

INTRODUCTION

By Representative Mary Schneider
of
HB 1529

House Agriculture Committee--Mike Beltz, Chairman

February 6, 2025

Chairman Beltz and distinguished members of the Agriculture Committee:

I am Mary Schneider, and I proudly represent District 21, central Fargo and West Fargo.

HB 1529 is a bill that would add returning Peace Corps volunteers, who have served their country in positions assigned to them around the world, to a long list of others who we consider "resident students" for tuition purposes. That list can be found in subsection 2 of section 15-10-19.1 of the Century Code.

The current list of individuals who meet that "resident student" definition includes a broad range of military categories including the armed services, the national guard, reservists, plus their spouses, surviving spouses, their children. Also, residents for tuition purposes are benefitted employees of our university system, and their spouses and children.

All those individuals are deserving, I'm sure, so I am only asking that you slightly modify the list to include one small additional group of individuals who served their country, often amidst hardship, isolation, and limited income, in foreign countries, and sometimes dangerous circumstances. Those are returning Peace Corps volunteers who completed at least two years of federal service for their country--making the world a better place. This small ask doesn't include spouses or children, and it's on behalf of people who don't ask for much.

In our state we have many groups that represent and speak for veterans--rightly so, too. We have the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Disabled American Veterans, the Department of Veterans Affairs, we have the ND Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans Administration, to name a few. North Dakota Peace Corps veterans don't have any groups in our state that speak for them, or maybe they would have been welcomed to the "resident students" list years ago.

The **Peace Corps** is a volunteer program, run by the U.S. government which has been supported and funded by Presidents and Congresses of both parties. Its purpose is to promote world peace by sending American citizens abroad to work on a variety of development projects in areas like education, health, agriculture, environment, and economic development. Unlike most military servicemen, volunteers don't have the support and resources of a large organization when they are on assignment. They may be mostly alone, facing barriers of language, culture, and poverty when undertaking their missions. They may live in risky conditions, and can be exposed to unusual hazards, environmental conditions, and diseases. Volunteers live and work in communities for at least two years, helping to address local needs and foster cross-cultural

understanding. They are usually armed with training in the language, culture, and technical skills required for their assignments--and which has value for a lifetime.

When Peace Corps volunteers leave for duty, almost all already have college degrees, and they return to the U.S. with additional valuable skills and experiences that can greatly benefit their states and local communities. Many are interested in further education to continue their professional development, but the financial burden of graduate school tuition can be a challenge.

In North Dakota, the decision to offer in-state tuition to returning Peace Corps volunteers is important for many reasons:

1. **Losing Lifelong North Dakotans:** North Dakota kids who have grown up here, who temporarily leave the state for school or another shorter-term reason, and then join the Peace Corps, can lose their residency while serving. If they must pay out-of-state tuition on returning, they have a lot of other choices--for example Maryland and Colorado have this provision so they could be considered residents there.
2. **Workforce Recruitment and Retention of Skilled Workers:** Peace Corps volunteers often return with valuable experiences in leadership, cross-cultural communication, problem-solving, and various technical skills. Two major categories of Peace Corps projects are teaching and agriculture. We need workers in both categories and have great university programs in those areas. By offering in-state tuition, North Dakota is encouraging these individuals to come to the state or stay in the state after finishing school, where they can contribute to local communities, businesses, schools, farming, and organizations that need their expertise.
3. **Encouragement for Further Education:** Many returning Peace Corps volunteers seek higher education to build on the skills they developed while volunteering. In-state tuition makes it more affordable for them to pursue these educational opportunities, which can enhance their ability to continue making a positive impact both in North Dakota and beyond.
4. **Strengthening North Dakota's Global Connections:** North Dakota sometimes feels like a small, rural state, and having individuals who have lived and worked internationally adds valuable global perspective. These volunteers can bring new ideas, innovations, and connections to the state, benefiting local industries, businesses, and international relations.
5. **Community and Economic Growth:** Returning volunteers often become leaders in their communities, in education, and in business. By supporting their continued education through in-state tuition, North Dakota fosters the development of a highly skilled, management and leadership-oriented, workforce that can help drive the state's economic growth.
6. **Recognition of Service:** Offering in-state tuition is a way of honoring the service that Peace Corps volunteers have given to communities both domestically and abroad. These individuals have dedicated themselves to solving global challenges and offering them a reduced tuition rate is a gesture of gratitude for their service.

In short, allowing in-state tuition for returning Peace Corps volunteers not only helps these individuals continue their education but also supports North Dakota's long-term development by

retaining skilled and broadly experienced people who can contribute to the state in meaningful ways.

How much will it cost? It's not a huge program and the money that's brought in by mostly graduate students that otherwise could or would go elsewhere, likely is more beneficial to our universities than the difference between state and out-of-state tuition. If they don't come, we get nothing and lose out on skilled workers and good citizens.

For universities it's a win-win, too. They will likely attract more graduate students, AND the Peace Corps will advertise the state's in-state tuition availability, as they provide future planning assistance and materials to their returning volunteers. It's a free marketing program.

This is a small ask, but with potential bigger payback. You can't lose by supporting this bill.