VISTA Supervisors' Manual

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A Letter From the Director

Dear VISTA Supervisor:

AmeriCorps VISTA is committed to ending poverty one individual, one family, one community at a time. In the time that I have had the privilege of serving as the Director of VISTA, I have been inspired by the sacrifice and spirit of service and idealism common to VISTAs and the organizations that sponsor them.

Your role, as VISTA supervisor, is critical to the success of the VISTA program. This manual, combined with the initial VISTA supervisors training, is intended to give you a good understanding of your role and of how you can help enhance the service of the VISTAs assigned to your project. My hope is that you will use the manual as a reference document and, as warranted, you will contact your local Corporation State Office to discuss issues and share successes.

On behalf of our VISTAs and many supporters, thank you for the important role you play in bringing the vision of VISTA into reality.

Best wishes,

Paul Davis
Acting Director, AmeriCorps VISTA

Overview of AmeriCorps VISTA Program

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Core Principles

Authorized in 1964, VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) is a federal anti-poverty program administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. VISTA provides full-time volunteers (VISTAs) to nonprofit organizations and public and local agencies to strengthen programs that bring individuals and communities out of poverty. VISTAs support anti-poverty projects by building the capacity of organizations serving low-income communities; encouraging volunteer service; and generating the commitment of private sector resources.

The VISTA program places VISTAs with sponsors, which absorb most of the costs related to project supervision and logistical support. The VISTA program provides a small living allowance and certain benefits for VISTAs. Investment by the sponsors and the community is fundamental to the VISTA program, as the VISTA resource is intended to be short-term.

Core Principles

To achieve its program purpose, VISTA operates under the following core principles:

Anti-Poverty Focus – The purpose of VISTA is to support efforts to fight poverty. Any nonprofit organization, educational institution, or tribal or public agency that has a program explicitly designed to alleviate poverty may become a VISTA project sponsor. The project's goal should address helping bring individuals and communities out of poverty, rather than on making poverty more tolerable. The project should strengthen long-term solutions, not merely provide short-term services.

Community Empowerment – Sponsors must ensure the involvement of community residents in planning, developing, and implementing the VISTA project. The project must be responsive and relevant to the lives of the community residents, and should tap into existing community strengths and resources.

Capacity-Building – VISTA achieves its mission by assigning VISTAs to organizations to expand the ability of those organizations to fight poverty. Rather than providing services to low-income individuals and communities, VISTAs strengthen and support organizations by building infrastructure, expanding community partnerships, securing long-term resources, and numerous other activities that strengthen anti-poverty efforts.

Sustainable Solutions – VISTAs are a short-term resource to help sponsoring organizations address a new or existing program area related to their mission. VISTAs are assigned to help build an organization to implement its anti-poverty program on its own after a period (typically three to five years). Organizations should develop a long-term sustainability plan beginning in year one of the project's existence, showing the eventual phase-out of the VISTA resource.

For an overview of the relationships among the project sponsor, the community, the VISTA, the Corporation State Office, and the VISTA headquarters, please see Chapter 1 of the VISTA Member Handbook:

On December 12, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson welcomed the first group of 20 VISTA volunteers with this advice: "Your pay will be low; the conditions of your labor often will be difficult. But you will have the satisfaction of leading a great national effort and you will have the ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their fellow man."

Chapter 2

You – The Project Supervisor

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Supervising VISTAs
- Project Supervisor vs. Site Supervisor
- Sponsor Verification Form
- Checklist of Supervisor's Roles and Responsibilities

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As the project supervisor designated by your organization, you are responsible for managing VISTA resources and providing the support necessary to achieve project goals. This support includes supervising VISTAs, developing clear project plans, and mentoring VISTAs to promote professional growth. You also play an important role in the success of the project and in linking your sponsoring organization with the Corporation and VISTA.

Your function, as supervisor, is to oversee the VISTA's work and give structure to the VISTA's assignment. In planning for the support of a VISTA, you should consider all aspects of their assignment including:

- The day-to-day tasks
- The relationship of these tasks to the work of your organization's staff members
- The staff's understanding of the VISTA's role
- The target community's expectations for the project and the VISTA
- The resources, facilities (e.g., reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities), and supplies needed for the VISTA to successfully complete his or her assignment
- The project plan approved by the Corporation State Office

You should make clear to community members and your organization's staff the VISTA's role in the project well before the VISTA arrives. Much of your role is to anticipate the needs and reactions of the VISTA and those with whom the VISTA comes in contact while working on the project.

You and your sponsoring organization are responsible for structuring assignments so that the VISTA's health and safety are not jeopardized. Sponsors must not require VISTAs to perform duties that would cause them to sustain injuries. Nor can their duties supplant those of paid staff or existing volunteers.

Supervising VISTAs

Although your organization and you, as the supervisor, provide day-to-day direction and guidance to the VISTAs, they are not employees of the sponsoring organization. You should expect, however, VISTAs to act in a professional manner and conduct themselves in accordance with the workplace norms of your organization.

VISTAs are also not employees of the Corporation, except for very specific purposes (see "Federal Employees' Compensation Act" section in Chapter 14 of the [VISTA Member Handbook](#)), but the Corporation retains authority for their acceptance, replacement, and removal.

Supervising a VISTA is different from supervising a local, paid employee. VISTAs are volunteers, and they commit themselves to serving for one year in the community and to the goals of the project. Therefore, they have a community development and capacity-building focus to their project assignment. Other staff in your organization may not recognize the difference. One of the challenges of having VISTAs is ensuring that everyone who interacts with them understands they are with your organization for a very specific purpose and not as "general help." At the same time, VISTAs are subject to the same or similar working conditions as their colleagues and should not be exempted from following the rules of conduct that everyone else has to follow. Your role as supervisor is to support the integration of VISTAs into your organization and the community, while at the same time giving appropriate feedback to them on their service performance and appropriate community involvement.

The most important competency in supervising a VISTA project is communication with your VISTAs. Do not assume they understand the big picture regarding the project. Meet regularly with your VISTAs, as a group and one-on-one if possible.

In addition, you must:

- Share the project plan with the VISTA
- Introduce the VISTA to the community
- Provide structure, advice, and guidance for the VISTA's assignment
- Clarify internal policies for requesting leave, and obtaining reimbursements and obtaining supplies
- Understand and refer, as needed, to the full set of policies in the [VISTA Member Handbook](#)
- Assess assignment performance with the VISTA
- Give the VISTA feedback on their project activities
- Work with the VISTA on meeting personal and professional goals
- Partner with the VISTA in developing community activities
- Ensure that the rules, regulations, and guidelines of the VISTA program are met
- Collaborate with Corporation state office staff specialists on in-service training needs
- Provide support in emergencies as outlined in the Memorandum of Agreement between your organization and the Corporation

The Corporation's National Service Resource Center created a general publication for supervisors of all service programs entitled *[Becoming a Better Supervisor: A Resource Guide for Community Service Supervisors](#)*.

Project Supervisor vs. Site Supervisor

If you are the project supervisor of a multiple site, statewide, multistate, or national project, you have the primary responsibility for management of the project, including reporting requirements, but the day-to-day responsibility of supervising the VISTAs

assigned to the sites should rest with a local site supervisor. Site supervisors need to be informed of their responsibilities to both the Corporation and the primary sponsoring organization. The Memorandum of Agreement between the primary sponsor and the Corporation requires the primary sponsor and all subrecipients to enter into a subrecipient agreement. This transaction occurs most often with your organization and sites signing a subrecipient agreement modeled after your organization's Memorandum of Agreement with the Corporation. Site supervisors must also attend a Supervisor's Orientation.

Site supervisors must notify the project supervisor immediately of any change in a VISTA's service status, including a VISTA leaving service early, change of site address, etc. The supervisor must immediately report a VISTA's resignation from the project to the Corporation State Office, and ensure that the VISTA completes Part A of [Future Plans or Early Termination Request Form](#) and indicates "resignation" in Part A, 7D of the form. The site supervisor also must immediately report to the project supervisor and Corporation State Office any issues that develop regarding the VISTA's performance or conduct. The site supervisor also must complete Part B of the Future Plans or Early Termination Form and submit it the state office.

Sponsor Verification Form

The Sponsor Verification Form is a document that lists the active VISTAs assigned to a project and their end-of-service dates. To comply with audit requirements, the project or site supervisor must return the Sponsor Verification Form, which the Corporation State Office faxes each pay period to the sponsoring organization. The project supervisor must note any changes on the form, and sign and return form to the Corporation State Office within three workdays. An online version of this form should be available for use in eGrants in early 2009.

Checklist of Supervisor's Roles and Responsibilities

Administration

- ☐ Understand the VISTA project application, including the project plan, VISTA Assignment Description, and the Memorandum of Agreement between your organization and the Corporation for National and Community Service.
- ☐ Attend VISTA Supervisors' Orientation prior to recruiting VISTAs.
- ☐ Prepare a VISTA Assignment Description for each VISTA in time for the VISTA to take it to PSO.
- ☐ Before the Supervisors' Orientation, read and become fully familiar with the *VISTA Supervisor's Manual* and the [VISTA Member Handbook](#).
- ☐ Finalize your recommended selections of VISTAs using the AmeriCorps Recruitment Portal at least 45 days prior to the Pre-Service Orientation (PSO) you intend them to attend. Ensure each candidate has accepted your recommended selection and completes necessary paperwork prior to attending PSO. Qualifications include meeting all legal requirements of VISTA, having the skills required in the assignment description, and being suitable for the assignment.

- Submit required documents, including Project Progress Reports, Sponsor Verification Forms, and the renewal project application, to the Corporation State Office in a timely manner.
- Provide information to local media on project start-up and project accomplishments.
- Provide a recommendation to the Corporation State Office on VISTAs' status at the end of their service year, including scheduled termination, extension, or reenrollment. Complete and submit the Future Plans Form to the state office at least 45 days in advance of the service completion date.
- Meet with Corporation staff during scheduled monitoring visits.

VISTA Supervision and Support

- Provide each VISTA with a copy of the project plan and assignment description, so they are available to discuss at the Pre-Service Orientation or during on-site orientation immediately thereafter.
- Provide on-site orientation for the VISTAs (see Chapter 5 for guidance), such as clarifying their role within the agency and community.
- Introduce VISTAs to the community using media and letters of introduction to local officials.
- Identify potential resources in the community that VISTAs may need to mobilize.
- Provide office space, phone, and other supplies needed by VISTAs to perform their assignments.
- Ensure that your organization has a fund (up to $500 per emergency) available for VISTA emergencies (to be reimbursed by the VISTA or Corporation).
- Ensure that the health and safety of VISTAs are not jeopardized during their assignments.
- Report immediately (within 24 hours) to the Corporation State Office any change in the status of VISTAs, such as leaving the project early, arrest, absence without leave, hospitalization, and other extended absences.
- Provide career development assistance to VISTAs.
- Reimburse VISTAs for on-site service-related travel as specified in the project application and Memorandum of Agreement, or provide other means of transportation.
- Arrange with the Corporation State Office for In-Service Training of VISTAs, as appropriate, so they can obtain skills required for their assignments.
- Provide assistance for VISTAs during special service events, such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day; Make a Difference Day; AmeriCorps Week; and National Volunteer Week.
- Release VISTAs to participate in Corporation for National and Community Service training events.

Chapter 3

VISTA Recruitment

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Marketing Your Opportunity
  - Project Description and Volunteer Assignment Description as a Recruitment Tool
  - Sample Project Description for Recruitment
- Finding Potential VISTAs
  - Developing a Recruiting Message
  - Using the Online Recruitment System
- Recruitment Resources
- Common Applicant Concerns

Recruiting applicants for VISTA is a major responsibility of the sponsoring organization. The project supervisor usually performs this role. A sponsor's goal is to attract skilled, committed, individuals who are self-motivated and qualified to perform the assignment duties. A sponsor develops the recruitment strategy, screens, interviews, and recommends to the Corporation State Office those applicants most qualified for the specific assignment. The Corporation State Office is responsible for final approval of all applicants. After approval, the Corporation State Office invites the applicant to the Pre-Service Orientation (see Chapter 6) and arranges for travel.

You may recruit locally for VISTAs or recommend selections from a national pool of applicants registered in the online recruitment and placement system, the My AmeriCorps portal. Sponsors access the recruitment system by using their eGrants account. Help in using the recruitment system is available on the CNCS website: http://www.nationalserviceresources.org/ac-training-support#grantees. The Corporation does not prescreen applicants in the My AmeriCorps portal.

Local applicants may be from the community or from other sources known to you, such as college campuses or professional organizations. Local recruits do not have to be from the immediate community served by the project. The recommended approach is to combine local and national recruitment. This increases the likelihood of identifying the best qualified candidates. A team of national and local recruits maximizes the strengths each brings to the project.

Whether you recruit locally or nationally, we encourage you to target your recruitment activities to as many audiences as are appropriate to reflect the diversity that characterizes American society. Diversity within VISTA adds depth to the experience.

Marketing Your Opportunity

Developing an accurate project description and a volunteer assignment description are essential steps before attempting to find a suitable candidate or even deciding where to look for one. Armed with this information, you are much better equipped to formulate a recruitment strategy to market your organization and your VISTA project and attract qualified candidates.

The project description should give details about your organization, its mission and activities, and the low-income population served, as well as define the VISTA project and it fits into the overall mission of your organization.

A good volunteer assignment description defines the key roles, responsibilities, and outputs of the VISTA position, as well as the personal attributes of the ideal candidate. The volunteer assignment description also specifies any special skills or preferences requested by your project, such as the ability to speak Spanish or the need for a car.

Project Description and Volunteer Assignment Description as a Recruitment Tool

A good project description and VISTA assignment description integrate the VISTA duties with the goals you hope to achieve. It is helpful for potential candidates to be able to see how the day-to-day performance of their assignment will contribute to the overall mission of the VISTA program and your agency.

You should also highlight your organization's past achievements, as well as any formal recognition your organization may have received from community leaders and others. VISTA candidates who search online find many great opportunities. Think about what will make your project stand out.

