

## **Seeds of Learning 2012 Work Group Policies and Guidelines**

The following policies are designed by Seeds of Learning to help ensure that volunteers, work group leaders, community members, and staff alike have a rich and meaningful experience in our program, as we continue to work together to increase access to education, improve cross-cultural understanding, and stay within SOL's mission, vision and goals. We have included information about SOL's mission, vision, and goals below in order to help you understand some of the reasons behind our policies.

### **Mission and Vision:**

Seeds of Learning is dedicated to promoting conditions for quality learning in developing communities of the Americas while educating its North American constituents about the rich cultural diversity and the educational and social needs of poorly resourced communities in Central America. Seeds of Learning envisions a world in which all persons have access to quality education, where cross-cultural experiences promote understanding, and where people are empowered to effect positive change.

SOL has worked very hard over the last twenty years to maintain its focus as an organization in the area of education. While the overall needs of the people in both Nicaragua are immense, from health care, to clothing, food, and so much more, we have chosen to maintain our focus strictly within the realm of education. We believe that by working closely with, alongside of, and listening to, as many people as possible in entire communities, we can better reach and achieve our mission. We know that in many instances, the physical progress of our work, such as school building, could be accelerated by going about it in different means, but we do believe that the net overall benefit for the community and international volunteers is higher if the process is carefully thought thru, and involves community participation and local resources at every level. We do not think of our work or organization as a charity program, but rather one that helps communities help themselves thru education. In Nicaragua, the US, and across the organization, SOL strives to never promise more than we can deliver to people and to not set precedents with communities or individuals that cannot be responsibly followed thru on in a way that stays within our mission and vision. We prefer to not focus on only the needs of one individual, but rather look at overall community needs. Our goal is to work with communities in such a way that, after the experience, people in the community, and the community as a whole is more empowered to make changes because they have increased access to education, and have participated in acquiring and creating those changes.

With hundreds of volunteers visiting and working with communities in Central America, it can be a challenge to make sure that SOL stays focused on its mission. One of the largest reasons for this challenge is that we work with many volunteers and staff alike with big hearts and who are passionate about the needs of the people in Nicaragua, which are never ending. For staff, volunteers, and others it's very common to want to immediately react when seeing all of these needs – be it a child or adult who is hungry, without adequate clothing, sick, or otherwise in need. Often people want to buy them food, clothing, pay for a special gift, operation, etc. However, the individual, community, region, and nationwide needs are expansive. As an organization, we strive to stay focused on improving and promoting conditions for quality learning, and empowering community members to also create positive change. This translates into a number of programs, including: scholarship, school construction, work groups, learning resource centers, sister schools, rural extension, vocational education, and others. Although it is the longer term solution, from which the fruit of our work is not seen immediately (e.g. the child who is hungry or sick does not get fed or operated on immediately), we strongly believe that by continuing to prioritize needs in education, and the needs of the

communities as a whole, the long term result will be overall better for the community. We also try to educate the North American volunteers with whom we work as to why the best solution to an immediate problem of need is not always to fix the problem right away, but rather to invest in fixing the cause of the problem (often times a lack of access to education). We strive to let communities know that SOL is not an organization that can just hand out money, but rather one that will accompany and empower people in the process to improve and promote conditions for education and in that way, benefits are much longer lasting for communities. When a volunteer who is part of SOL responds to more than just the educational needs of a community, liability and risks are created, including dependency, financially committing the organization or volunteers to more than it/he/she can equitably and fairly deliver on for the entire community, pitting community members against one other, and more importantly the focus of education and SOL's primary mission is lost.

Each SOL volunteer (and his/her parents when volunteer is under 18 years of age), should CAREFULLY read the following policies and SOL Standards of Personal Conduct and Community Behavior, which apply during all of the phases of SOL work group participation. Participation in a SOL work group requires that volunteers understand the policies and agree to follow the standards listed below.

*Adult Leaders and Chaperones* - SOL will always have at least two adults in a group when minors are part of the group. When groups have female participants who are under 18 years of age and are not accompanied by their legal parent or guardian, there will always be a female chaperone who is at least 21 years or older in the group.

*Visiting the Beach* – As a general rule, due to safety concerns, SOL does not take groups to visit the beach in Nicaragua. Excursions outside of the normal realm require ED approval.

*Staffing Work Groups* – SOL will always have at least two staff members available to work with every work group. Staff members may be from SOL or a partner organization.

