In 1967, the program was repeated with little change, except that in the interview process there was greater interest by the students to participate in the program. Taking advantage of this enthusiasm, the program leadership added to the

training scheme, a project development phase. So, the students would have an idea about community mobilization techniques and strategies. The candidates diminished to 36 as the field placement began, however at the end of the summer placement, fifteen students decided to take a year off and work in their projects with their community peers. The participants wanted to “address the problems faced by poor people on a day-to-day basis”.

On April 1969 a proposal was submitted to hire a group of VISTA-VESPRA Associates (Ortiz & Concepcion 1969). The objective is to identify and utilize local, indigenous leadership in poor communities where VESPRA has not been active. This project will also assist in the development of projects that the community has identified. The project will serve as an introductory experience for university students to poor people in their communities. In this way the future leaders of Puerto Rican society will get a firsthand opportunity to working with poor people. This VESPRA-VISTA Associate program was designed to fill some short-term needs that had become apparent in some VESPRA-served poverty Areas in Puerto Rico. The program lasted thirteen (13) weeks, and the participants will come predominantly from the University of Puerto Rico. The cohort will be composed of 50 university students, two full-time staff members, and some technical resources from within the ranks of VESPRA.

By the end of summer 1969, almost half of the volunteer cohort had been assigned to one of seven communities in El Caño (the Model Cities Program in San Juan). The VESPRA Associates meet with the residents and provided assistance with legal education, some adult education practices, conducted health clinics, social planning and architecture. The School of Planning and Architecture gave the participant formal academic credit for their involvement. The case study below highlights the work of the School of Planning and Architecture of the UPR.

Among the first group of VESPRA University students was Edwin R. Quiles Rodriguez, a first-year student in the School of Architecture at UPR. “I was fortunate that during my first year in the Architecture School, I was invited to spend a summer with the VESPRA summer program in el Caño de Martin Pena. I moved and lived in a slum called “*Tokio*” (May to August 1969) based on observation and talking to people we organized a project to reconstruct the slum homes into comfortable places to live. Quiles helped the people of the sector to express and draw their vision, that reflected their needs, their lives, hopes, and dreams”. By the end of the summer the neighbors had reconstructed 23 homes in the sector. The cost to VESPRA was \$250. For Quiles Rodriguez, his greatest lesson was that people who lived in poverty didn’t have access to architects (El Nuevo Día, 2011).

A second group of VESPRA-VISTA Associates were placed in projects where they familiarized themselves with the communities and identified long-term plans that they may have. In this project “sense of place” methodology was practiced where the volunteer provided the space for the community to identify their

cultural and ecological sense of place and using their social capital plan a developed long-term (yearlong) projects. In June 30, 1969, Gov. Luis A. Ferre sent a Cable to the Director of VISTA: *"I hereby accept endorse for summer program sponsored by VISTA and VESPRA to conduct a summer program with under graduates and professional schools' students from UPR"*.

After having worked for almost a year together VISTA and VESPRA a meeting was held at the Institute in Cayey to discuss 1) effectiveness of volunteers; 2) Internal reorganization of VESPRA staff; 3) reporting procedures; 4) ability to train and enroll the number of volunteers; 5) seeking external funding, and; Hiring external evaluators. This meeting set the tone for how VESPRA was going to function moving forward. The meeting helped the VISTA-Washington leadership to understand the special nature of VESPRA. Its volunteers were generally from the ranks of the poor, made it incumbent of the Institute staff to do all within their power to prepare and support the new volunteer in his or her new and difficult role. Improving performance through greater support through meetings, in-service training, and feedback on the development community projects. In September 11, 1967, Dr. Silva Gotay, Father Walter Janer, Hector Concepcion, Jack Ramsey, Carl Ehmann, Jack Roseblum and Richard Werksman meet and agreed that in order to achieve the objective of improving performance, there was a need to increase in field positions, composed of former volunteers. An internal study was conducted to develop tools that would measure effectiveness in the field.