Sample Project Description for Recruitment

Cradles to Crayons VISTA Project

Every child deserves a safe place to sleep, a warm coat in the winter, books to read, and a birthday toy. Sometimes paying rent or buying groceries means that a child goes without. Cradles to Crayons provide poor and homeless children with great, everyday supplies. From strollers and car seats to clothes, books, and school supplies, we provide items that enrich the lives of children and the people who love them. In 2004, just two years after opening our doors, we served 16,000 children through partnerships with nearly 200 shelters, hospitals, schools, and other agencies.

VISTAs with strong organizational and leadership skills are sought to play a critical role in our organization. VISTAs will:

1. Help enhance our large and growing volunteer program
2. Refine projects and educational messages specifically designed for our youth volunteers
3. Create community partnerships through outreach to schools, faith-based organizations, and corporations to hold product drives
4. Develop a database of volunteers, distribution partners, orders, and contacts.

Once you have posted your project description in the [My AmeriCorps](#) portal, you should begin a local recruitment campaign to attract qualified, skilled, and self-motivated candidates. Effective recruitment depends on effectively marketing your program and organization. Your marketing approach should include:

- Planning – Know your audience and prepare realistic strategies to reach them.
- Collaboration – Identify the community groups and agencies that have direct contacts with the target groups you are trying to reach.
- Message – Be accurate, brief, and clear. Develop a clear description of the VISTA positions. Use terms that will encourage and persuade individuals to become VISTAs at your organization.
- Best Practices – Research recruitment campaigns have worked locally, regionally and nationally.
- Evaluation and feedback – Talk to your current and former VISTAs to determine the effectiveness of your proposed strategies.

Be creative and choose organizations and venues that you think will get you the most qualified applicants possible. Also, work with other VISTA projects in your area to expand your network in recruiting VISTAs. Good planning, careful execution, and timely follow up are essential to the success of any recruitment strategy.

Finding Potential VISTAs

A basic feature of successful recruitment is to "market" your program and VISTA opportunities to an appropriate audience. You should start your search early. Here are some sample target groups and how to reach them. These suggestions may give you some ideas to use in your own community.

Recent college graduates and young adults   Recent college graduates, or others from the same age group who are seeking valuable experience through service, are prime targets for a recruitment campaign. They are usually highly motivated and energetic individuals who may bring new ideas and insights. Graduating from college is a transitional time when many young people are deciding what to do next. They are available and open to service and relocating.

You can reach recent college graduates and young adults through:

- Community colleges
- Universities and colleges
- College career services; college and university clubs (especially clubs that are related to your project), volunteer clearinghouses, and service learning centers; campus newspapers and radio stations; fraternities and sororities related to service; and student centers
- YMCAs and YWCAs
- Housing complexes
- Internship programs
- Youth civic groups and youth groups at place of worship
- Websites

Older citizens   Individuals beyond age 50 make up a sizable portion of people across the country committed to service. They represent a valuable resource, offering experience wisdom, specialized skills, and time. You can find retired citizens through:

- Local branches of AARP
- Area Agencies on Aging
- Associations of retired workers and retired branches of professional societies
- Businesses that may share you information with retiring employees
- Libraries, especially those with special programs for older adults
- Church groups and other religious organizations
- Educational programs
- Senior housing complexes and centers
- Volunteermatch.org, a recruitment website targeted to individuals 55 and older

Other places to find potential VISTAs

- Local chapters of national organizations, such as National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, League of United Latin Citizens, or National Council of La Raza)
- Local volunteer clearinghouses
- Nonprofit and voluntary organizations
- Offices of social services
- Retired teachers organization and unions
- Native American Tribal governments
- Vocational rehabilitation agencies
- Waiting lists of other AmeriCorps programs in your area

Developing a Recruiting Message

Once you develop a list of target groups, think of different ways you can market your VISTA message to each group. Remember to vary your approach because not all people will respond to the same message. Some basic qualities that attract people to VISTA include:

- Appeal of VISTA and service
- Aspect of giving back to your community
- Development of job skills and career networks
- Appeal of travel, meeting new people, adventure
- Deferment for qualified student loans
- Education award to pay off student loans or for graduate school
- Opportunity to apply education and experience to help communities

Additional support. If your organization can provide additional support such as free or low-cost housing, training, on-the-job mileage reimbursement, or a public transportation pass, it is important to let candidates know in your recruiting materials. These additional benefits could be the "tie-breaker" between your site and another VISTA site that the candidate may be considering. If you have questions about what type of support you can offer VISTAs is appropriate, please call your Corporation State Office.

Target your materials. What would attract an applicant to your program? Applicants want to know what they will be doing and what they will gain from service as a VISTA. Target your approach to specific audiences. For example, if your project focuses on education, advertise to education majors the valuable experience that they will gain as VISTAs. Ask your current VISTAs to comment on your existing

recruitment materials and give you either formal or informal reactions. Even though you do not need to incorporate all of their comments, you are likely to receive helpful feedback.

Make it personal.   Personal contact makes the difference. Use current VISTAs and alumni from your program or others to attend a state fair, conference, or school career day to share their experiences. Consider holding an information session with the contacts that you have made. Invite your current VISTAs, service alumni, and other VISTAs in the area to share their experiences and give potential applicants a firsthand account of your program.

Respond quickly and follow up. Keep a record of people who received an application from you or who requested further information. Follow up with them with a postcard, phone call, or e-mail to invite them to take the next step. Offer suggestions to them on completing the application.

Enlist the help of current VISTAs. Encourage them to assist in recruiting during their year of service. While they are out in communities, they may get to know people who possess the skills to replace them or who would be ideal for other VISTA assignments. Current and former VISTA Leaders and VISTAs are excellent sources for identifying individuals who have the experience and motivation to become VISTAs. Discuss with them their reasons for joining VISTA and have them identify individuals with similar motivation.

Collaborate and ask for help. Check with other programs recruiting in your area. Find out how you can combine mailings, or share space at events with other programs. They may even have a list of people they were unable to place who may be perfect for your program.

Network. People often decide to do something because someone they respect or trust has suggested it. Ask college placement officers, professors, and community leaders to promote VISTA and your project. Again, consider your target audiences and the attraction that your project would hold for them.

Say thank you. Send a thank-you letter to everyone who assisted you during the recruitment drive. This will help to generate goodwill and support from those outside of your organization.

Advertise. Ask to place posters in campus career centers, department and classroom bulletin boards, dormitories, clubs and human development offices. Also, place posters throughout the target area at community action agencies, public libraries, grocery stores, barber and beauty shops, and other organizations. Place ads in local or campus newspapers, community newspapers, publications for senior citizen, nonprofit, social service, and professional organizations. Ask churches and community centers to post announcements on bulletin boards and in their newsletters. Send announcements to job search agencies, unemployment offices, college placement and counseling offices, and professional trade journals. Contact local college radio stations and campus newspapers. They may be willing to conduct an interview with you, allowing you to explain the opportunities available with your project.

Order recruitment materials. Use the AmeriCorps Material Request Form to order the recruitment materials that you need, or call the toll-free number, 1-800-942-2677. The Corporation can supply VISTA posters and ads with space for you to add a

description of your project. Recruitment displays can also be sent out for career fairs and other events. For these materials and VISTA applications or information packets, contact your Corporation State Office or call 1-800-942-2677. Be sure to add project-specific information to the VISTA application packets.

Using the Online Recruitment System

The Corporation's online recruitment system is available through the eGrants system you used to apply for the VISTA project. Upon award of your VISTA project, links to new features for recruiting, selecting and managing your VISTAs will become available.

My AmeriCorps is a **central location** for Sponsors to recruit, select and manage your VISTAs. You can:

- Create and update VISTA project descriptions
- View applications and references for your VISTA project
- Submit documentation for citizenship
- Submit the Sponsor Evaluation and select applicants
- Approve assignment-related transportation forms (V-81)
- Create your own travel profile when invited to VISTA events

Recruitment Resources

Several websites provide information related to recruitment of VISTAs, including:

VISTAcampus.org, an online learning community designed for VISTAs and VISTA supervisors, is a well-organized site that offers useful information and an easy way to connect with and share ideas with fellow supervisors.

www.nationalservice.gov, the official website of the Corporation for National and Community Service, provides information to help the public understand the mission of the Corporation for National and Community Service. It includes information on all the programs, legislative updates, program directories, forms, and press releases.

http://www.AmeriCorps.gov, the official website of the AmeriCorps programs, offers information directed at sponsor and grantee organizations and individuals interested in national service. Access to eGrants (for VISTA Sponsors) and the My AmeriCorps Portal (for VISTAs and potential VISTA Applicants) is available at this website.

www.nationalserviceresources.org, the website for the National Service Resource Center, is a library for participants in national service. You can subscribe to the Center's 22 listservs or download service-oriented guides and other resources.

VISTAnet is an online discussion group used by current VISTAs and project supervisors. You will find listed VISTA and Leader positions that are available throughout the country. You can also post VISTA and Leader openings at your project. To subscribe, send an e-mail to listserv@listserv.icors.org with the message: "subscribe VISTAnet Your Name" (e.g., subscribe VISTANET Jane Doe). VISTANET is not sponsored, endorsed, or maintained by the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Other useful websites include:

- www.zazengo.com – empowers people and organizations to create projects, recruit team members to assist, and track their total volunteer impact.
- http://beta.razoo.com – promotes social good and inspires others to get involved by making giving and serving fun, easy, and meaningful
- www.change.org – transforms social activism by serving as the central platform that connects likeminded people, whatever their interests, and enables them to exchange information, share ideas, and collectively act to address the issues they care about.
- http://giving20.ning.com – a community of people who work for Web 2.0 companies who get together to volunteer for charitable organizations. The group uses Ning to organize, communicate, and recruit others.
- www.idealist.org – an interactive site where people and organizations can exchange resources and ideas, locate opportunities and supporters.

Common Applicant Concerns

The Community

Many VISTA applicants may never have been to your geographical area. You should try to give them some understanding of the culture of your community before they are placed with your project. Be prepared to answer questions about your town's demographics, weather, and public transportation. If you decide that you would like to recommend an applicant for placement, consider mailing the individual brochures from your local Chamber of Commerce, local newspapers, and other information that will help acquaint the prospective VISTA with your town.

Housing/Safety

As a sponsor, you are requested to assist VISTAs in locating housing. However, your organization is not responsible for securing housing for VISTAs. Initially, you need to identify a place for the VISTA to stay for the first week or two, perhaps with a staff person or another VISTA who has extra room. (Be sure the person needs this help; sometimes the new VISTA may already know someone with whom he or she can stay.)

Further assistance in identifying an inexpensive place to live can be provided in various ways. If you know of other VISTAs in the area who are interested in having a roommate, offer to connect them. Or, send the VISTA a listing of available apartments and circle those listings in areas that are safe, convenient, and affordable.

Each VISTA receives a monthly subsistence allowance (the Corporation State Office will provide specific rates) to cover housing, food, utilities, and other living costs.

VISTAs who must relocate in order to serve receive a relocation allowance. Contact your Corporation State Office to learn the amount of this allowance for your area based on local settling-in expenses.

Travel

The Corporation pays for the VISTA's travel to Pre-Service Orientation and to the project site. If the VISTA plans to travel by air (or train or bus), the Corporation State Office will purchase the ticket for the VISTA at a government rate. If you require the VISTA to have a vehicle available during the VISTA's year of service, then CNCS can reimburse the VISTA for mileage to the PSO and then to the project site. The reimbursement rate is available at the Corporation State Office.

Once an applicant has been approved to travel to Pre-Service Orientation, you will need to discuss with the applicant his/her preferred method of transportation. If a personal vehicle is not required for the VISTA's year of service and the VISTA chooses to drive instead of fly, the VISTA will receive a reimbursement at the government rate for a one-way airline ticket. Once the VISTA candidate communicates the preferred mode of travel to CNCS, a VMSU representative will contact the candidate to make travel arrangements to the next Pre-Service Orientation.

VISTA Training

Before VISTAs begin service, they complete an online training and then attend a three-day Pre-Service Orientation (PSO) conducted by Corporation staff. The PSO reinforces the terms and conditions of VISTA service and the program's mission to move communities out of poverty, and introduces some general techniques needed in the VISTA assignment, such as volunteer recruitment, fund-raising, and community development. New VISTAs are also sworn-in at the PSO to begin their service year. Immediately following the PSO, the VISTA arrives at the project site to begin On-Site Orientation, provided by the sponsor. The On-Site Orientation covers the specific service activities in which the VISTA will be engaged. Early in the service, VISTAs can attend In Service Trainings that focus on specific skill building in areas such as grant writing, financial literacy, volunteer development, collaboration and partnership, and marketing and media.

Health Coverage and Life Insurance

Health coverage is provided at no cost to the VISTA; however, it does not cover preexisting conditions. The AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefits Program is not a comprehensive health plan, but it covers most medical needs and emergencies a VISTA may encounter during the year of service. The health coverage is for VISTAs only and does not apply to spouses or dependents. Life insurance is an option that a VISTA may purchase at a nominal deduction from the biweekly subsistence allowance.

Student Loan Deferments

All VISTAs earning an Eli Segal AmeriCorps Education award are eligible for national service forbearance, meaning the Corporation pays the interest that accrues on loans during the VISTA's term of service. All VISTAs, whether they have elected the education award or the post-service stipend, may be eligible for other types of postponements. To postpone repayment of qualified student loans, VISTAs must request "forbearance" for the payment of their loan at the beginning of their service. Since there are several types of forbearances and deferments, each with its own

unique characteristics and possible limitations, VISTAs should check with their loan holders to see which type of forbearance or deferment applies to their loan.

Additionally, VISTAs are eligible for partial cancellation of Perkins loans if they choose the post-service stipend (in lieu of the education award) and complete at least one full year of service. VISTAs should check with their lender concerning this cancellation option. More details are available in Chapter 6 of the VISTA Member Handbook.