*Work Group Finances* – Well before a group's departure, the majority of the work group's in-country expenses will be deposited in the SOL bank account of the country that is being visited. In this way, large quantities of cash will not be carried with work groups.

*Material Possessions* - SOL strongly suggests that participants do not bring any ipods, discmans, cell phones, expensive jewelry, cameras, etc., on work group trips. SOL asks people to keep their belongings as basic as possible and not to draw any extra attention to the group. SOL is not responsible for any lost, stolen, or misplaced personal belongings that volunteers choose to bring.

*Communication via telephone and Internet with friends/family while on a work group* – In order to gain the full experience of a work group in Central America, SOL strongly discourages constant and daily communication with friends and family in the US while participating in a work group.

*Group Travel* – The entire work group travels together on the same flight, and no deviations from group travel are allowed unless special circumstances are arranged beforehand with the Program Director.

*Airline Travel* – While SOL staff often make the group's travel arrangements directly with airlines, SOL is NOT responsible for any airline delays, changes in airline schedules once the passengers are

ticketed, overbooking or for any costs incurred by volunteers resulting in any airline itinerary changes/overbooking, etc.

*Traveler Security-* SOL offers the following Additional Travel Security to our participants to cover cancellations due to an act of terrorism or the threat of an act of terrorism. Through this plan, participants will receive a full refund (less \$100 per person) should conditions ‘a’ and ‘b’ and/or condition ‘c’ be met: (a) a terrorist act, or threats of terrorist acts occur(s), which is directed against U.S. interests on U.S. soil or in U.S. airspace or directed against U.S. interests in any other country or in international airspace; and (b) as a result of these events a formal Travel Warning is issued by the United States Department of State, stating that Americans should not travel to any country or countries which are included in the participant’s work group itinerary; and/or (c) the formal Travel Warning by the U.S. Department of States is issued within 100 days of the participant’s departure.

*Donations/Tips to Staff Members in Central America –* SOL asks work group volunteers to not give tips or personal donations to any staff members or contracted employees during a SOL work group (including bus drivers, translators, etc.). Our staff and the people who our staff contracts to work with work as a team, negotiate fair prices, and work out and pay those prices ahead of time. Any additional gratitude that you may have for a SOL staff member, and/or contracted employee we encourage you to express in words of appreciation, letters, etc. to people, but we kindly ask you to not give tips to individuals. Our staff has found that giving to individuals in their context often creates inequality, and can be divisive. Any tips that do end up reaching SOL staff will be treated as a general donation to SOL.

*SOL Policy on Material Gifts to Individuals -* It is often the case that SOL work group volunteers and other visitors to Nicaragua are filled with an intense desire to help the people of those countries through donations and other means. Many are struck by the enormous disparity between the wealth of the United States and the poverty of Central America, and recognize that they are in a unique position to make a difference. However, if donations are channeled through SOL it is important to donate and help out in ways that are responsible and consonant with the mission and principles of Seeds of Learning. The present document outlines SOL’s stance on material giving; it discourages certain types of giving while suggesting alternative ways to donate that do not compromise SOL’s principles.

Based on over 20 years of working in Nicaragua, as well as the experience of countless others involved in international development, SOL embraces a number of maxims that relate to donations:

- (1) It’s better to give a hand up than a handout. Instead of simply distributing materials to meet immediate needs, SOL strives to provide people with the means to help themselves and their communities to develop and rise up out of poverty. This helps to empower individuals and communities in such a way that allows them to gain long-term, sustainable benefits, and not just momentary ones.
- (2) It’s better to help groups of people rather than individuals. Individual giving has the potential to produce divisions within communities, while giving to groups can create unity and solidarity.
- (3) Any support to individuals (e.g. scholarships) must be determined through a fair, objective, and transparent process that does not favor certain individuals or groups of people due to personal relationships or relations. Favoritism can compromise the goodwill of the organization and its standing in the community.

Based on these principles, SOL discourages work group volunteers and other visitors from giving substantially to individuals, whether community members or employees of SOL, with whom they have

cultivated a personal friendship. Substantial giving can be thought of as consisting of gifts with a value of over \$20, including scholarships, monetary gifts, cameras, etc. It is understandable that one might wish to give a photo of oneself, a hat, or some other small item as a reminder of one's friendship with an individual, and SOL does not discourage this sort of giving.