Three additional points, focused on avenues to lift the volunteers from poverty, were discussed during the meeting including experimenting with a new type of VESPRA volunteer (college students, and older skilled volunteers), secondly the need for medical coverage for volunteers, and thirdly to allow volunteers who come from deprived backgrounds, to pursue course work toward a high school or technical diploma.

On April 17, 1967, Ed Cunningham reported that he had visited Puerto Rico to set up a medical assistance program for VESPRA and VISTA volunteers. He reported that the physicians in Puerto Rico were receptive in caring for the volunteers and expressed an interest of their mission.

Tom Powers requested an amendment to the VISTA grant (E75201) to extend the expenditure from April 30, 1967 to June 30, 1967. His rationale was that there were sufficient funds available. This letter was followed with a letter to Peter L. Pond requesting his concurrence with the offer from Washington for an extension. In addition to a request of concurrence, Mr. Crook indicated: "It is my intention to continue the VISTA contribution to your program in the coming fiscal year on a co-existent basis with Community Action Program funding."

The Foundation, faced with volunteers and the resources to train up to 300 volunteers (VISTA/VESPRA), hired Father Walter Janer S.J. to the position of VESPRA that had been vacated by Peter Pond. Father Janer is one of the sponsors of VISTA volunteers. He was a member of the Foundation Board and began in his new position on September 1, 1967. Padre Janer was a pious and kind man

with a deep concern for Puerto Rico and the socio-economic problems it was facing. The decision to hire him was not met with favor by VESPRA's employees. Naturally, Mr. Concepción was disappointed, but he has made a point that now is a critical time for VESPRA and any division in the ranks can only hurt the organization. The VESPRA staff met to decide what, if anything, they will do to protest electing an "outsider" as Director. They have nothing personal against Father Janer but feel that "Induction" requires promotion from within.

Padre Janer, with the agreement of the Board of the Foundation hired a sociologist from the University of Puerto Rico, Dr. Pedro Vales to determine the indicators of poverty in the communities currently being served by VESPRA. He explored occupation, income, education of the Head of household and the size of family (Vales, 1967). He surmised in his report that the problem of poverty in Puerto Rico included a combination of characteristics, occupation, education and income. These factors were framed keeping as a reference to the distributional inequality between physical and socio-economic positions of the Puerto Rican society at the time.

## **10. VESPRA 1968-1970**

The Foundation finally moved all its operation to the southeast corner of former Henry Barracks, now called "Sector VESPRA". With Padre Janer at the helm, half a dozen professional was hired to serve as Faculty of the Institute.

Having the wisdom from the studies referenced above, Padre Janer and the Board reached the conclusion that "to confront the problem of poverty and the needs which this created to the Puerto Rican society, VESPRA has emerged as the tool to confront the needs of the Puerto Rican people and their communities". VESPRA became a new approach to the problem of poverty based on training and orientation of those who are the victims of the circumstances which poverty implied. The fundamental goal of VESPRA was to alleviate and eradicate poverty through community mobilization strategies.

In December of 1968, a comprehensive document related to the continued development of VESPRA was submitted to VISTA (Ortiz & Concepcion, 1968). In order to achieve its stated goal, VESPRA and the Foundation identified three fundamental methods: 1) community organization, 2) development of Leadership, and attitudinal change. The most important being community organization. Community Organization was understood by the Foundation as the process through which a community identifies its needs and wants, prioritizes the list, develops a plan of action, collaborates with the implementation of solutions, and conducts a monitoring and evaluation.

Father Janer hired several academicians from the University of Puerto Rico to concentrate on the curriculum in community development would look like, and assess who would be potential clients in addition to VISTA/VESPRA. This decision would change the focus of the program from community mobilization to community development. Most intervention became short term

with external stakeholders assuming the planning and execution of community activities.