Chapter 4

VISTA Selection

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IN THIS CHAPTER

- Steps from Recruitment to Arrival
- Interviewing Applicants
- Interviewing Techniques
    - Preparation for the interview
    - Structure of the interview
    - Information Gathering
    - Providing key information
    - Closing the Interview
    - Looking for Key Personal Qualities
- Standard Selection Criteria for VISTA Applicants
- Selection Consideration
    - Criminal History Issues Related to VISTA Selection
- Recommending Applicants for Service

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Steps from Recruitment to Arrival

If your recruitment efforts are successful, you should have several VISTA candidates from which to recommend selection. Getting the right VISTAs is critical for the success of your VISTA project. This chapter provides you some resources for making that important recommendation. It is important to note that when a sponsor recommends selection of an applicant for the project, the person is not guaranteed to become a VISTA. The Corporation State Office must approve the application, and the applicant must successfully complete the Pre-Service Orientation (PSO). Selection authority remains with the Corporation State Office.

The table below is an overview of the steps involved from the time a person applies to your project to when the person arrives on site.

Step	Description
Application submitted	The applicant submits an application for a project.
Sponsor reviews application	The sponsor reviews the application: If the applicant is qualified for the position, the sponsor checks references and conducts an interview.
Sponsor recommends applicant	The Sponsor recommends selection of one applicant for a certain project.
Applicant agrees to position	Sponsor notifies the applicant of recommended selection by email, and the applicant agrees to the position. If the applicant is the recommend selection for more than one position, the applicant must choose only one.
State office approves applicant	After the applicant agrees to serve on a particular project, the state office reviews and approves or denies the

Step	Description
	application. Approval is contingent upon background and suitability checks, and availability of resources. Upon approval, the applicant becomes a VISTA candidate.
State office invites candidate to PSO	The Corporation invites the candidate to Pre-Service Orientation. ***(This must occur a minimum of 45 days before the start of the PSO)***
Candidate attends PSO	Candidate attends and successfully completes Pre-Service Orientation and is sworn in as VISTA.
VISTA arrives at project	VISTA arrives on site and begins service.

Interviewing Applicants

To determine which applicants you want to recommend, it is important that you be thoroughly familiar with the VISTA and project application process and respond quickly to applications when they come in. You should direct interested individuals to complete the AmeriCorps Member Application online at www.americorps.org.

When you have reviewed the applications, conduct interviews with your most competitive applicants. The interviews provide you with an opportunity to determine whether a match between the applicant and your VISTA project would be successful.

The applicants should be interviewed by all supervisors—the overall project supervisor as well as any site supervisor who will work directly with the VISTA.

Be sure to send relevant program information, such as the VISTA Assignment Description and the Project Plan, to the applicants prior to the interview.

Interview Techniques

There are two perspectives in an interview: yours and the applicant's. Therefore, spend time thinking about both. Your goal should be to provide information about your program and to learn more about the applicant. **An interview is not the time to convince someone to become a VISTA**. It is an opportunity to assess further an applicant's appropriateness for VISTA service and to reach an understanding and agreement on expectations and responsibilities, which will indicate to each of you whether a match between the applicant and your VISTA project assignment would be successful.

The interview, which should last about an hour, may be conducted in person or over the phone. You and the applicant will likely discuss some of the following topics:

- The VISTA Assignment Description and Project Plan
- The applicant's reasons for considering VISTA service
- Your expectations for the VISTA project and the VISTA(s) assigned to it
- The applicant's expectations and concerns about serving on the VISTA project for one year
- Any experience the applicant has living and working in a low-income community

- Support that could be provided to the future VISTA, such as housing assistance, training, and mentoring
- The applicant's experiences living and working with people who may be different from them
- The applicant's preferences and flexibility about VISTA assignments and geographic placement
- Work schedules, scheduling leave, as well as other policies that are specific to your organization, such as drug-testing

Preparation for the Interview

- Review application and resume. Check for incomplete information, as well as problems or discrepancies.
- Check references. The VISTA application requires two personal references.
- Formulate questions. Try to ensure that you ask each applicant the same set of questions.
- Do not keep the applicant waiting; avoid interruptions.
- Keep dynamic of telephone interview in mind. How will this work best for you? What do you need to know and how can that be achieved?

Structure of the Interview

- Introduce yourself, include small talk, discuss note-taking, etc.
- Set the tone. Make the applicant feel comfortable, but remain professional. Inform the applicant that the interview is just as much for them as it is for you and that they should not hesitate to ask questions. However, suggest that they may want to save questions until the end of the conversation, as this will keep interview focused and save time.
- Set time limit – *I have scheduled an hour for this interview, which should allow plenty of time for questions.*
- Describe the sponsor organization, the project, and the position.

Information Gathering

- Ask comprehensive, open-ended questions. It may be helpful to set up a role play of sorts (e.g., say to applicant: *Let's imagine I am your old friend from school. Tell me about the VISTA position for which you're applying.*
- Begin with broad questions; then ask specific ones to help you to draw out and gain specific information (e.g., from the scenario above you may move in many directions depending what the person says. It may become clear that an individual does not have enough or accurate information about your organization or VISTA and you can fill in the necessary gaps).
- Summarize and restate what you hear to make sure you have understood the information correctly.

Providing Key Information

- Your applicants should be aware of key elements related to your VISTA position that are probably contained in information that should have been reviewed by applicant prior to interview, but it is essential that you discuss this with each applicant. Topics should include:

- Expectations of the time commitment and specific hours, including prohibition of having outside employment or attending school during the year of service
- On-the-job training requirements as well as the need for out-of-town trainings/orientation
- Travel reimbursement procedures
- Exact amount of the living allowance and the applicant's ability to manage on that amount, including paying rent, outside loans, or car insurance, etc.
- Housing cost and availability of suitable housing (especially important for out-of-town and nationally recruited applicants)
- Taxes and deferment of student loans
- Other benefits that may be part of your program and how that works (e.g., medical insurance)

Closing the Interview

- Be honest and as specific as possible in describing the job and work environment. It is best that the applicant's expectations are realistic regarding the challenging aspects of the position.
- Explain the application process, and inform the applicant what will happen next in the process.
- For promising applicants, establish follow-up.
- Spell out your concerns if you have questions or doubts, and let the applicant respond.
- Explain calmly why you cannot accept the person at this time, if you are not interested in a candidate. Give specific examples of how he or she does not meet the criteria. The applicant may be qualified for another AmeriCorps position, so recommend that they research other programs.
- Prepare for the evaluation and documentation of the interview.
- Identify issues of concern for follow-up.
- Document these concerns on Sponsor Evaluation Form in the My AmeriCorps portal.

Looking for Key Personal Qualities

Throughout the interview, you should look for the specific qualifications you have developed as "knock-out factors"— attributes that you will use to screen out unqualified applicants. Once you have narrowed the applicants in this manner, you can focus more sharply on quality. At this point in the evaluation process, the notes you took during the interview will likely serve as the most important source of information in making your final decision. Some factors you may want to consider include:

- Motivation
  - Self-starter background
  - Community service
  - Degree and/or experience
  - Personal and professional goals
  - Skills
- Commitment
  - Previous commitments
  - Goals not met and why

– Extent of involvement in organizations
- Maturity
  – Persistence over difficulties
  – Responsibilities accepted in the past that were above and beyond the norm
  – Evidence of adaptability, tolerance, and ability to work with a wide variety of people

Standard Selection Criteria for VISTA Applicants

Many factors help determine whether an applicant, either nationally or locally recruited, is suited to a specific VISTA position. The following selection criteria, not meant to be all-encompassing, should be viewed as guideposts in recommending applicants to the Corporation State Office. Applicants must meet the following minimum standards of eligibility:

- Be at least 18-years-old upon entering VISTA training. There is no upper age limit
- Be a U.S. citizen or have permanent resident status
- Not listed in the National Sex Offender Registry database as convicted of a sex-related crime
- Be in a position to offer full-time service for one year without regard to regular working hours
- Be able to exhibit previous education, training, military, or work experience, and any other relevant skills or interests necessary to perform a specific VISTA assignment
- To the maximum extent practicable, be willing to live among and at the economic level of the low-income people served by the project

Applicants must also understand the VISTAs serve on a full-time basis; therefore, they cannot hold part-time jobs, enroll in school except in limited circumstances as noted below, or be the subject of legal proceedings (civil or criminal) that may consume time needed for their assignments. VISTA service cannot be used to satisfy service requirements of parole or probation.

Selection Consideration

References   Be sure the references meet the application requirements. Look for a balance among vocational, educational, and personal references. Try to get an understanding of the applicant as a whole person. Follow-up phone calls may be necessary.

Employment   Past job experience may be relevant to a VISTA assignment, especially if there is some demonstrated expertise gained in previous positions that would be useful in the VISTA assignment. Take note of experience that includes leadership positions and working with the public. Remember that part-time and summer employment can add to the applicant's overall qualifications.

Sample Questions to Assess Candidate's Qualifications

Motivation (Assessing why applicant wants to serve in VISTA, reason for joining)
- What do you like best about your present situation?
- What was the most ambitious goal you set for yourself in the past and how did you accomplish it?
- Describe your finest accomplishment.
- What are your specific goals in joining VISTA?
- Tell me about the greatest effort you have put into a project or task.

Cues to look for:
- Is the candidate a self-starter on projects?
- How much and what kind of volunteer work has the person done?
- Has the candidate worked hard enough to meet his or her goals?
- Consider the types of questions the candidate asks during the interview; do most deal with the project or VISTA benefits?
- Is the individual flexible and adaptable?
- Has the person taken care in filling out the application?

Commitment (Assessing the applicant's knowledge of program and ability to complete term of service)
- What is the longest time you have been at any activity, other than school? What was the activity and why did you stick with it so long?
- Tell me about the organizations you are involved with, and the extent of your involvement.
- Describe the activity you have been the most committed to; what was it; why were you so committed; and how did you show that commitment?
- Tell me about the time you sacrificed most for a commitment.
- When was the last time you quit something you started?
- Tell me about the most frustrating or difficult project/social situation you have ever encountered; the most satisfying?
- Describe the last time you encountered a problem. How did you resolve it?
- Describe any concerns you have about being a VISTA.
- What do you think will be the hardest thing about being a VISTA on this project; the most exciting?
- How do you feel about living on the VISTA monthly allowance?

Cues to look for:
- Consider previous commitments.
- Look for enthusiasm, readiness for challenge, and ability to deal with adversity.
- What was a difficult and challenging commitment the applicant made and met?
- Did the person fail to meet goals and if so, why?
- What family commitments has the individual successfully met?
- How has the applicant been involved with other organizations?

Maturity (Assessing skills and experience, social and cultural sensitivity, ability to adjust)
- Why do you want to join VISTA?
- What strengths can you bring to the position?
- What is an area you would like to work on or receive training in?
- Tell me about the last time you worked on an important project and confronted an obstacle.
- What was the most significant change in your life and how did you handle it?
- Can you give me an example of something you initiated?
- Tell me about a time you felt like an outsider.
- Tell me about a time you worked with people from a different racial, ethnic, social, or economic background.
- Tell me about something (preferably work-related) that did not turn out the way you thought or hoped it would.

Cues to look for:
- Has the person given examples of persevering in the face of obstacles?
- Was the person friendly in answering your questions?
- Has the candidate accepted responsibilities in the past that were beyond the norm?
- Has the individual taken initiative?
- Has the candidate thought out reasons for joining VISTA?
- Were responses to questions clear and thoughtful?
- Has the candidate asked relevant questions?
- Has the person provided specific examples of his or her adaptability?
- Has candidate given evidence of tolerance and the ability to work with a variety of people?

Note: You **cannot** ask questions about the applicant's race, national origin, religion or age, or about whether the applicant has a disability. While an applicant must show and attest that he/she is at least 18-years-old, you **should not** ask questions about age. While you can ask if the applicant would need any special accommodations, you **cannot** base your decision to recommend or not recommend selection of the applicant on this ground.

Education   Matching an applicant's academic background with a sponsor's specific needs is highly desirable. Courses or degrees completed by an applicant should be reviewed in the context of the VISTA assignment description.

Military Status   Significant experience or education gained through military service should be fully considered in recommending an applicant for VISTA service. Another factor to consider is the type of discharge a person received. If an applicant enters VISTA service before completion of a military reserve obligation, the VISTA may need to transfer to a new reserve unit or request a deferment of the reserve obligation until the end of VISTA service.

Community Service/Volunteer Activities   In some ways, this information is the heart of the VISTA application. Homemakers who serve their communities, liberal arts graduates who have worked with diverse groups of people, and retired persons who have a history of volunteering for worthy causes have proven to be outstanding VISTAs.

Motivation Statement   Read this portion of the application carefully. Ideally, an applicant's motivation is a balance of altruism and a desire for personal and/or professional growth. Further discussions are needed if a "change of scenery" is the only listed motivation.

Medical   It is not appropriate or legal to ask prior to recommendation to select or not select whether an applicant has a disability. Persons with disabilities are eligible to serve as VISTAs if they meet all the requirements. In fact, such individuals should be encouraged to serve. Any special needs must be reasonably accommodated in accordance with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended.

Children and Dependents   It is not appropriate to ask prior to selection whether an applicant has children or dependents. Applicants should be advised, however, that the Corporation assumes no financial responsibility, including health support, for dependents of VISTAs.

Criminal History Issues Related to VISTA Selection

The Corporation must take into account an applicant's criminal history in determining the suitability or fitness of an applicant. Making such a determination can be complex. Among the criteria considered in determining the suitability of an applicant with a criminal history are the following:

- Nature and severity of the applicant's crime(s)
- Number and frequency of the applicant's criminal convictions
- Length of time elapsed since the applicant's most recent conviction and incarceration; whether there has been adequate time since incarceration for the applicant to bring his or her behavior into compliance with the laws of our society; and whether, upon consideration of all available information, it can be determined that the applicant has demonstrated, over a sufficient period, that he or she has actually accepted and complied with laws prohibiting criminal behavior
- Whether the applicant is currently on parole or probation. If so, what conditions are imposed by the entity with jurisdiction over the applicant? Note that VISTA service may not be used as a condition for parole or probation.

