

MCC SALT/YAMEN Service Opportunity

Assignment Title & Partner Organization: SALT/YAMEN: Health Project Support Worker – WBVHA

Term: August 17, 2021 – July 21, 2022

FTE: 1.0

Location: Siliguri, Darjeeling, West Bengal, India

Start Date: August 17, 2021

Program information and policies can be found at mcc.org/salt or mcc.org/yamen

MCC is an equal opportunity employer, committed to employment equity. MCC values diversity and invites all qualified candidates to apply.

Synopsis:

The SALT/YAMENer will serve alongside West Bengal Voluntary Health Association (WBVHA) with their projects for those infected and affected with HIV/AIDS. There may be opportunities to be involved in other WBVHA projects as well.

Qualifications:

All MCC workers are expected to exhibit a commitment to a personal Christian faith and discipleship; active church membership; and nonviolent peacemaking.

An invitation to an assignment is contingent on the successful completion of a criminal background check.

- Bachelor's degree in social work, cross-cultural studies, or related field.
- Experience working with a HIV/AIDS/health program is an asset.
- Research (data collection, data analysis), report writing, and administrative experience is an asset.
- Ability to be independent in daily living and working situations, with backup support from MCC/India staff.
- Flexibility and adaptability in assuming a variety of job responsibilities depending on changing needs.
- Adaptable to basic lifestyle and lodging accommodations.
- Language learning aptitude/desire to learn a new language.
- Willingness to live as a member of an Indian household, learning a new language, ways of living, custom, foods, communication patterns, modes of travel and modes of worship.
- Willingness to be open to the mentoring and support of an Indian church community.
- Willingness to make your needs known.
- Flexibility and openness to new experiences.
- Creativity and ability to take initiative.
- Interest in building relationships with the community.

- Maturity; positive attitude towards others.

Assignment Narrative:

Through living with host families and participating in host churches and service assignments, SALT/YAMEN participants in India will:

- Realistically test their gifts, limitations, and their call for further training and longer-term cross-cultural service.
- Grow spiritually as their faith is challenged and nurtured in a cross-cultural setting.
- Broaden their understanding and appreciation of the lives of their brothers and sisters in their host country and further mutual trust, relationships and caring.
- Help to dismantle the stereotypes and prejudices that exist between cultures both during the exchange year and upon their return to their home communities.

To help meet these objectives, the SALT/YAMEN participant will:

- Participate in an in-county orientation of 5 to 10 days in Kolkata.
- Have six weeks of language study.
- Live as an adult “son” or “daughter” in an Indian family.
- Expected to be part of church and community life.
- Full participation and mutual support opportunities in the schools.

West Bengal Voluntary Health Association (WBVHA) was established in 1974 as a charitable, non-profit and secular organization. WBVHA is a government-recognized state level health promoting organization providing support services for the promotion and implementation of universal health/primary health care services.

WBVHA operates with the active support and involvement of NGOs/CBOs and community groups like SHGs and cooperation from Government, both national and state, and the corporate sector as well. The primary objective of WBVHA is to promote community health related to the provision and distribution of health services. The motto of WBVHA is working together for health, education and livelihood thus adding values to life and making health a reality.

WBVHA is implementing Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) 6th & 7th Module Training for Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri & Alipurduar districts through the District Training Centre Darjeeling & Jalpaiguri done with the support of the Department of Health & Family Welfare, Government of West Bengal. They are also implementing a HIV/AIDS/STDs prevention program among female sex workers (brothel & non-brothel based) at Siliguri with the support of West Bengal State AIDS Prevention & Control Society, and the Government of West Bengal. WBVHA has also been implementing an HIV/AIDS mainstreaming program among the HIV infected and affected people of Siliguri & Kurseong sub-divisions since 2014, promoting organic farming for the marginalized farmers of Siliguri, Kurseong Sub-Divisions with the help of Department of Agriculture and the Government of West Bengal.

WBVHA has four staff members who will be directly involved in this project; they each have specific roles and responsibilities. The two peer counsellors, one from the hills and one from

the plains, belong to the target community. They oversee the day-to-day interactions and follow up regularly by visiting homes of the project participants, accompanying people living with HIV (PLHIVs) to the different referral centres and to the hospital and other related health service centres, organizing local level meetings, and visiting the Anti-retroviral therapy (ART) centers along with the PLHIVs.

The Field Officer/Counsellor regularly visits PLHIV homes to track their health condition, communicate with stakeholders, organize awareness camps, programs, counsel PLHIVs and implement the project and its activities. The Field Supervisor/Office Assistant also visits homes and maintains records of the PLHIVs as well as field-related official documents. The Accountant/Monitoring Officer maintains the project accounts, monitors the field-related activities, and reports to the Project Director. The Project Director oversees all aspects of the project at the field and administration level as well as networks with stakeholders to enhance the project.