Poverty has often been interpreted, with good reason, as a set of attitudes that block individual and community progress and well-being. One of the methods used by VESPRA volunteers is to encourage a positive attitude toward the community and toward each other, that is to change their attitudes. VESPRA believed that this accomplished through orientation, effective motivation and training with respect to available resources. Through community mobilization and during the organizational process, the neighbors learn the importance to define the problems (stuck points) that impact their development and learning the consequence of being stuck. The neighbors begin to introject that the solution to their current situation is in their hands as well as the resolution.

Another key activity of meeting the problems caused by poverty is the development of community leadership. A community will grow in independence as it explores the use of its own resources and human capital. Therefore, the development of leadership in the community, guarantees present and future problem solving. The Foundation through VESPRA volunteers intended to teach the poor to grow through their efforts, to help the affected people to declare independence in the use of their own resources, to raise the level of competitiveness in society. In summary community growth, and self-sufficiency is achieved by defining and solving stuck points.

The training of VESPRA volunteers evolved since its original model of their predecessor YMCA Cuerpos de Paz in 1965 to a model of community development four parts; 1) Induction, 2) Selection, 3) Training and 4) Community work. The volunteers after training return to his or her own poor community where they will act as catalytic or agents of social change agents. They will engage themselves in group formation, whereby they will motivate others to become engaged in the community struggles.

In 1969 the last proposal was submitted on behalf of the Foundation. The program lasted until April 1970, when VISTA-Washington decided to support the Institute and field programs out of the "Community Action Program" in San Juan. The Foundation was collapsed with the Episcopal Church efforts in community development.

A Board of Directors composed of 24 professionals was developed. By 1970, The Board included six (6) representative from the Poor People's Council of Puerto Rico. The Board assumed the responsibility of advising the VESPRA Director, and the Foundation in matters related to program development and expansion.

In September of 1968, the training program was administered under the auspices of the Institute for Community Development, [Arroyo, Villafana, & Burgos, \(1968\)](#). The program was designed to last twenty days. The teaching methodology will be based on group discussion and handouts. The objective of the training course is to: (1) Increase The experience in CISLA is perhaps the most sig-

nificant in the entire training process. Volunteers describe the experience at CISLA as the deepest and most significant experience of their lives and the first serious look at their lives. CISLA's experience for these volunteers is a traumatic exposure to the extremely intense experience of a former group therapy addict with the purpose of exploring and rehabilitating their social attitudes.

The initial training in CISLA has been substituted by a local training in Cayey that lasted three weeks and was based on the New Jersey Community Action Training Institute (CATI) model. CATI was a government funded organization that trained throughout the U.S. Their primary client was Community Action Agencies. Their Director of Training consulted with the Foundation at the time that this group was being trained.

The training focused on community mapping, civil rights, human rights, community action techniques based on Alinsky's model, analysis and solution of problems, power structure, the nature of the culture of poverty, community organization, and a community visit. Floating team of volunteers was organized to assist the communities to conduct assessment, mapping, identify social capital and develop joint proposals. The result of this training was in preparation of the VESPRA volunteer as a change agent, instead of the more systematic process of developing group work and leadership skills to help their own communities.

The two case studies below provide an example of change in the program:

**Case Study 1:** *Comunidad "El Basurero" in Guayama* (3 August 1968), where the people had been threatened with being forcibly removed because they had no running water. Finally, the volunteer for that community received assurance from the Municipality that if the neighbors had three public faucets in the geographic areas, they would not execute the mandate of forcibly moving them. VESPRA-Cayey dispatched the "response team". They meet with the neighbors (some 200 families) that depended of clean water from two public faucets outside the perimeter of the community. Within seven days twelve meetings were held with the community members to assure human and social capital. A group of five community members and a volunteer plumber. So, as not to give away their plan pipes and other tools were brought into the community in the middle of the night. The following night 20 neighbors began the task of installing the pipes and hooking them up to the public water ways. The police had an order to remove the neighbors on a Friday evening. The project was completed by the morning. As a result of the VESPRA intervention the neighbors were able to remain in their barrio.