- Individuals convicted under federal or state law of the possession or sale of a controlled substance are not eligible to use the Eli Segal AmeriCorps Education Award from the date of the conviction until the end of a specified period based on the type of conviction. Contact the Trust Office to learn more about this restriction.
- Whether the applicant is listed on the National Sex Offender Registry database. They cannot serve as VISTAs.
- Work history of the applicant prior to and since incarceration.
- Stability of the applicant's home, work, and community environments (e.g., is there any documentation, such as references, that attests to the personal history of the applicant's functioning in the community at large?)
- Any current use of an illegal drug or the unlawful use of prescription drugs by the applicant
- Any pending legal matters, civil or criminal against the applicant
- Accuracy and completeness of information provided by the applicant; whether any references contain broad-based, substantive information regarding the history of the applicant
- Type (and appropriateness) of the applicant's potential VISTA and the extent to which the population to be served is vulnerable to exploitation (i.e., is there any indication of potential for the exploitation of such vulnerability by the applicant or the applicant's associates?)
- The location of service to which the applicant will be assigned. Is the area conducive to supervision and open to monitoring by the sponsoring organization and the Corporation?
- The type of population to be served (e.g., an applicant with a history of crimes involving the use of force and violence would not be suitable for placement in a program dealing with children or troubled teenagers)
- Type, method, frequency, and quality of supervision that the applicant will receive
- Any potential for adverse impact on the integrity of the VISTA program if the applicant is accepted
- Any matters arising from the examination of the applicant's background that may be pertinent to the applicants suitability to serve as a VISTA

Recommending Applicants for Service

When you have narrowed your recommended selection to the candidates you regard well-suited for VISTA service, you must make your recommendation via the online recruitment system in eGrants. Please make sure candidates know that the Corporation State Office must approve all candidates.

Before you recommend the applicant in the online recruitment system, be sure:

- The applicant is at least 18 years of age; there is no upper age limit
- The application clearly demonstrates the applicant has the skills and/or education to perform a VISTA assignment
- Gaps in personal or employment history are accounted for
- The applicant is a U.S. citizen or permanent legal resident. (If the applicant is a legal resident without U.S. citizenship, the applicant must attach to the application the type and expiration date of his or her visa and registration number.)
- You have contacted references. Let them know that they may be called for additional information. There must be at least two references: one

professional (e.g., job or volunteer supervisor, teacher or professor) and one other. It is your responsibility to collect at least two references for locally recruited applicants.

- References are complete. If references were completed over the phone or collected via fax, you must forward them to your Corporation State Office.
- To keep copies of applications to refer to during the VISTA's year of service

You should maintain a reserve of additional applicants, in the event some individuals are not approved, or do not successfully complete Pre-Service Orientation. To limit such obstacles, recommend only those applicants for selection by the Corporation State Office that you regard highly motivated and well-suited for VISTA service.

Chapter 5

Preparing for a VISTA's Arrival

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Locating Housing for a VISTA
- Creating a Work Space for a VISTA
- On-Site Orientation and Training
    - OSOT Checklist
- Welcoming the VISTA to the Community
- Emergency Fund for VISTAs
- Establishing a Good Relationship with VISTA
- Role of VISTA Leader
- Supervising VISTA Leader

Starting a new assignment is always a challenge, and that can be doubly true when a VISTA is also moving to a new community. Performing some advance work before the VISTA arrives can save time and stress for the VISTA down the road. Ideally, VISTAs would have the chance to visit their site ahead of time, but realistically, that is not the case. To help you get started ahead of time with preparations for a VISTA's arrival, here are a few suggestions for making a VISTA feel comfortable in a new community and welcomed into a new position within your organization.

Locating Housing for the VISTA

A fundamental assumption of the VISTA program is that the skills and energies of VISTAs are used most effectively when they *live* and *work* with the low-income people they serve. In keeping with this philosophy, VISTAs are expected to secure housing using their living allowance, which is provided to cover the basic costs of food, housing, and utilities. They should look for housing within the community they are assigned.

Some VISTAs may need to relocate to a new community to serve on a specific assignment. Hence, they will immediately need inexpensive housing. Although your sponsoring organization is not required to provide housing to VISTAs, you should ensure that housing is not a major problem for VISTAs when they first arrive. Some suggestions for a smooth transition:

- Offer to house them until they find a place that is affordable and convenient to their project location.
- Keep your ears open before they arrive for inexpensive rental opportunities.
- Help them identify which neighborhoods are safe, affordable, and appropriate.
- Let them know about community papers or bulletin boards that list apartment openings.
- Drive them through affordable apartment complexes and neighborhoods that could be options for them.

- See if other VISTAs on your project or on a project in town need a roommate.
- Think creatively. Do you know someone who has a large house and is willing to rent out a room?
- Suggest that VISTAs tell their landlord or property manager that they are VISTAs who receive only a small living allowance. Some landlords may discount their rent or reduce the amount of security deposits.

VISTAs receive a relocation allowance to help with any deposits. The amount, which may not exceed $550, is only given if the VISTA is relocating to serve a 12-month term at a VISTA project. The Corporation State Director determines the relocation amount; therefore, VISTAs should direct requests to the Corporation State Office.

The VISTA living allowance is limited; therefore, VISTAs may accept offers of free or low-cost housing from community members, local organizations, educational institutions, or sponsoring organizations. Some examples of housing that VISTAs may accept include:

- Unused free housing space offered by a community member because he or she is proud to have a VISTA in the community
- A vacant apartment over the shop area offered by a local business owner
- Reduced-rate housing offered by a national housing company to volunteers who serve in a given community and VISTAs who meet the eligibility requirements
- Free or low-cost housing provided by a local, state, or federal government agency in areas with limited housing opportunities
- Housing rented by a sponsoring organization on the VISTA's behalf
- A portion of existing space the sponsoring organization already owns or rents

Under no circumstances may a sponsoring organization or others offer money directly to a VISTA to supplement the VISTA's living allowance, or to pay rent, utilities, or other costs. Nor may VISTAs accept via third-party payments for utilities or other housing costs other than for rent. Accepting free or reduced-cost housing could possibly increase the VISTA's reportable income for tax purposes.

VISTAs are also fully responsible for any legal or financial issues with their landlord (e.g., the project closes and they owe money on the lease).

Creating a Work Space for a VISTA

One way to foster a successful and productive start for your new VISTA is to provide a comfortable office space. A good office station goes beyond desks and chairs—you need to consider noise and interruption control, and lighting. By placing emphasis on the office environment, you can expect to see an immediate boost in energy, productivity, and well-being—necessary factors for any office environment and a good investment in your VISTA's overall success on the project.

Ideally, VISTAs should have access to all the materials that are needed to complete their projects. You are expected to provide VISTAs the use of a computer, printer, Internet access, e-mail access, consumable supplies, telephone, copier, and fax—just as you would for any staff member. Having equipment and supplies readily accessible when the VISTA arrives makes the VISTA's assignment a lot less stressful.

Also, help the VISTA understand how your particular office functions when supplies are needed.

Inform other staff in the organization that a new VISTA will be starting. If you are unavailable when the new VISTA starts, identify a colleague who can meet the VISTA and assist with the on-site orientation.

On-Site Orientation and Training

After Pre-Service Orientation, all VISTAs arrive at their communities of service expecting to participate in an On-Site Orientation and Training program developed and conducted by you and the Sponsoring Organization. This program may last two to three weeks or more, or it may last just a few days, depending on the circumstances of the project and the background of the VISTA. Among the areas of orientation and training that may be covered:

- Transition (e.g., finding housing, exploring transportation options, setting up a bank account)
- Sponsor organization (e.g., work policies and procedures, the VISTA project plan, and key working relationships)
- VISTA project (e.g., mission, community stakeholders, and beneficiaries)
- Community being served (e.g., leaders, organizations, and resources)
- Professional skills (e.g., shadowing staff members, community leaders, or other experts in the field);
- Other skills (e.g., specialized skills required by the sponsoring organization);
- Responsibilities (e.g., related to reporting, monitoring, and evaluation).

OSOT Checklist

VISTA oriented to:
___ His/her work area
___ Office basics; how to use copy machine, fax, printer
___ Phone policies; how to dial out, long distance, greeting, etc.
___ Parking area (preferably convenient and free)
___ Office automation
___ Mail delivery

VISTA formally introduced:
___ To office staff, volunteers, interns, etc
___ At a staff meeting, board meeting, committee meeting, etc.

Reviewed with the VISTA:
___ VISTA Member Handbook and agency manuals
___ List of committees and responsibilities of the committees
___ List of Board Members
___ Dress code for the site
___ How to order and budget for supplies
___ How to submit transportation reimbursements
___ How to request vacation
___ The VISTA policy for leaving taking, including sick days; who to contact in case a sick day is needed
___ VISTA policy for holidays; does the site follow the state holiday calendar?
___ Office policy for snow days; how to find out if the site has a snow day
___ Regular office hours; expectation of hours the VISTA will be working
___ How to access the office during nonregular office hours if the VISTA works nights or weekends

Welcoming the VISTA to the Community

Settling comfortably into a new community may be one of the most difficult challenges that VISTAs face. Hence, one of your most important roles as a supervisor is to introduce the VISTAs to their new community. This process should begin when they arrive and continue during their initial months with your organization.

The following are ideas for welcoming a new VISTA to the community:

- Prepare a press release announcing the arrival of the VISTAs at your organization. Talk about the VISTA's goals and how the VISTA will improve the community. You might also consider arranging an interview with the new VISTA on a local radio station.
- Host a reception and invite community leaders, board members, and program participants to meet the new addition to your agency. You might also plan a day of community service activities, inviting board members and community leaders, and introduce the new VISTA at that time. Submit a press release to the local media each time you hold an event.
- Have the site supervisor give the VISTA a tour of the community, making introductions, and generally making the VISTA feel welcome.

Emergency Fund for VISTAs

If an immediate family member (spouse, parent, sibling, child, grandparent, or guardian) of a VISTA becomes critically ill or dies, and if the Corporation cannot provide a prepaid ticket in advance of the approved emergency leave, the sponsoring organization should furnish the needed travel assistance, including an advance of up to $500 from its own funds, to the VISTA. Such advances, however, should be authorized (via telephone) by the Corporation State Office. Both the sponsor and the VISTA must complete and sign the VISTA Payment Voucher form in the My AmeriCorps portal to record receipt of any emergency travel advance. The sponsor forwards the form to the Corporation State Office for processing so that the sponsor is reimbursed for the advance. For more information on emergency leave procedures, see Chapter 9 of the [VISTA Handbook](#).

Establishing a Good Relationship with VISTAs[1]

Key to a successful year for you and your VISTAs is developing a good work relationship. Here are a few tips to ensure that the relationship with your VISTAs has a good foundation. Such a rapport will be a tremendous benefit to the project and its development.

1. Attend a VISTA Supervisor's Training before you bring VISTAs to your organization. This training, which is a requirement for all VISTA supervisors, will help you better understand your supervisory role, as well as the role of the VISTA.

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[1] Adapted from "A to Z: VISTA Project Development" by Chris Von Zuben, a VISTA Leader who served with the National Alliance to End Homelessness in Washington, D.C.

2. Encourage VISTAs to understand the project plan thoroughly. The only item more important to VISTAs than the [VISTA Handbook](#) (which they should read and follow) is their assignment description and project plan. Every VISTA should have a copy of his or her assignment description and project plan and know exactly what it means. You and your VISTAs should review it meticulously so everyone knows what is expected of one another.

3. Become familiar with the VISTA handbook and encourage your new VISTAs to read the handbook during first few weeks at the project site. This task should be part of your project's On-site Orientation and Training plan. VISTA supervisors are required to submit an orientation plan to the Corporation State Office.

4. Set aside a day and specific time to meet weekly with each VISTA, especially during the first month or two of service. If possible, try meeting in a different place within the community each time. Get coffee or breakfast at a local diner or walk through the community with the VISTA when you meet.

5. If the VISTA works for a partnership of organizations, make sure the VISTA is invited to each organization and given a presentation on the functions and mission of each contributing partner and its role in the partnership.

Role of VISTA Leader

VISTA Leaders are assigned regionally or to larger projects to assist sponsoring organizations and VISTAs in achieving their project objectives.

VISTA Leaders are former VISTAs who successfully completed a full year of service and demonstrated exemplary skills and leadership in community service.

VISTA Leaders are not permitted to perform administrative or supervisory functions for their sponsoring organizations or Corporation State Offices. They may not supervise VISTAs. The Leader's role is to coordinate and assist VISTAs to increase the impact of the project.

Supervising VISTA Leaders

In a project where a VISTA Leader is present, a relationship, different from that between the supervisor and VISTAs, must be developed with the Leader. The Leader's role is to coordinate and assist VISTAs in communications and performing their service. The Leader is not an intermediary between the supervisor and the VISTA program. Moreover, he or she is not responsible for the oversight and guidance of VISTAs—that role rests with the supervisor and the Corporation State Office.

With a mutual understanding of the parameters of the Leader's role, the Leader may very effectively complement the role of the supervisor. The assignment description is a guide to the Leader's service goals and objectives, but determining how each other's work dovetails, and how and when to best communicate, requires discipline and focus between the two of you early on and then throughout the year. The table below presents examples of the appropriate role balance for the supervisor and Leader.

Leaders sometimes take more responsibility or they are given more authority than is reasonable or appropriate. Keeping focused and within the limits of the Leader's roles is key to the Leader's success; regular communication with the supervisor is highly effective to this end.

VISTAs must also understand the distinctions between a supervisor and Leader, and know whom to turn to for what. Co-facilitating a discussion with the VISTAs and, perhaps, providing a reference sheet about procedures and points of contact are effective methods to pass this information to the VISTAs.