The major problem is that there are many newly infected PLHIVs appearing in Kurseong Hills. They are not fully aware of its causes. Many tea gardens are closing leading to massive unemployment. During such times of recession, huge numbers of local people are migrating to different states. As per previous records, we know that people migrating to different states to earn more for a better living are unaware of the dangers and impact of HIV/AIDS. They become involved in different trades which generally becomes a risk factor for them as well as for their families. Most of the migration takes place mainly from the tea garden areas and awareness on HIV/AIDS to these people living in this particular community is integral.

We would also like to directly intervene with the newly infected people. In order to help them to avail themselves of the new schemes that are provided to PLHIVs by the State, as well as the Central Government, it is important to spread the positive message on HIV/AIDS since it is seen that there are many such isolated and scattered villages in the hills, where misconception and discrimination rates are high compared to the suburban areas. We feel that they should be assured, given more emphasis, and be more effective and possible to involve the youth, church leaders, schools and college students. We have planned to set up three more support group members, two in the hills and one in the plains in order to get better and more effective results. WBVHA will strengthen the participants' skill and capacity building along with enhancing the Income Generation Programs (IGP).

One of the peer counsellors recruited by WBVHA, who has been working in the HIV/AIDS project for the last two years to oversee the hill area of Kurseong, is a representative and a member of the Kurseong Network Positive (KNP+) organization. KNP+ is registered under the Societies Act but lacks the infrastructure to assist the PLHIVs in this region in a full-fledged way. WBVHA hopes that by the end of 2019, the Kurseong Network Positive (KRSP+) organization which is known as the Kurseong Network of People living with HIV/AIDS, will be strengthened and technically equipped. They will be trained to teach PLHIVs to address the day-to-day problems they face, helping them tap resources from other funding agencies, access government funds and schemes for the welfare of PLHIVs and see that they communicate and create their own linkages within local communities.

Duties:

- Provide support and office assistance at WBVHA projects.

- Help the PLWHIV & other project participants work towards positive living in the society.
- Assist in project analysis and documentation of projects.
- Help in project reporting and other office work as required.
- Cooperate/build relationships with the staff and coach them in English as necessary.
- Attend church and relate to the local Mennonite/Christian community.
- Participate and connect with young adults from the Mennonite church.
- Follow the supervisors' guidance and support in personal and social matters.
- Live as a member of an Indian household, learning a new language, ways of living, custom, foods, communication patterns, modes of travel and modes of worship.
- Participate with MCC India, attending the Annual Retreat, workshops and seminars.
- Help MCC India or MCSFI as opportunities come or according to one's interest.

Location Description:

Darjeeling District has three international borders with the neighbouring countries of Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. This district of West Bengal is also referred to as the "North East Corridor" which links the Northeastern states of Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland and others. Much of the population is engaged in trade and commerce. Tea, tourism, and forest products are the main economic sectors in the district. There are 26,244 hectares of land for agricultural production. Another important issue is the sale and consumption of inorganic food and vegetable items that have a serious effect on the different vulnerable groups of the population like PLWHIVs, daily wage labourers, rickshaw van pullers, and sex workers. Through experience and observation, it is seen that consumption of inorganic food leads to multiple Opportunistic Infections (OIs) like indigestion, diarrhoea, allergy, fungal infections and other internal problems as the inorganic food contains high amounts of chemicals, harmful pesticides that could even worsen the health condition of the PLWHIV. The Government of India is gradually planning to implement organic farming wherever possible to avoid health problems amongst the general public. However, some states in India have already started organic farming.

Siliguri is chilly from November to March in the winter season and during the summer there are very hot and dry conditions of up to 43 degree Celsius. The higher one gets in the mountains, the colder it is. A winter coat may be required for a couple of months. It is possible to purchase warm clothing in India. Summer starts from April to mid-June with a rainy season due to southwestern monsoon occurring from mid-June to the end of September.

Kolkata to Siliguri is well-connected by train, bus and air. To get there, a person takes a train from the Sealdah (Kolkata) to New Jalpaiguri Station. The Sealdah station is relatively close to the MCC office in Kolkata. It is 600 km between Kolkata to Siliguri – an overnight train trip. The nearest airport is 20 minutes drive from WBVHA's Office, which is then a one-hour flight from Kolkata where the MCC office is located (and then possibly a one-hour drive in from the airport!).

There are several hospitals in Siliguri Metropolitan City including a government hospital and several other hospitals. There are also many private, multi-specialty hospitals that have 24-hour, 7-day a week service. Private clinics are also available. For serious medical

conditions, patients are referred to North Bengal Medical College and Hospital which is 15 minutes from WBVHA's Office. Dental and eye care is available, but no physiological or mental illness facilities exists within the town.