It should also be noted that SOL, in its Personnel Manual, prohibits its employees from soliciting gifts or scholarships from work group volunteers and other visitors. If a volunteer or visitor feels pressured by any SOL staff member to provide a gift or scholarship, he/she is encouraged to discuss the issue with the in-country Director or Coordinator.

Even though SOL discourages substantial giving to individuals as outlined above, there are a number of alternate channels for donating, which are encouraged by SOL and which further SOL's mission and vision. First of all, it is important to recognize that (in the case of work group volunteers) the work group fee and the new school constitute significant gifts in themselves. Individuals could also donate to SOL's general fund or to specific programs, such as the Educational Advancement Program or the Sister School Program, areas of need in the LRC or other special initiatives. Unneeded materials such as clothing and toiletries can be donated to SOL, which will then in turn redistribute the materials in an equitable way that evenly benefits a whole group of people. Above all, continued involvement with SOL can constitute the most substantial gift of all, whether it's participating in future work group experiences, donating regularly to SOL, or serving as a long-term or short-term volunteer in the US.

At times, individuals may wish to donate toward certain needs for which SOL lacks an appropriate channel. For instance, an individual may wish to address problems that fall outside of SOL's mission statement, such as basic health, sanitation or food needs. In such cases, SOL is willing to suggest alternate channels for giving, including other local organizations, international NGOs, etc where possible.

By donating and helping out through the appropriate channels, as outlined above, and resisting the desire to give substantially to specific individuals, work group volunteers and other supporters can make a significant difference in the lives of Nicaraguans and Salvadorans in ways that are consistent with years of international development experience and that do not compromise the objectivity, transparency, and goodwill of Seeds of Learning.

## **SOL Standards of Personal Conduct and Community Behavior**

SOL work group volunteers shall:

- Read and carefully consider all materials issued by SOL that relate to the work group experience.
- Consider their health and other personal circumstances when applying the work group program.
- Make available to SOL accurate and complete physical and mental health information and any other personal data necessary in planning for a safe and healthy work group experience (on the *Work Group Volunteer Application* and *Medical Waiver and Liability Release*).
- Assume responsibility for all the elements necessary for their personal preparation for the program and participate fully in pre-departure meetings.
- Inform parents/guardians/families, and any others who may need to know, about their participation in the Seeds of Learning work group and provide them with emergency contact information.
- Understand and comply with the standards of personal conduct and emergency procedures of the program, and obey host country laws.

- Be aware of local conditions and customs that may present health or safety risks when making daily choices and decisions.
- Promptly express any health or safety concerns to the program staff or other appropriate individuals.
- Behave in a manner that is respectful of the rights and well being of others, and encourage others to behave in a similar manner.
- Accept responsibility for their decisions and actions.

SOL work group volunteers shall not:

- Engage in any behavior that may be harmful to the health & safety of others
- Engage in any behavior that may be detrimental to the program.
- Use or possess any drugs that are illegal under the laws of the US or the host country.
- Operate any motorized vehicle or ride on a motorcycle.
- Consume any alcoholic beverage if under the age of 21.
- Smoke cigarettes (if under the age of 18) on SOL work group/LRC facilities
- Handle firearms or fireworks.
- Form romantic relationships during the trip with either host country nationals or other group members.
- No one (regardless of age) is permitted to consume alcoholic beverages in the SOL LRC compound before 7pm or when children are present. If adult volunteers choose to consume alcoholic beverages on LRC property after 7pm they are expected to drink responsibly & clean up after themselves before staff and children arrive.

## **Procedures in the event of a Violation of the Standards**

An infraction or disregard of the *SOL Standards of Personal Conduct and Community Behavior* may result in the volunteer's immediate dismissal from the SOL work group program and return to the United States. When a volunteer violates the *SOL Standards of Personal Conduct and Community Behavior*, all of SOL's programs suffer. Staff, community volunteers, and the group itself are affected by the disturbance of normal operations. Any volunteer who is dismissed from a SOL work group due to a violation of *SOL Standards of Personal Conduct and Community Behavior* will be charged \$500 (to cover airline ticket charges, additional lodging, food, staff time, and disruption to the program). The decision to send a work group volunteer home is made by the Executive Director of Seeds of Learning, after consulting with the work group leader, program director, and in-country staff. We sincerely hope that we will not have to send people home, however we have in the past due to underage drinking. We are very serious about enforcing this rule and expect parents and teens to be as well.