Examples of Appropriate Leader and Supervisor Roles

Task / Activity	Leader Contribution	Supervisor Contribution
Conducting on-site orientation and training	• Collate orientation materials • Draft agenda • Help to secure guests, speakers and facilitators • Participate in implementation of OSOT	• Finalize agenda • Submit on-site orientation and training plan to Corporation • Help to secure guests, speakers, and facilitators • Implement OSOT
Recruiting and selecting new VISTAs	• Promote position announcement through local venues • Assist in setting up and participate in interviews of top applicants • Provide input to supervisor	• Interview top candidates • Nominate candidates for selection and approval by the Corporation State Office • Notify candidates of their selection and approval • Ensure paperwork is completed
Mediating conflict between two VISTAs	• Make self available to VISTAs as a resource • Listen when VISTAs approach with problems and barriers • Assist VISTAs in identifying their options and creating their own solutions • Inform supervisor of the issues • Involve the supervisor if the VISTAs cannot resolve the issue themselves	• Make self available to VISTAs as a resource • Develop protocol for addressing conflict within group (including the Leader's role) • Intervene when required
VISTA is habitually late	• Discuss with the VISTA as a peer the reasons for the recent tardiness and provide the VISTA with suggestions for how to improve timeliness • Notify the supervisor of the situation	• Discuss with the VISTA the reasons for the recent tardiness and provide suggestions for how to improve timeliness • Determine any organizational measures to be taken to address the situation • Notify the Corporation State Office, if situation merits

Task / Activity	Leader Contribution	Supervisor Contribution
Conducting on-site orientation and training	• Collate orientation materials • Draft agenda • Help to secure guests, speakers and facilitators • Participate in implementation of OSOT	• Finalize agenda • Submit on-site orientation and training plan to Corporation • Help to secure guests, speakers, and facilitators • Implement OSOT
Recruiting and selecting new VISTAs	• Promote position announcement through local venues • Assist in setting up and participate in interviews of top applicants • Provide input to supervisor	• Interview top candidates • Nominate candidates for selection and approval by the Corporation State Office • Notify candidates of their selection and approval • Ensure paperwork is completed
Mediating conflict between two VISTAs	• Make self available to VISTAs as a resource • Listen when VISTAs approach with problems and barriers • Assist VISTAs in identifying their options and creating their own solutions • Inform supervisor of the issues • Involve the supervisor if the VISTAs cannot resolve the issue themselves	• Make self available to VISTAs as a resource • Develop protocol for addressing conflict within group (including the Leader's role) • Intervene when required
Reports on project performance to Corporation State Office	• Coordinate collection of data from VISTAs • Clarify points in reports with VISTAs if required • Collate or categorize information • Assist in interpretation of data	• Interpret data • Write report • Ensure timeliness of reporting to CSO
Volunteer Assignment Description development/refinement	• Review VADs for clarity and accuracy • Suggest improvements/changes • Clarify tasks for VISTAs when required • Offer feedback to determine task's achievement of objective	• Establish tasks to achieve goal • Write VAD • Review VAD with VISTA and adapt where needed • Monitor task's achievement of objectives • Refine VAD

Chapter 6

VISTA Training and Professional Development

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Introduction
- VISTA Training Philosophy
- Overview of VISTA Training
    - Training Cycle
    - Sponsor/Supervisor Training and Development
    - VISTA Training
- Online Training and Development Resources

Introduction

The VISTA program provides training and professional development opportunities to VISTAs and supervisors throughout their service and the life of the project. These opportunities are formal and informal, group-based and individually focused, and face-to-face, as well as virtual and textual. The VISTA program is committed to preparing the VISTA, sponsor, and supervisor for service that leads to sustainable projects and committed leadership.

VISTA training is a shared responsibility among Corporation staff, the sponsoring organization and supervisor, and the VISTA. During training, you and the VISTAs will be challenged to take an active role in the process. The training experience is an opportunity for supervisors and VISTAs to explore issues surrounding poverty, the communities they serve, and VISTA programming, and to develop their skills and commitment to VISTA and its goals.

Once in the community, VISTAs will need to continue to improve their skills, including their knowledge of national and local resources and their understanding of the attitudes that contribute to or inhibit effective working relationships. The training required may be as formal as workshop sessions organized by sponsoring organizations or as informal as self-initiated evening study at the local library. Training is a continuous process of skills development and enhancement for project assignments that requires VISTAs to provide much of the initiative and make many of the decisions.

VISTA Training Philosophy

The training context for VISTA is a series of training and developmental opportunities provided at points when they are most useful during the year of service. Guiding the training and development calendar, then, is the principle that training must be practical and directly relevant to the VISTAs' service or your work as the supervisor. The knowledge, skills, and abilities required of you and VISTAs to successfully carry

out tasks in the project plan and attain project goals are the basis for any VISTA training design.

The VISTA approach to training and professional development is based on longstanding adult learning theory. Participants are actively involved in the learning process and serve as facilitators for their peers. Specifically, to the extent possible, training is designed around participants' needs, interests, and goals. Instructors and facilitators guide participants to their own knowledge rather than only supplying them with facts through lecture and handouts. Because you and VISTAs have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge that include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education, training is most effective when it connects learning to this knowledge-experience base. Finally, you and the VISTAs, like all adult learners, appreciate an educational program that is organized and that has clearly defined objectives. Those objectives in turn must be applicable to the participants' work or other responsibilities to be of value.

Overview of VISTA Training

Training Cycle
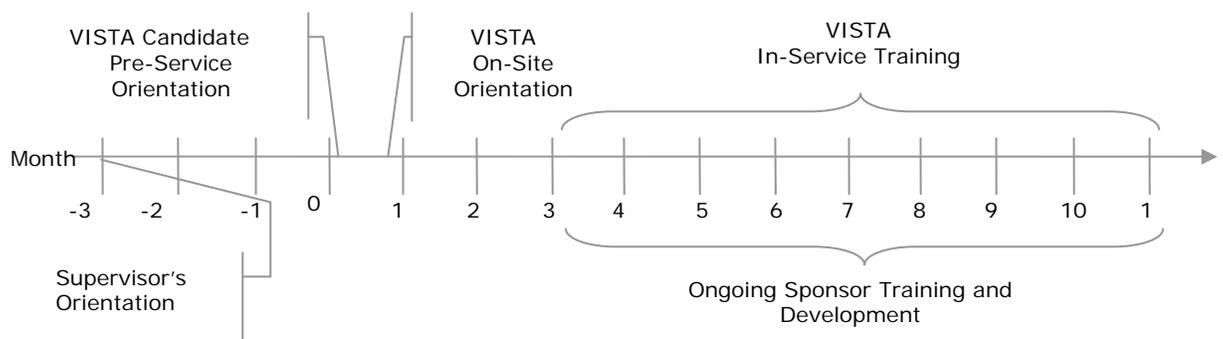
Sponsor/Supervisor Training and Development

Sponsor training and development is divided into two phases: Supervisors' Orientation prior to the arrival of the VISTAs at the project site; and on-going Training and Technical Assistance (T&TA), which is provided by Corporation T&TA providers and which may be offered in various forms and venues.

Supervisors' Orientation

The Supervisors' Orientation is an introduction to managing a VISTA project, and recruiting and supervising VISTAs. The aim of the three-and-a-half-day orientation, usually conducted in tandem with Pre-Service Orientation for VISTA candidates, is to develop the supervisor's ability to manage effectively VISTA resources, including VISTAs, grant money, and training and technical assistance resources, to support the project. Sessions address supervision and leadership in context of VISTA and requirements in managing the project outside of supervision.

New supervisors receive this orientation three months before the arrival of VISTAs on-site. All new supervisors attend the orientation, including "subsite" supervisors in larger projects or under an intermediary, as well as supervisors who have replaced someone during the mid-project cycle. While it is essential for the VISTA's first-line supervisor to attend the orientation, we strongly recommend the project supervisor of the sponsoring organization attend as well.

The learning objectives of the Supervisors' Orientation are:

- Identify a VISTA supervisor's responsibilities (including supervising, reporting, following administrative procedures, etc.)
- Describe the role of the VISTA in the community development process as it relates to poverty
- Develop a clear, realistic VISTA Assignment Description (VAD)
- Design On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT)
- Identify the diverse characteristics of the VISTA population
- Learn to effectively recruit, interview, and screen VISTAs
- Interpret and clarify VISTA terms and conditions of service
- Plan preliminarily for VISTAs' professional development in relation to the project
- Address supervision at large projects with several sites versus small single-site projects
- Build and strengthen relationships with VISTA that result in retention and successful completion of project tasks
- Introduce the role of the Corporation State Office in relation to the project

Training and Technical Assistance

The Corporation maintains a portfolio of providers that offer tools, training, and technical assistance to support project sponsors and supervisors. The providers offer training and assistance in outreach and recruitment, member development, project management, resource development, performance measurement, grants management, management of training logistics, navigating eGrants, and programming under the faith-based and community initiative.

Training and technical assistance consists of:

- Coaching and mentoring
- Teleconferences with
    - Subject matter experts
    - Affinity groups
    - Coaches
- Webinars
- Workshops
- Institutes
- Conferences
- Curriculum design
- Facilitation
- Online Resources

To read more the specific assistance each providers offers, visit the directory of training and technical assistance providers at http://nationalserviceresources.org/resources/tta/index.php.

VISTA Training

Training and development for VISTAs is divided into three phases: Pre-Service Orientation prior to the arrival of VISTAs at the project site; On-Site Orientation and Training, provided by the sponsor and supervisor; and In-Service Training, which is provided by various organizations and which may be offered in various forms and venues.

Pre-Service Orientation

VISTAs receive a three-and-a-half day orientation immediately before they begin service. The aim of PSO is to ensure VISTA candidates embrace the mission of VISTA; understand and accept the terms, conditions, and benefits of VISTA service; have a general grasp of the state of poverty in America; and can relate their project assignments to addressing poverty.

Throughout PSO, candidates are encouraged to reflect on their commitment and consider their specific assignments.

The PSO, facilitated by Corporation staff and training consultants, is conducted on a multistate basis, with candidates from several locations participating. This approach offers the prospective VISTAs a broader view of national service and the VISTA program, and the opportunity to develop a relationship with their counterparts preparing to serve on a variety of projects.

By the end of the PSO, we expect candidates to have a basic knowledge or understanding of the following:

- The philosophy and goals of VISTA;
- Their sponsoring organization and VISTA assignment description;
- Their role in:
    - mobilizing resources
    - recruiting and coordinating community volunteers
    - building organizational capacity
    - community involvement
- Skills in community analysis, communications, community development, and networking

We require all VISTA candidates to attend a PSO before they begin service. In some cases, a VISTA may begin serve before attending a PSO; however, the decision to defer orientation, made at the discretion of Corporation staff, is rare.

The Corporation staff uses the PSO to make the final decision on a candidate's qualifications for VISTA service. If the candidate is deemed suitable for VISTA service at PSO, the candidate will take the oath of service and be enrolled in the VISTA program. If a candidate is not deemed suitable, the candidate will leave the PSO, be deselected, and not be enrolled in the VISTA program.

On-Site Orientation and Training

On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT) is an extension of Pre-Service Orientation. Immediately following the PSO, VISTAs are formally oriented to their assignments, sponsoring organization, and community by the project sponsor/supervisor.

At the Supervisors' Orientation, supervisors begin planning an On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT) for new VISTAs when they first report to the project. What supervisors do in the first few days and weeks to help a VISTA's transition into the project office may serve to establish work habits, relationships with co-workers, and overall contributions of the VISTA for months to come. The orientation, which should take place at the project site during the initial weeks of a VISTA's arrival, provides the opportunity for VISTAs to learn more about their sponsor organization, become acquainted with the community, and gain the knowledge and skill they need to be successful on the project.

The purpose of the orientation is to establish an effective working relationship between VISTA and the supervisor, the organization's staff, and the community. An effective orientation describes the organization's mission and project goals and establishes the importance of the VISTA's tasks. Additionally, the orientation demonstrates the supervisor's willingness to provide support and direction to the VISTA.

An effective, professional orientation also helps the supervisor in assessing the individual training needs of each new VISTA. The OSOT is an opportunity for the supervisor and the VISTA to plan for the VISTA's professional development. A thoughtful, well-planned OSOT design is a key element to the success of the VISTAs and the project. State office staff, in approving a VISTA project, reviews the sponsor's plans for OSOT and bases its evaluation of the project's merits and potential for success on these designs. For information on planning and designing an OSOT, see Chapter 5: Preparing for a VISTA's Arrival.

The On-Site Orientation and Training is a supervisory facet that ensures the VISTAs understand and are prepared to carry out their assignments, and that helps identify areas where training or coaching is required.

In-Service Training

In-Service Training is follow-up training that provides VISTAs the opportunity to develop specific knowledge and skills needed to perform their assignments. This training may take place at key points in a VISTA's service: early on, to develop the knowledge and skills identified by the supervisor and the VISTA; later in service should an opportunity present itself; and even later as the VISTA transitions out of service.

Training opportunities may be a course, a conference, or a professional development activity (such as a temporary reassignment or shadowing a colleague) that meets a VISTA's professional development need. Training topics may include but are not limited to fundraising, volunteer development and management, grassroots leadership development, community analysis, group dynamics, media relations, project sustainability, and specific training in program issue areas. **Mentoring and coaching by the supervisor is also an important component of a VISTA's development and training.**

In-Service Training is designed to improve program quality and support networking among the VISTAs, sponsoring organization staff, and individuals who are engaged in similar activities. The project supervisor is expected to identify professional development opportunities for VISTAs.

Several approaches exist for delivering in-service training to VISTAs. An In-Service Training may be:

- Delivered on a state-wide basis by a Corporation State Office, with or without a community partner
- Delivered on a multistate basis, and may draw on the expertise of the Corporation's Training and Technical Assistance providers
- Delivered by intermediary organizations that support several projects and have the capacity to deliver training
- Delivered on a project basis, funded through a grant
- Arranged for by the project but delivered by a training vendor outside the Corporation Training and Technical Assistance network
- Focused on an individual or a group
- A formal event, such as a conference, a workshop, a course, or an online course
- An informal event, such as coaching, mentoring, shadowing, or texts or articles

The principle underpinning In-Service Training is that it addresses the VISTA's needs in carrying out the project assignment, that it is early enough to make a difference in the service year, that it is an appropriate venue for VISTAs' learning style, and that it is cost effective. All in-service training must be approved by the Corporation.

Close of Service and Transition

"Beyond the Service Year" is an online interactive course designed for use throughout service. It guides VISTAs through self-reflection, with a goal to enrich service, strengthen the project, and inform their decisions on next steps after a year of VISTA service. The course is located at http://encorps.nationalserviceresources.org/.