**Case Study 2:** *Community Action Project in Barrio Honduras de Cidra* (15 June 1968). This was an isolated community of 40 families. The Mennonite Church had a visiting nurse that cared for the physical wellbeing of the community. They had reported that poor nutrition was affecting the families. There was a bridge between the community and access to the nearest road. However, due to heavy rains the bridge had been damaged and the government was refusing to repair the same. The community, with help from the VESPRA volunteers put together a plan of using a piece of land to grow their own crops. The volunteers



engaged a private citizen to lend a Machine to tilt the land. The Extension Service provided seeds and education to the community members; the Department of Health provided health education to control mosquito borne illnesses. Within six months, the community was inaugurating its first hydroponic garden with enough crops for the whole family. The total start up cost was \$152.90.

VESPRA stimulated the development of an Action Committee of Poor people, that included seven communities along the Martin Peña Canal in San Juan. This Committee has emphasized its participation in decision making in issues that have a direct impact in the lives of families that live in these communities. These communities are part of the San Juan Model Cities Program, thus the problem. The organization is managed by the San Juan Municipality and funded through Federal monies; therefore, the people are at the mercy of bureaucratic decision making. The organization of this group into a Joint Action Committee has been one of the most successful activities for VESPRA in Puerto Rico.

The Federation of Poor People was organized by VESPRA volunteers (Ortiz & Concepcion, 1968). The Poor People group were organized as follows: 1) local groups chose delegates who met at the municipal level; 2) in turn the groups of municipal representatives elected Regional representatives; and, 3) from these regional representatives elected the Island wide representatives. This island wide of poor people representatives consisted of twenty people.

April 29, 1968, the planning of the march of the poor in Washington began, in which a representative of a community action program called VESPRA participated (Wright, 2007). On June 29, 1968, the march of the Poor People arrived in Washington, DC. Directed by Rev. Abernathy and Martin Luther King, among the participants a group from Puerto Rico representing VESPRA and the Caño communities (Wright, 2007: p. 212).

The concept began to work in the poor communities of Puerto Rico through VESPRA volunteers. The San Juan Star reported that the Poor Convention was held in the theater of the University of Puerto Rico with the aim of organizing itself as an organism that would take pro-active actions to eradicate poverty in Puerto Rico (Ahlers, 1968). An estimated 3000 people representing poor neighborhoods in forty-three (43) island wide communities, gathered in Rio Piedras. The conference was the result of a year of work by VESPRA volunteers with funds from the Office of Economic Opportunities of Puerto Rico. Héctor Concepción, Director of VESPRA indicated that this meeting was imperative since the poor people were overlooked, they (the poor people) would have to take the actions necessary to improve their condition.

Immediately after the Convention Poor People Convention, the Board of Directors of the Federation of the Poor became the Advisory Board for VESPRA. Its Board was an active one and they had the ability to change the work plan of VESPRA. The Foundation provided training to the Board of the Federation of the Poor in handling legal matters related to expropriation, community participation, fundraising, and denials. The VESPRA program evolved from a community action program funded by the Federal Government, to a program that re-

sponded to the Federation of the Poor People of Puerto Rico (Ortiz & Concepcion 1968: p. 12). The Foundation only provided training and paid for the operational phase.

The group of volunteers assigned to the Caño communities together with the Episcopal diocese formed “the Caño Corporation”. This is a Model City project in a poor neighborhood in San Juan. The Community Development Foundation offered a hundred workshops to the neighbors. Once El Caño joined, about six (6) volunteers remained until 1970. The Foundation provided six seats on the Board of Directors. In this way, a way of including poor people, in the institutional power circle, of the establishment was modeled before government structures. These delegates were part of the administrative committee and the Training Institute (Bennett 1967: p. 112).

## **11. The Foundation of Community Development and VESPRA in the Public Eye**

On March 19, 1968 a group of residents from Barrio Caimital Alto de Guayama went to the Capitol to confront the Representative Justo Sánchez since the water they are using is contaminated. The voice of the neighbors rang loud on TV and the newspapers. A few days later there were trucks from the Aqueduct Authority in the neighborhood (El Imparcial, 1968). Several weeks later, the quality of the drinking water had improved. Mr. Juan Vega, who served as Director of the Guayama region, commented that after this confrontation, the Representative in question called him to ask that next time there was no need for protest, they could come to his Office, “there was no need for protests.”