This is a growing city in India, so all international standard big shopping malls are available in Siliguri.

The MCC office has been in the same location since 1962, having begun its presence in India in 1942 in response to the Bengal famine. Since then, MCC's primary strategy in India has been to identify needs and to provide consultative and financial assistance to indigenous registered societies wishing to engage in relief, development, education and peace initiatives. Assistance is provided without regard to caste, colour or creed. Except for projects initiated by Mennonite churches in India and of the Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA) in response to disasters, MCC India confines its work to the five states nearest to Kolkata – West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh – which are also the poorest and most populated states in India. MCC India has a national staff of 23 and a North American country representative couple.

The MCC office is situated near Entally Market, one of the most interesting and exciting indoor/outdoor markets in the city. One will not be bored with a walk through the market, or in the streets surrounding the office. The SALT/ YAMENer will discover a variety of shops including pharmacies, tailor shops, outdoor barbers, the coconut seller on the corner; as well as men washing at open pipes; rickshaws, pedestrians, motorcyclists, taxis and private vehicles vying for street space; sleeping street dogs; families living and sleeping in front of buildings; mazes of tiny alleyways; snack and sweet shops of all descriptions. There is a cacophony of noise at most hours of the day or night. At night the street is brightly lit, and activity abounds until 10pm or later, depending on the season. That being said, the MCC Office itself is considered an oasis of quiet in a sea of confusion.

MCC India works closely with the Mennonite Christian Service Fellowship of India (MCSFI). MCSFI was founded in 1964 and is the service arm of nine Mennonite and BIC church conferences in India and Nepal. MCSFI provides fellowship and teaching opportunities within the church community for youth, women, pastors and leadership workshops. MCSFI also engages in service through churches in the community. Presently MCSFI is engaged in projects involving food security, HIV/AIDS awareness, as well as peace and conflict resolution. The head office of MCSFI is Kolkata but the administrative office is located in Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh. Rev. M. K Masih is the Director of Mennonite Christian Service Fellowship of India.

Male and female friendships are understood differently in India than in other parts of the world. A SALT/ YAMEN participant would need to spend time in mixed groups or with friends of the same gender and be very sensitive to cultural cues. Following the lead of Indian friends of the same age and gender will help to prevent cultural blunders.

Indian culture is extremely complex and mysterious to North Americans, with its layers and layers of unspoken rules pertaining to social protocol. The elderly, those in authority and teachers are generally held in high regard and deferred to with respect. In many ways Indians are extremely reserved. Nothing is quick or simple, black and white – but on the streets one experiences a fresh bluntness, vitality and an energy that defies description.

India is a land of contrasts and contradictions, and those fortunate enough to spend a year in the rich tapestry of this pluralistic society called India are most fortunate.

Challenges:

- The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect countries around the world. While we remain hopeful that the pandemic will be under control by August 2021, to prioritize the well-being and limit risk to our participants and the local community, assessments of each assignment will continue on a regular basis. If it is deemed that an assignment is no longer viable, we will do our best to help you secure an alternative assignment.
- To live with an Indian host family might be challenging due to cultural differences. Indian families feel more responsible for guests and would certainly be very protective which might be very unusual or considered controlling for someone coming from North America.
- Indian food, although very delicious, can be very spicy. It may take some time to adjust to this. Yoghurt is frequently served with meals and is cooling when eating spicy food. Digestive upsets are common, especially during the first 2-3 months of the assignment. Differences in diet and water sources take time to adjust to.
- Learning language and building cultural understanding requires time, patience and dedication. Willingness to practice, make mistakes and an ability to laugh at oneself is important.
- The hot climate can be quite uncomfortable. Most of the Indian families do not have air conditioning and use locally made air water coolers to cool the houses.
- Train travel should be viewed as an adventure and is an integral part of experiencing India to the fullest. With limited language skills, the participant may be nervous about travel, especially travelling alone, but they will find people to be kind and helpful.
- Perceptions of LGBTQ+ individuals are generally negative, and more strongly so in Christian communities. An openly LGBTQ+ Christian would likely face significant challenges with acceptance in this context.
- Managing frustration when things don't turn out as expected can be hard. While we do our best to determine and outline job responsibilities with our local partners, assignments really come alive based on the passions, skills, and gifts of an individual. Responsibilities may change or be refined over time in communication with supervisors to meet the ongoing changes and needs within a local context. As such, the greatest characteristics a participant can bring to an assignment are adaptability, flexibility, patience, a willingness to get your hands dirty, and humility to complete even mundane tasks.
- Assignments in India tend to be nebulous. For those who are very task oriented, it can be a challenge to recognize the importance of "being" instead of always "doing" as building healthy relationships and mutually transformative learning is an important part of the participant experience. We hope participants will come with a desire to walk alongside our local partners, rather than see the assignment solely as a way to "get things done".