Online Training and Development Resources

Online resource materials and courses are available for VISTAs, sponsors, and supervisors. The VISTA Campus is an online learning environment for the entire VISTA community. The site offers many of the features of a community college:

- Courses designed for specific tracks, for specific audiences, delving progressively deeper into subjects
- A library holding a range of media
- A meeting house or union where free discourse is supported
- A bookstore, where materials, and VISTA identity merchandise can be purchased or in some cases ordered free of charge

There are interactive courses, learning instruments, reflection activities, discussion groups and more. In addition, the VISTA Campus is the site for mandatory courses,

such as "Terms, Conditions and Benefits of Service" for VISTAs and "Administrative Roles and Responsibilities of VISTA Supervisors."

Specifically for supervisors is a host of courses, articles, training designs, and tools that address project management; supervision; VISTA recruitment, development, and retention; resource generation, sustainable community development, and more. Sponsors and VISTAs also have a means to connect and discuss specific program issues and share resources.

Several other websites provide information related to AmeriCorps VISTA and the Corporation for National and Community Service, including:

- www.nationalservice.gov: The official website of the Corporation for National and Community Service provides information to help the public understand the mission of the Corporation for National and Community Service. It includes information on all the programs, legislative updates, program directories, forms, and press releases.

- www.nationalserviceresources.org: The Resource Center is a one-stop shop for online tools and training resources to strengthen your volunteer or service program. You can subscribe to the Center's 22 listservs or download service-oriented guides and other resources.

In addition to the websites listed above and the forums on VISTA Campus, you can also join several discussion groups, listservs, and mailing lists, including:

- VISTAnet is an online discussion group used by former VISTAs, current VISTAs, project supervisors, and anyone interested in national service. To join VISTAnet, complete the web subscription form at http://listserv.icors.org/archives/vistanet.html. VISTAnet is not sponsored, endorsed, or maintained by the Corporation for National and Community Service, or AmeriCorps VISTA.

- The VISTA Supervisors listserv is a forum to discuss the management of VISTA projects and VISTA volunteers. Participants share promising practices, program research, conference and training announcements, resources, and other pertinent updates relative to the VISTA program. The listserv is restricted to VISTA supervisors and Corporation staff. You can join by sending an email message to join-VISTA_Supervisors@lists.etr.org.

Chapter 7

Project Implementation, Sustainability, and Evaluation

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IN THIS CHAPTER

- Overview of Implementation
    - Community Empowerment
    - Sustainability
    - Project Evolution, Training, and Technical Assistance
- Monitoring and Oversight
    - Reporting
    - Site Visits

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Overview of Implementation

Implementing a VISTA project involves training and supporting the VISTAs, engaging the community, and reporting activities and accomplishments. Project implementation involves leading people—sharing a vision, inspiring partners, building teams, supporting them to reach high performance levels, giving feedback, and solving problems.

VISTA projects continue for multiple years, typically three to five. The project plan and VISTA Assignment Description outline the activities for the project's implementation during the year. Although the project plan outlines the results you expect to achieve during a one-year period, the goals should relate to a three-year timeline.

It may be helpful to outline and refer to a goal statement that spans all expected years of your project. (Your organization created a goal statement during the application process). Refer to the multiyear plan during implementation to help you stay on track as you accomplish results. Revisit your plan regularly to see if your assumptions have withstood the test of time and actual project experience. Have your original goals and results proven realistic? How does your actual progress compare with your anticipated timeline for achieving project results? You may need to meet with the project stakeholders to review and revise your plan based on actual project experience.

The following logic model shows a three-year plan for a VISTA mentoring program.

COMMUNITY NEED→	GOAL →		INPUTS →	ACTIVITIES →	MILESTONES
The ABC State Prison Fellowship Office Report (2007) found that more than 500 children and youth in Waketa County have at least one parent incarcerated in the state or federal penitentiary. About two-thirds of these children and youth (61%) live in households with incomes below the Federal poverty line. Murray and Farrington (2007) studied results from research and representative samples on children of incarcerated parents and found that they are more inclined to suffer anti-social and delinquent behavior, mental health problems, drug use, school failure and unemployment. Those who were present when the parent was arrested may also be traumatized in addition to enduring the pain of separation. Waketa Community Services (WCS) currently provides mentoring services to children and youth of incarcerated parents in Waketa County who often suffer social, emotional, and cognitive delays, have difficulty in school, and feel stigmatized. However, WCS has had difficulty finding enough volunteers to meet the demand for mentors and most volunteer mentors do not stay with the program for more than three or four months. Mentors ensure that children and youth of incarcerated parents receive social and emotional support.	To help ensure that children and youth of incarcerated parents receive the social and emotional support they need to help them escape the cycle of poverty, the WCS VISTA project will build the capacity of the organization through the development of a sustainable volunteer recruitment and management system for the mentoring program.	**YEAR 1**	2 VISTAs Program staff Board of Directors Advisory Board Financial and material resources	Develop, enhance, implement volunteer recruitment and management (R&M) system: • Review existing volunteer R&M system. • Develop improvement plan. • Submit plan to Board of Directors for review and approval. • Implement changes to volunteer R&M system. • Orient/train staff to use revised volunteer R&M system.	R&M plan approved by Board. R&M system components created/revised (screening procedures, training curricula, recruitment database, support resources, etc.). Staff orientation and training completed. New/revised R&M systems are operational: Volunteers are recruited using new systems. New/revised volunteer R&M systems are effective: Volunteers serve at least 3 months.
		YEAR 2	2 VISTAs Program staff Board of Directors Advisory Board Financial and material resources	Fine-tune volunteer R&M systems based on staff and volunteer feedback. Integrate changes into mentoring program. Develop fundraising plan.	R&M system components further refined. Volunteer mentors recruited. Youth are mentored. Increased staff use of volunteer R&M systems More volunteers complete mentor training. More volunteers use support systems. Increased retention of volunteers More youth matched with volunteer mentors. Mentoring relationships last longer. Youth and mentors form closer bonds.

Community Need →	Goal →		Inputs →	Activities →	Milestones
		Year 3	2 VISTAs Program staff Board of Directors Advisory Board Financial and material resources	Implement fundraising plan: • Host fundraising events • Apply for grants. • Identify volunteer coordinators • Implement annual fundraising campaigns Institutionalize mentoring program changes and sustainability systems.	Fundraising plan approved by Board of Directors. Fundraising events held. Grant applications submitted. Long-term system for fundraising is instituted. Long-term commitment for volunteer coordinators established. Increased financial and personnel resources to support mentoring program. Staff and Board institutionalize changes/enhancements of mentoring program through policy and on-going staff training.

Community Empowerment

As you implement the project, it will soon be evident that VISTAs are the catalysts for change. Community resources are used to meet goals and inform the project. Sponsors must ensure that the project engages residents of the low-income community in implementing the project. As you know from the application process, 51 percent or more of your organization's board of directors are members of the low-income community (or if this is not the case, your agency developed an advisory council for the VISTA project that consists of members or representatives of the low-income community served by the project).

During implementation, the role of the board or advisory council is:

- To meet periodically (no less than twice yearly) with the sponsoring organization's staff to review and comment on the development and implementation of the project. This review and commentary should be directed toward the adequacy of the project to meet the identified needs of the project beneficiaries
- To submit, if it so chooses, written reports and minutes of its meetings to the sponsor to accompany the Project Progress Report
- To the extent practical, assist the sponsor in the planning of a continuation project application

In all instances, the community must be in the forefront, and the VISTAs must take their guidance from project staff and the community. This approach requires VISTAs to familiarize themselves with the Project Plan and the VISTA Assignment Description, as well as to meet with sponsor staff, board and advisory group members, others the sponsor identifies as having a working knowledge of the issue to be addressed, and the community at large. This practice may involve direct

contact with individual community members who are seeking assistance. This process may lead community members to identify new issues and other strategies for addressing project goals. Significant changes in Project Plan and VISTA Assignment Descriptions require approval by the project and the Corporation State Office.

Sustainability

Community involvement leads to sustainability. Sustainability is the process of setting local volunteers, resources, and programs in place they will continue long after the VISTA project ends. From the beginning of the project planning process, the sponsor must think about how to use the VISTA project to phase in other resources and systems to replace the VISTA resource. VISTA accomplishment surveys conducted by the Corporation show that three years after projects have ended, 70 percent of programs have continued. Mobilizing community resources helps to ensure that anti-poverty activities will continue long after the VISTA resource is withdrawn.

There are four necessary conditions for sustainability through community empowerment:

- The commitment, energy, and initiative that the VISTA brings to the community
- The involvement of the sponsoring organization in project supervision, support, self-assessment, and planning
- The participation of the project beneficiaries in all phases of project development and implementation
- The continued participation of the community through the provision of volunteers, material and financial resources, and expertise

Progress towards sustainability needs to be monitored regularly to ensure progressive steps are taken toward the eventual absorption of project initiatives by the sponsor and the community.

Project Evolution, Training, and Technical Assistance

Project plans should become increasingly specific over time as the project moves toward self-sufficiency. Training and technical assistance for implementing the project are available through the Corporation State Office as well as the Resource Center, an online information repository, sponsored by the Corporation, that includes tools and training materials for volunteers and service programs.

As the project plan is implemented, necessary adjustments may be made to accomplish the planned goals through periodic reviews by the sponsor and the Corporation State Office.

Monitoring and Oversight

Monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up are important elements of good project planning and implementation. Monitoring and oversight includes assessing how well the project is being implemented and whether or not the project is on track to achieving its goals.

The sponsor should be engaged in continuous monitoring of progress. Additionally, the Corporation State Office is responsible for providing monitoring and oversight to support the sponsoring organization. The Corporation's monitoring actions include the review of ongoing reports and directed training and technical assistance, as well as onsite visits.

Reporting

The sponsor/supervisor submits a Progress Report to the Corporation State Office quarterly for first-year projects and semiannually thereafter, unless otherwise specified by the Corporation State Office. The purpose of the report is to track the project's progress against the goals outlined in the Project Plan, and to update the Corporation State Office on the project's challenges and successes. The Progress Report also helps the Corporation and sponsor to be accountable to stakeholders, identify technical assistance needs, reassess the project and make any necessary adjustments, and build a cumulative project record for future reference.

The Progress Report form is available on the Corporation's website or from the Corporation State Office. Progress Reports are completed in eGrants.

The report contains three primary sections. The first section, "*VISTA and Sponsor Development,*" provides a chart for sponsors to indicate the types of training provided to VISTAs and supervisors. The chart also asks whether the training was funded by the Corporation, or by the sponsoring organization or other entity.

The second section, "*Performance Measures*," provides a template based on your Project Plan and allows you to enter your accomplishments against the targets you set for the project. In this section, you report on each performance measure listed in the Project Plan. You must to discuss each performance measures, even if minimal work was accomplished or you do not have final data.

The third section, "*Narratives*," provides you the opportunity to describe your challenges, training needs, and other accomplishments not covered under the previous sections. This section also asks you to describe your partnerships and collaborations, as well as the efforts you have made to move your project towards sustainability.

Once the Corporation State Office reviews the submitted report, the office determines the amount of training and technical assistance the project needs and follows through accordingly. This follow-up may take the form of on-site supervisor training, specialized early service or in-service training, guidance on administrative procedures, or revisions to project plans.

The Corporations requires a financial status report for projects that received a grant.

Checklist for Completing Progress Reports

General tips
- ☑ Keep good records during the year
- ☑ Schedule plenty of time to write reports
- ☑ Organize all documents needed for the report before getting started
- ☑ Do not leave anything blank ("NA" stands for "not acceptable")
- ☑ New projects that do not have VISTAs on board may not have much progress to report on project end goals. Instead, focus on describing recruitment and other startup activities.

Some best practices for reporting in the Project Plan section:
- ☑ Remember that a clear, concise project plan is the key to good, simple reporting
- ☑ Keep reporting aligned with original project plan
- ☑ Mid-year report: If you have not fully reached a project milestone, report on the progress to date.
- ☑ Include statistics in reports, not just descriptions
- ☑ Include real numbers with percentages. For example, say "75% of respondents (45 out of 60)…" instead of only "75% of respondents."

And some best practices for reporting in the Narratives section:
- ☑ **Challenges:** What are you doing to address challenges?
- ☑ **Recruitment**: What steps are you taking to ensure a smooth transition between outgoing and incoming VISTAs?
- ☑ **Training/tecnhnical assistance need**: What are the training and technical assistance needs of your project? (Do not describe training you have received from the State Office.)
- ☑ **Partnership/aollaboration development**: Do not simply list new partnerships. Describe how activities with partners relate to achieving project goals.
- ☑ **Resource development**: Who gave you resources? How will you use them?
- ☑ **Sustainability**: How will you ensure VISTA project accomplishments endure?
- ☑ **Other accomplishments**: Provide specific information.
  - ☑ Example 1—Grants: Describe how VISTAs were involved with the grant request, how much money was awarded, who the funder is, and how dollars will be used. (This could also go under Resource Development.)
  - ☑ Example 2—Training Events: Describe how many participants were involved, what the training covered, and who conducted the training.
- ☑ Do not wait until progress report is due to notify state office of major accomplishments.

Site Visits

Site visits, conducted by the Corporation State Office staff to monitor and support the sponsoring organization, are designed to meet specific needs, enhance project effectiveness, deliver technical assistance, and support and recognize project successes. Site visits are a method of exchanging information; ensuring compliance with general administrative, financial, and program requirements; providing technical assistance and guidance as needed; and assisting with project promotion.

Corporation State Office makes site visits to projects in accordance with annual program guidance and state plans. During the site visit, the Corporation State Office reviews the project for administrative effectiveness, compliance, and quality. Corporation headquarters staff may also make project site visits. Staff members monitor projects according to three categories:

- Sponsors and supervisors and their roles
  - VISTA recruitment
  - VISTA assignment
  - On-site orientation
  - In-service training
  - Career development assistance for VISTAs
  - Administration, including provision of supervision, transportation, and other support
  - Assessment of need for Corporation support and training

- Compliance
  - Programmatic
  - Fiscal
  - Legal and regulatory

- Community impact and self-sufficiency
  - Accomplishments
  - Troubleshooting and mechanisms for overcoming challenges
  - Resources generated
  - Sustainability—how the community is going to take over when the VISTA is gone

The Corporation may also conduct a fiscal if a project received a grant.