San Juan was in the process of creating its own office of the Community Action Agency. This was a political maneuver to prevent VESPRA volunteers who were working and organizing El Caño communities from continuing to organize groups. Héctor Concepción, Director of VESPRA was presented at the public hearings at the Office of Economic Opportunities in San Juan to oppose the request of San Juan (McDonough, 1968). Concepción said that the Office of the Mayor called his office to dismiss a volunteer, on another occasion the Mayor requested an investigation of the volunteers in three communities, because they led the neighbors on a protest march to the Office of the mayor to request improvements for their community. Concepción finished his presentation with the suggestion that they should not give the money of the poor to the Government, because this by nature was paternalism.

Von Eckardt (1968), a professor at the University of Puerto pointed out that within the political mess in Puerto Rico, a third power had emerged, which was developing a new policy both in Puerto Rico and in the United States. Von Eckardt calls this power the “activist machine.” “Recently, the VESPRA Director opposed the municipal government in requesting funds for a Community Action Agency because the funds would be used for political reasons. Of course, Doña Felisa Rincon de Gautier, the Mayor of San Juan, and one of the great Political Chiefs of the Popular Party, and where the City was governed by her machinery

opposed vehemently. The real enemy of the people was not the machinery of the administration. It was the activist machinery of “volunteers” in groups like VESPRA. They tend to be radical establishment members.

## 12. Summary

One of the most important impacts of the VESPRA program was its role as a catalytic agent with local community groups, local and state government agencies, other more service-oriented Community Action Programs (CAP), and private and faith based groups in identifying the basic issues and problems facing the poor people in Puerto Rico. Through local, regional, and island wide meetings, seminars, and other venues, as well as through direct confrontation between community members and different agencies, VESPRA more than any other groups working in Puerto Rico has helped to highlight the conditions and results of poverty and the response of poor people motivated to change their lot in life.

VESPRA has been involved in public and private controversies almost from its inception, without seeking recognition, but merely because of its actions, changed attitudes towards poverty have been reflected in the press and perhaps more dramatically in the political campaign of 1968. At the same time other attitudes have hardened in rejection of the facts about poverty in Puerto Rico, and of VESPRA as an effective agent of changing the condition of the poor (Faulkner, 1970).

VESPRA, despite working behind the scenes, helping the groups it organizes, has gotten some recognition of its work from many sources. The Foundation received frequent visits from Africa and Latin America, and of course from the United States who came to study the VESPRA model of community mobilization and community development and the possible application in their homelands. One such proposal was the development of a model of community empowerment in Paraguay (Ramallo, 1967).

VESPRA was able during its existence to expand its program into 291 new communities in the Island since the program inception: 1967-1970. The geographic expansion has provided the space and opportunities for VESPRA to coordinate services with other agencies such as: Legal Services of Puerto Rico, Model Cities Coordinating Agencies, Municipal Administrations, Farmer Home Administration, School of Social Work, UPR, Planning School UPR, the Episcopal Church in Puerto Rico, the Federation of Poor People of Puerto Rico, El Caño Corporation, American Red Cross, and Hermanas del Buen Pastor.

VESPRA and Foundation staff were frequently called to lecture at local Universities and participate in private and public forums. These opportunities have allowed the diffusion and meaningful discussion of VESPRA as a tool to alleviate suffering among the poor people. VESPRA became a vocal force in impacting the decision of the Community Action Agency in San Juan (McDonough, 1968). Hector Concepcion, the Director of VESPRA opposed San Juan's plan to estab-

lish a Community Action Agency because “government by logic is paternalistic”. He further indicated that when Community Action programs were operating, conflicts arose between the affected people and the local leaders.