Chapter 8

When Issues Arise

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Who to contact at the Corporation
- Common Issues
    - Leave
    - Extension of Service
    - Emergency Situations
    - Interpersonal
    - Prohibited Activities
    - Early Termination
    - Housing

The earlier chapters of the *Supervisor's Manual* give information on the role of a project supervisor, recruitment and selection of candidates, preparing for a VISTA's arrival, and working with a VISTA throughout project implementation. This chapter describes actions to take when issues arise.

Discussing an issue with your contact in the Corporation State Office is quite important and should be commonplace. The VISTA policies and procedures are, for the most part, general. Applying the general policies and procedures to specific situations necessarily requires thought and analysis. It is good practice to obtain the Corporation State Office's views and advice.

Who to Contact at the Corporation

The typical order of contacts when questions arise is:

1. Your contact at the State Office
2. State Program Director
3. Area Manager

Common Issues

This chart lists some common issues that may arise and gives suggested actions. For more details about some of these issues, refer to the [VISTA Member Handbook](#).

Leave

Issue	Suggested Action
A VISTA requests personal leave in first 3 months or last month	Approve: however, encourage the VISTA to limit leave to emergencies and family matters in the first 3 months and last month
A VISTA requests personal leave in excess of 10 workdays	Do not approve
A VISTA requests medical leave for nonmedical reasons	Do not approve
A VISTA requests medical leave in excess of 10 workdays	Do not approve; VISTA can use personal leave; if the request exceeds the remaining personal and medical leave, contact the CSO for possible termination of the VISTA
A VISTA requests leave for birth or adoption	Approve use of personal leave and medical leave, plus 10 workdays in cases where extended recuperation is required
A VISTA is away from the project without approved leave	Check on the VISTA's safety; contact the Corporation State Office immediately; CSO may possibly terminate the VISTA
A VISTA requests emergency leave because an immediate family member of the VISTA is critically ill or has died	Approve; a VISTA is allowed up to 5 workdays of leave under these circumstances; the emergency leave does not count against personal or medical leave
A VISTA wants to leave VISTA service for an extended period and return to VISTA service within a year	Contact the CSO; the CSO may allow the VISTA to leave the project and be reinstated either in your project or another project within a year
A VISTA is called for jury duty	Approve; a VISTA's jury service does not count as personal leave
A VISTA wishes to participate in special days of service, e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday, National Volunteer Week, AmeriCorps Week	Allow, as reasonable, in relation to project duties; this leave does not count against personal leave
A VISTA is required to report for military service	Approve short-term military service (week-end or annual training); this does not count as personal leave
A VISTA wishes to vote during regular service hours	Approve when this leave is common practice at the organization/agency; encourage use of time outside regular service hours
A VISTA wishes leave for personal religious observance	Allow; set up a schedule for the VISTA to make up the time used

Extension of Service

Issue	Suggested Action
A VISTA requests an extension of his/her term of service	Contact the CSO; you may request that the CSO approve the extension if the time is needed to complete the VAD
A VISTA chooses to reenroll for another year	The CSO discusses this with the VISTA; sponsor may approve the VISTA for another year at the project
A VISTA extends term of service and then wants to complete a full, one-year term	The VISTA contacts the CSO; the extension cannot be rolled into a full, one-year term; the VISTA must begin a second one-year term following the end of the extension
A Summer Associate wants to become a VISTA	The Summer Associate contacts the CSO; the summer service cannot be rolled into a full, one-year term; the Summer Sssociate must begin a one-year term as a VISTA

Emergency Situations

Issue	Suggested Action
Project site closes due to a natural disaster	No action required; the VISTA has instructions; if possible contact the CSO to report the natural disaster
A VISTA is in an accident	If the VISTA is unable, contact the CSO
A VISTA is hospitalized	If the VISTA is unable, contact the CSO
A VISTA is arrested	If the VISTA is unable or unwilling, contact the CSO
A VISTA's belongings are lost due to fire or theft	If the VISTA is unable, contact the CSO
A VISTA does not receive a living allowance	The VISTA contacts CSO
A VISTA needs to travel for a personal emergency	The VISTA contacts CSO

Interpersonal Situations

Issue	Suggested Action
A VISTA is not carrying out his/her VAD	Document actions/inactions and contact the CSO to discuss
A VISTA asks for a change in his/her VAD	Discuss with the VISTA; if change appears to be warranted, contact the CSO for discussion and approval/disapproval
A VISTA asks for reasonable accommodation	Assess the need and appropriate response for reasonable accommodation; as appropriate, contact the CSO for guidance
A VISTA submits a grievance in writing	The sponsor is required to respond in writing within 10 days

Issue	Suggested Action
A VISTA takes actions that appear to discriminate against others on the basis of race, religion, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, age, disability, political affiliation, marital or parental status, or military service	Take reasonable steps to address the immediate situation; document the actions and contact the CSO to discuss
A VISTA takes actions that appear to sexually harass others	Take reasonable steps to address the immediate situation; document the actions and contact the CSO to discuss

Prohibited Activities

Issue	Suggested Action
A VISTA has outside employment	Immediately inform the CSO
A VISTA accepts money for work at the project site	Immediately inform the CSO
A VISTA is related by blood or marriage to project staff, sponsor staff, officers or members of the sponsor's board of directors	Immediately inform the CSO
A VISTA participates in political or lobbying activities	Immediately inform the CSO
A VISTA enrolls in an educational course without approval of the sponsor and CSO	Immediately inform the CSO

Early Termination

Issue	Suggested Action
A VISTA wishes to leave the project before his/her term of service is scheduled to end	Contact the CSO
The supervisor wishes to have a VISTA leave the project before his/her term of service is scheduled to end	Contact the CSO prior to taking any action; be prepared to document the reasons. Only the Corporation staff can terminate a VISTA.

Housing

Issue	Suggested Action
VISTA has difficulty finding affordable housing	Reasonably assist the VISTA, as best you can, in locating housing through community residents, board members, local businesses, etc. (See Chapter 4 for ideas)
VISTA accepts money for rent, utilities, or other housing costs	Contact the CSO
VISTA has difficulty with the landlord	This issue is between the VISTA and the landlord, and primarily the responsibility of the VISTA

Chapter 9

Other Items

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IN THIS CHAPTER

- Change of Project Address Notification
- Disclosure and Use of VISTAs' Addresses
- Supplies and Equipment
- Donated and Other gifts to Benefit the Project
- Intellectual Property Created During Service

Change of Project Address Notification

The sponsor must immediately notify the Corporation State Office in writing or by email a change in the project address to ensure timely delivery of correspondence.

Disclosure and Use of VISTAs' Addresses

The Corporation uses the private addresses of VISTAs for internal administrative purposes only. The Corporation may disclose a VISTA's private address (home of record or residence during service) with the VISTA's prior written permission, or to duly authorized representatives of federal investigative agencies, including the Corporation's Office of Inspector General, and pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act.

The mailing address of VISTA projects are public knowledge and may be disclosed when requested.

Supplies and Equipment

The policy of the Corporation is to encourage self-help and mobilization of resources; therefore, the Corporation does not provide the equipment or supplies required by VISTAs for their project assignment. The sponsoring organization must provide any special equipment or supplies necessary to implement a project successfully.

Donated and Other Gifts to Benefit the Project

The Corporation does not pay the shipping costs for gifts or materials donated or obtained by VISTAs to benefit the project to which VISTAs are assigned. Such costs are borne by the sponsor.

Intellectual Property Created During Service

VISTAs have the right to copyright works that are subject to copyright that they produce as part of their VISTA service. Such works include software designs, training manuals, curricula, videotapes, and other products created by VISTAs while serving as a VISTA. VISTAs may not sell, however, any work that includes an AmeriCorps logo without prior written approval of the Corporation.

Through their enrollment in the VISTA program, VISTAs, with regard to work products created by them as part of their VISTA service, agree to give the Corporation and the sponsoring organization where they serve an unlimited, royalty-free, nonexclusive, and irrevocable license to obtain, use, reproduce, publish, or disseminate products, including data produced for the sponsor. VISTAs also agree to authorize others to do so. The Corporation may distribute such products through a designated clearinghouse.

Appendix A

Corporation for National and Community Service Programs

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Created in 1993, the Corporation for National and Community Service supports service at the national, state, and local levels through three main programs: Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America. Members and volunteers serve with national and community nonprofit organizations, faith-based groups, schools, and local and public agencies to help meet community needs in education, the environment, public safety, homeland security, and other critical areas. The Corporation is part of USA Freedom Corps, a White House initiative to foster a culture of citizenship, service, and responsibility."

The Corporation's three major sets of programs, each with its own structure, target population, and emphasis, are united in a common goal—engaging citizens dedicated to making their communities better.

Senior Corps

Senior Corps taps the skills, talents, and experience of more than 500,000 Americans age 55 and older to meet a wide range of community challenges through three programs:

- **Foster Grandparent Program** engages low-income people, age 60 or older, who serve one-on-one with children and young people who have special needs, including teen parents, boarder babies, and those who have been abused and neglected.
- **Senior Companion Program** engages low-income people, age 60 or over who provide assistance to adults with physical, emotional, or mental health limitations, most of whom are elderly.
- **RSVP** comprises a network of more than 400,000 Americans, age 55 or older, who perform a wide range of volunteer services that meet community needs while effectively using their skills, interests, and experience. RSVP volunteers conduct safety patrols for local police departments, participate in environmental projects, provide intensive educational services to children and adults, and respond to natural disasters, among other activities. RSVP is the Corporation's largest service program, providing volunteers diverse in experience, interest, and education who are ready to take on the challenges facing communities across the country.

Learn and Serve America

Learn and Serve America provides grants to schools, colleges, and nonprofit groups to support efforts to engage students in community service linked to academic achievement and the development of civic skills. This type of learning, called service learning, improves communities while preparing young people for a lifetime of

responsible citizenship. In addition to providing grants, Learn and Serve America serves as a resource on service and service-learning to teachers, faculty members, schools, and community groups.

- **K-12 Program** supports school- and community-based organizations that engage school-aged youth in service. More than 275,000 students in all 50 states participate in service activities that are integrated into their curriculum, providing structured time for service and time for students to think, talk, or write about their service experiences.
- **Higher Education Program** engages college students in meeting pressing community needs. Higher education projects support community service and service-learning initiatives at colleges and universities across the nation.

AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps engages more than 70,000 Americans each year in serving their communities 20 to 40 hours a week. Most AmeriCorps participants (called members) are selected by and serve with local and national nonprofit organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity, the American Red Cross, City Year, Teach for America, and Boys and Girls Clubs of America, as well as with a host of smaller community organizations, both secular and faith-based.

AmeriCorps consists of AmeriCorps* VISTA, AmeriCorps State and National, and AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps).

- **AmeriCorps State and National** grant programs provide meaningful service opportunities for Americans to serve full or part time. AmeriCorps members provide direct service, such as teaching or tutoring a child, walking a beat with a community policing officer, or cleaning up a stream or neighborhood park. Through more than 600 programs, AmeriCorps State and National involves more than 35,000 people in community service. Members receive an education award upon successful completion of their service to pay off existing qualified student loans or finance future higher education.

  - **AmeriCorps National** programs are operated by national nonprofit organizations funded directly by the Corporation. Grants are made directly to public or private nonprofit organizations, institutions of higher education, government entities within states or territories, Native American Tribes, and partnerships among any of theses groups.

  - **AmeriCorps State** programs are administered through governor-appointed State Commissions. These 15- to 25-member commissions are appointed by the governor in each state and are managed by an executive director. State commissions are responsible for performing outreach to potential applicants in their state, administering grant competitions, and overseeing AmeriCorps State programs.

- **AmeriCorps NCCC** (National Civilian Community Corps) is a ten-month, full-time residential service program for young Americans, ages 18 to 24. Working in teams of 10 to 12, members focus on projects that protect and conserve the environment's natural resources, respond to communities experiencing natural disasters, and address other pressing needs of communities.

AmeriCorps NCCC members serve communities in every state, but live and train at three regional campuses, located in Denver, Colorado; Sacramento, California; Perry Point, Maryland; Vinton, Iowa and Hattisburg, Mississippi. In partnership with nonprofit organizations, state and local agencies, and faith-based and other community organizations, members complete service projects throughout the region they are assigned.

- **VISTA** is a full-time, year-long program for individuals age 18 or older who commit themselves to assisting low-income people and communities to improve the conditions of their own lives. VISTAs work to increase the capacity of the low-income community they serve by mobilizing resources, recruiting volunteers, and implementing community programs. They mobilize the community and its resources to solve a problem so that the community can sustain the activities and services after resources are withdrawn. Approximately 7,000 VISTAs are serving on more than 1,100 projects throughout the country. VISTAs are recruited both nationally and locally, and after successfully completing a year of service, can either receive an education award to pay off existing student loans or finance future education, or choose a cash stipend.

Summary of the Corporation's National Service Programs

Program	Focus	Eligibility	Skill Requirement	Term of Service
AmeriCorps [4] *NCCC* (National Civilian Community Corps)	*NCCC* Assists communities with special projects in education, public safety, and environmental conservation, and mobilizes quickly to provide disaster relief	*NCCC* Applicants must be 18-24 years old while they serve and a U.S. citizen, U.S. national, or lawful permanent resident alien of the U.S.	*NCCC* All skills needed	*NCCC* Full time for one year (No part time service opportunities available)
State and National	*State and National* Provides a wide range of direct services to the nation's neediest citizens and communities	*State and National* Applicants must be 17 years old and a U.S. citizen, U.S. national, or lawful permanent resident alien of the U.S.	*State and National* All skills need	*State and National* Full time for one year Some part time service opportunities available)
VISTA	*VISTA* Provides support to nonprofit organizations to help fight poverty—by developing and mobilizing resources that create sustainable benefits at a community level	*VISTA* Applicants must be at least 18 years old and a U.S. citizen, U.S. national, or lawful permanent resident	*VISTA* A bachelor's degree or three years of related volunteer or job experience	*VISTA* Full time for one year (No part time service opportunities available)

Program	Focus	Eligibility	Skill Requirement	Term of Service
Learn and Serve	Engages young people in service projects to help their schools and communities			
Senior Corps *RSVP*	*RSVP* Provides a wide range of direct services to the nation's neediest citizens and communities		*RSVP* A willingness to volunteer and assist your community	
Foster Grandparent Program (FGP)	*FGP* Provides mentoring and other support to children with exceptional needs		*SCP and FGP* All skills and talents needed. These are stipend programs that require volunteers be low income.	
Senior Companion Program (SCP)	*SCP* Provides support services to frail and elderly adults to enable them to continue living independently			

To learn more about the Corporation for National and Community Service and its programs, visit www.nationalservice.gov.