Probably the greatest strengths of the program have been the involvement of poor people in the governing structure. VESPRA could organize into an island wide federation: “The Poor People Federation”. This group was composed by representatives of every local group with whom VESPRA has worked. It is a body of 300 members. The Federation could mobilize approximately 3000 people to participate in a meeting at the Theater of the University of Puerto Rico held on August 18, 1968 (Wagenheim, 1968). The participants introduced and approved a set of resolutions calling from responses from public agencies to help solve problems of poverty (Ahlers, 1968).

The cause of the poor people was brought to the fore with this manifestation. A group of Social workers meet with the Governor to highlight the plight of the poor. “Mr. Governor, one fifth of the Island resident are in a state of despair. Miranda (1968) reported that “Ms. Marin explained to the Governor that she was in touch with the Leaders of the Poor People’s Congress. Her impression was that these people are determined to take justice into their own hands, using all legal means. She continued: “the poor people of the island have lost their docility and resignation”.

VESPRA relationship with the Poor People Federation was strengthened from the appointment of 1/3 on the Board of the Foundation. Therefore, there is Poor people representation in all segment of VESPRA: training, participation in planning, development and evaluation of the program (Institute for Community Development), and the VESPRA volunteers became fully accountable to the Poor People whom they served.

El Caño Corporation was a private non-profit corporation composed of resident of the seven communities. This is a model City neighborhood in the San Juan. The communities have been organized through the efforts of the VESPRA team assigned to the area in collaboration with volunteers from the Episcopal Church. Father Ramos expresses his reaction to a newspaper article from El Mundo that highlights acts of violence in barrio Tokio in San Juan. He enumerates several acts in diverse barrios in Puerto Rico in a recent past. The newspaper and political parties were blaming each other. He surmises. His feelings are that “that these violent expressions, especially coming from Poor people, should be dismissed by simply blaming them on the political opposition, depending on who is the victim. Many of these are spontaneous outburst of anger are symptomatic of something much deeper than what we want to recognize. These violent outbursts, just as the actions taken by the residents of Tokio against bulldozers, are symptomatic of how the poor people feel. One only has to be with them for a short time to perceive the resentment that there is for government agencies And their representatives, because they are fed-up of being manipulated with false promises, being the object of social studies and research, of being the

recipients of what is left overs of our progressive society or having to conform to decisions made by others, left out and powerless.

The Corporation has been successful in acquiring external funds from private sources. The members of the Corporation have engaged the existing municipal government and other Commonwealth agencies in dialogue to secure their participation in the process.

In October of 1967, a VESPRA twelve-person team started organizing the El Caño area and as a result the El Caño Corporation evolved (Von Eckart, 1968) writes: "Here the third power gets involved." To be truly effective, the "third power" bosses need more than emotional issues and the demonstration. They need a framework within which the sporadic emotional support can be harnessed so it can be used as and when needed. It is here where VESPRA, VISTA, or any other private or government group, just as long as someone else pays the bills and supplies a letterhead to impress the suckers, come in handy."

The resolutions passed by the Poor People's Convention resonated with the feel of the poor people of El Caño. These words were the words of the poor people from throughout the Island. They expressed very vividly how they felt about the Puerto Rican society at large. In November 1968 the community of El Caño sent a letter to the Governor explaining why the communities of El Caño opposed the construction of the "Expreso Muñoz Rivera", (a highway that joined San Juan with the rest of the island). The pressure continued from the six communities of El Caño. With the assistance of VESPRA volunteers the activism continued throughout 1968. The Poor People Joint Committee for Joint Action became active members of the Foundation for Community Development.

By 1969, the involvement of thousands of residents, has resulted in a commitment from The Model Cities Agency, the Housing Authority, and Highways Authority for inclusion of community representatives in decision-making issues and projects that affect their lives. Von Eckart, 1968 remarks that "political battles between party leaders are new in Puerto Rico. However, the matter is complicated by a kind of "third power". Recently the Head of VESPRA spoke against a San Juan Municipal CAA because it would subvert the agency for political ends. Dona Fela is one of the great bosses with a great political machine. She has to face in the next election not the party's machine, but the activist-machine of the "volunteers" of groups like VESPRA."

The YMCA Cuerpos de Paz, VESPRA, and the Institute for Community Development of Puerto Rico emerged in the mid '60, at a moment where Puerto Rico was undergoing political and economic transitions. Gov. Muñoz Marín had completed his last term and passed the political baton to Gov. Roberto Sánchez Vilella who remained in power for one term, until 1968. During those four years a force of members of civil society organization, the faith based, and the intellectual intelligentsias of the IHE's in the Island.

The energy of the youth was felt, and a space was carved out for the poor people to emerge and be heard. Some strategies such as using a psychiatric pro-

gram to “attempt to cure” poverty, had some positive results, however, the practical projects in the poor communities were more effective and longer lasting. Don Osvaldo Caraballo, President of the Federation of Poor People in Puerto Rico: “We have to claim a sit in the “car of progress” (carro del progreso). We will notice that there are squeaky parts, and the car has a rough ride. This is not the fault of the driver. To make the ride smooth, we have to focus on fixing the car.<sup>1</sup>”

Unbeknownst to the leadership, VESPRA has had a far-reaching influence for poor people around the world. The community mobilization has been written in many forms however the basics have been used to mobilize poor people in over thirty countries around the world. The materials used by Disaster response program, under the rubric of psychosocial support, are the same materials and non-verbal tools developed by the Institute for Community Development in Puerto for the VESPRA-VISTA class of 1967. If we pay attention and listen to the pleas of the people today for better government, disaster assistance, education or health, it is no different than the plea heard by Padre Jose Antonio Ramos in the summer of 1968.

Another of today’s universal concept for poor people is the “re-establishment of place”, one has only to go back to the literature generated in “El Caño communities interventions” in 1968-1969, to locate the approaches used by many today in terms of “dislocation-relocation” in modern theories and practices of urban planning, or loss and re-establishment of place in the field of psychology.

### 13. Conclusion

The VESPRA program selected, trained, and returned volunteers from poor communities, to the same communities to work in community organization to help themselves rise from the culture of poverty. The aim was to produce indigenous leadership that would mobilize their communities. The Institute provided assistance in the foundation of the volunteers. As the several VESPRA proposals stated: “the image of the poor as bedraggled, inarticulate, and helplessly unconcerned” became history in Puerto Rico. In 2017 Hurricane Maria destroyed the infrastructure, the flora and fauna of Puerto Rico, but the Puerto children and grandchildren carrying on the torch in support of the poor people.

VESPRA embraced a philosophy of hope, and through its volunteers brought to action. VESPRA was in many ways a bold program and a departure from the stereotyped, paternalistic norms which had for so long maintained the cycle of poverty. This very cycle denied the dignity of the human beings because it denied the poor people the true freedom: the inalienable right to express themselves, and freely assume their responsibility as members of a free society.

VESPRA caught on and became a partner with the poor people in asserting those rights and ensuring participation. This writer witnessed when the last building was locked in the VESPRA Sector of Cayey in May 1969. By that time,

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<sup>1</sup>Speech to Class of VESPRA-VISTA # 52, September 2, 1968. La Parguera, as related by Victor M. Ortiz, January 2013.



VESPRA had a total of 305 active volunteers, involving some 800 community leaders, working with 600 community groups in 380 different barrios (neighborhoods), involving more than 22,000 poor people in 250 major community projects.

Finally, forty years later, in 2009, when we were gathering the data for this paper, shared a draft with 92 persons who had been members of VESPRA, had been impacted by the teachings of the Institute for Community Development, or had been part of the poor people who became part of the decision making body. They expressed their approval and were overwhelmed that someone would take time to remember their story. Overall, they were nostalgic, and had fond memories of those days. The feeling is that they became better human beings for having been involved during those six years in the 60's and early 70's.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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