Appendix B

Applying for a VISTA Project

Before a VISTA is assigned to a sponsor, the organization must have in place an VISTA project that addresses the needs of a low-income community. The community and sponsoring organization work collaboratively to design the project. The sponsor must design a VISTA's assignment so that when the project is completed, the low-income community is better equipped to solve its own problems, and the systems, services, funding, and personnel remain in the community to continue the efforts initiated by the project. The low-income beneficiary community must be involved in the planning and development of the VISTA project.

The VISTA project sponsored by your organization parallels a concept paper and application developed and submitted to the Corporation State Office in your state. The application details the specific problem the project addresses in the low-income community. It includes a project plan that describes the activities the VISTAs are undertaking and a set of goals and objectives for the overall project.

Project Application

The project application details the specific problem the project will address in the low-income community, provides a set of goals and objectives for the overall project, and includes a project plan that describes the activities the VISTA will undertake.

The project application also serves important assessment and recruitment purposes. The project plan portion of the application is the basis of subsequent Project Progress Reports, which Corporation staff uses to monitor the achievement of project goals.

Primary Emphasis Areas

The VISTA program's overall mission is to assist local communities in the fight against poverty; however, each year specific program initiatives are highlighted for new project development. These initiatives may be set by the Corporation, the U.S. President, or Congress. Your Corporation State Office will provide information about the key program elements highlighted each year.

Although specific initiatives are emphasized annually, VISTA projects need to contain the following elements:

- **Anti-Poverty Focus —** The purpose of VISTA is to support efforts to fight poverty. Any nonprofit organization, educational institution, tribal or public agency with a program that is poverty-related in scope can apply to sponsor a VISTA project. The project's goal should address helping individuals and communities overcome poverty through long-term solutions rather than through short-term services.

- **Community Empowerment —** Organizations working with VISTA must ensure their project engages residents of the low-income community in planning, developing, and implementing the project. The project must be responsive and relevant to the lives of the community residents, and should tap into inherent community strengths and resources.

  You are required, by law and regulation, to ensure the VISTA project engages residents of the low-income community in planning, developing, and implementing the project. This approach allows low-income individuals the freedom to speak for themselves in determining the projects that suit their specific needs. This approach often results in innovative, effective programming that supports lasting change in the community, as well as meaningful experiences for the VISTAs. This requirement is in place to ensure that a sponsor, eager to receive VISTA resources by providing a well-developed project plan, also sufficiently involves project beneficiaries.

- **Sustainable Solutions —** VISTAs are a short-term resource. They work to ensure the long-term sustainability of anti-poverty programs. All sponsors should develop VISTA projects with a goal of an eventual phase-out of the need for VISTAs.

- **Capacity Building —** The VISTA program assigns members to organizations to expand the ability of those organizations to fight poverty. Through activities such as fundraising, volunteer recruitment and management, community outreach, and partnership development, VISTAs help organizations achieve lasting solutions to poverty.

Overview of Project Application Process

The Corporation accepts and reviews applications throughout the year. To apply for VISTAs, a potential sponsor contacts the Corporation State Office that covers the area where the proposed project would be located to discuss application requirements and procedures. The Corporation State Office directs the applicant to eGrants, the Corporations online grant and project application system, and provides technical assistance during the application process. (For a directory of Corporation State Offices, visit: www.nationalservice.gov/about/contact/stateoffices.asp). The length of the application process varies, but often the time from the initial contact to a final decision is three to five months.

Concept Paper and Criteria for Approval

The application review process begins with the applicant's submission of a project concept paper in eGrants, a web-based system in which project applications are submitted, assessed, approved or disapproved. In the concept paper, the applicant describes the community needs as they relate to the reduction of poverty and how the VISTA resource will be used.

A Corporation State Office staff person reviews the concept paper within ten workdays of receipt of an eGrants notification that the applicant has submitted its concept paper. The State Director has the authority to approve/disapprove the concept paper. The staff person enters the approval/disapproval in eGrants, and notifies the applicant via eGrants whether the application received approval.

Criteria for determining approval/disapproval are based on whether the proposed project:

- Complies with the provisions of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended; VISTA regulations; and VISTA policies
- Addresses the needs of a low-income community
- Leads to building organizational capacity so that the project can continue once the VISTA resources are withdrawn
- Involves beneficiaries of the service and the low-income community in project development and implementation
- Is designed to generate public- or private-sector resources
- Promotes local volunteer service

Further, criteria for determining approval/disapproval are based on whether the applicant:

- Is a public-sector organization or a private organization designated as nonprofit by the Internal Revenue Service (An organization that has submitted to the IRS an application for nonprofit status may be considered, but its full VISTA application cannot be approved until it is designated)
- Has resources available for VISTAs to perform their activities, such as space, supplies, and on-the-job transportation, and is able to provide emergency cash advances when needed
- Has the capacity and commitment to recruit, train, supervise, and otherwise support VISTAs recruited locally and nationally
- Understands and is committed to promoting national service
- Is experienced in the issues relating to the beneficiaries of the service
- Has the capacity to build community partnerships and collaborative efforts to achieve project self-sufficiency

Application and Criteria for Approval

If the concept paper is approved, the applicant may submit a full application in eGrants. Data that the applicant already entered into the concept paper will automatically populate on the application screen. Technical assistance is available to the applicant during the application preparation. Travel funds permitting, a Corporation staff person visits the applicant to give technical assistance and learn about the applicant organization and the community to be served by the proposed project.

Corporation staff reviews the application within 15 workdays of receipt of the eGrants notification of submittal. The approval authority rests with the Corporation State Office if the sponsoring organization has received VISTA resources for less than 3 years. If the sponsor has received VISTA resources for more than 3 years, the application must be approved at a higher level. The approval/disapproval is entered into the eGrants system, and the applicant is notified in eGrants whether the application is approved.

Criteria for determining approval/disapproval are based on whether the application:

- Continues to meet the approval criteria listed for the concept paper

- Is persuasive in relating the statement of need for the project with the project plan, the assignment description, and the positive outcomes of the project
- Describes in measurable terms the anticipated self-sufficiency outcomes
- Demonstrates that the number of VISTAs requested is appropriate for the project goals
- Links the skills qualifications for VISTAs with the project activities
- Utilizes the VISTA time to the maximum extent
- Demonstrates the VISTAs will receive orientation, on-the-job training, and supervision
- Sponsor has not received more than 5 years of VISTA resources, either as a direct project or as a site of a multi-site, statewide, or national project.

Initial Approval and Governor's/Tribal Executive's Letter

When the application has been approved, the Corporation State Office staff submits a summary of the project to the state governor or executive of the tribal territory. That person has 45 days to notify the Corporation, in writing, of any reasons for disapproving the project.

Memorandum of Agreement

A Memorandum of Agreement, signed by the State Director and the authorized official of the sponsor, is a legally binding document that states the specific obligations of each party, as well as joint responsibilities.

Project Continuation and Criteria for Approval

VISTA projects are generally eligible to apply for up two continuation periods. Each continuation period is for one year. The process for a VISTA project attain continuation begins four months (120 days) prior to the end of the current project year. It is at this time the sponsor completes a continuation application in eGrants. The sponsor must submit the continuation application no later than 90 days before the current project year ends.

The continuation process begins with a thorough review of the project's accomplishments to date, and concludes with a decision by the Corporation to continue or close the project at the end of the current project year. If the project has been successful in meeting its goals and building sustainability, continuation is highly probable; however, a continuation is not guaranteed. The Corporation reviews the application within 15 workdays of receipt or at least 75 days prior to the end of the Memorandum of Agreement.

The process for reviewing a continuation proposal is generally similar to the review process for an initial project application, but with several important differences. The Corporation reviews the application for adherence to VISTA project guidelines and the State's annual plan for project development. In addition, the Corporation reviews the following aspects of the project:

- Previous year's accomplishments, which must be included in the continuation proposal

- Long-range plans, especially regarding project sustainability, which must be discussed in the continuation proposal
- Project progress reports, monitoring reports, biweekly member verification forms, and feedback from VISTAs to ensure the project is making substantial progress in meeting goals and objectives
- Level of resource mobilization, including volunteers recruited, from the previous year, as well as plans for the coming year
- Level of recruitment and retention of VISTAs

The Corporation bases the decision to continue a project on the following conditions:

- VISTA resources are available.
- The project has made progress toward achieving capacity-building and self-sufficiency goals.
- The project has performed well in meeting its goals and objectives.
- The project has complied with provisions contained in the Memorandum of Agreement and other applicable guidelines and regulations.

Once the continuation application is approved, the sponsoring organization and the Corporation sign a new Memorandum of Agreement for the new project period.

The following criteria, as applicable, are considered in determining whether to continue VISTA projects after the third year, subject to the availability of funds:

- The sponsor agrees to cost-share a significant portion of the VISTAs
- The sponsor acts as an intermediary organization and changes the sub-applicant organizations according to the three-year period
- The sponsor has demonstrated an extenuating community need, such as being the only sponsor available in a high-poverty area for the VISTA project

Amendments and Criteria for Approval

During the project term, the sponsor may request an amendment to the Memorandum of Agreement. Typical amendment requests concern the following:

- Changes in the circumstances of the sponsor, such as a name change or a change in the organization's articles of incorporation
- Changes in the scope or significant detail of the project

If a change occurs, the sponsor submits a request in writing and supporting documentation. The State Director approves the request, subject to the project continuing to meet the approval criteria with the change.

Elements of Good Project Planning

Once the Corporation accepts a sponsor's concept paper, the development of the VISTA project involves four major phases:

Phase I—Planning with Community Empowerment

To plan a project well, the people involved need a clear, shared vision of what they aim to accomplish. During this phase of project planning, the sponsor develops general ideas from the concept paper into more specific statements of what the project expects to accomplish. These statements or goals are called the project plan. This plan is the blueprint for the VISTA project. It is designed to address the need(s) identified by the low-income community. This phase is the heart of the project development process because it transforms good intentions into achievable actions. The project plan should continue to be the blueprint for the proposed VISTA project.

A VISTA project should be designed to develop or expand programs and activities that will remain in place at the end of the VISTA project life cycle. Hence, the project development process should be a participatory exercise that involves the community from the beginning. Anyone asked to help implement the project plan or whose support is critical to the success of the plan should be involved in its design. Community members that are involved take responsibility for what they help create. This participation can help develop local partnerships and ownership to support the sustainability of the project after the VISTA program is no longer involved.

Phase II — Implementation and Capacity Building

This phase involves developing a strategy to implement the project. After the project goals are delineated into quantifiable and time-phased objectives, an assignment description is developed to guide the activities of each VISTA in achieving these objectives. More precisely, the assignment description defines the VISTA's role and the supervisor's responsibilities as they relate to the goals and objectives to be accomplished during one year of service.

VISTAs follow the goals and objectives set forth in the project plan and engage in activities spelled out in the assignment description. As the project plan is implemented, necessary adjustments may be made to accomplish the planned objectives through periodic reviews by the sponsor and by the Corporation State Office. During both the planning and implementation phases, it will be evident that VISTAs do not work in a vacuum—that they are the catalysts for change. It is their responsibility to ensure that the resources of the project are focused on accomplishing project goals and that they work with the low-income community to achieve specific objectives—and that the goals and objectives increase self-sufficiency within the community. Progress toward self-sufficiency becomes increasingly specific as the project implements its project plan and then continues to refine its approach during subsequent project periods.

Implementing a VISTA project involves training and supporting the members, and reporting activities and accomplishments. It also involves leading people—sharing a vision, inspiring partners, building teams, supporting them to reach high levels of performance, giving feedback, and solving problems.

Phase III — Sustainability

Sustainability is the process of mobilizing community resources to address poverty so that those resources will continue anti-poverty solutions long after the VISTA resource is withdrawn. A legislated requirement for service by VISTAs, sustainability of project activities must be taken into account when the sponsor initially develops the project and designs the project plan. This process needs to be monitored on a regular basis to ensure that progressive steps are taken toward the eventual absorption of project initiatives by the sponsor and the community.

VISTA accomplishment surveys have shown that three years after projects have ended, 70 percent of the programs have continued. At the same time, sustainability results from empowering the community to seek solutions to specific conditions of poverty.

Empowerment conveys the community develops it own strategy to implement solutions to a poverty conditions they have identified. VISTAs serve as a catalyst in designing and accomplishing those strategies that achieve sustainability. In all instances, the community must be in the forefront of planning strategies and the VISTAs must take their guidance from project staff and community. This approach requires VISTAs to familiarize themselves with their assigned project's plan. VISTAs also meet with sponsor staff, board and advisory group members, others the sponsor identifies as having a working knowledge of the issue to be addressed, as well as the community at large. This practice may involve direct contact with individual community members who seek assistance; however, the purpose of the VISTA's involvement with individual community members is to develop a sustainable solution to conditions of poverty faced by all community residents. This process does not mean that project plans are prescriptive, but are subject to change. The VISTA's activities may identify new issues and other strategies for addressing poverty issues. Significant changes in project plan activities will require approval by the project and the Corporation State Office.

In essence, there are four necessary conditions for sustainability through empowerment:

- The commitment, energy, and initiative that VISTAs bring to the community
- The involvement of the sponsoring organization in project supervision, support, self-assessment, and planning
- The participation of the beneficiaries of service in all phases of project development and implementation
- The continued participation of the community through the provision of volunteers, material and financial resources, and expertise

Phase IV — Performance Measurements

Monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up are also important elements of good project planning. At the Corporation, these elements are called Performance Measurements. Performance Measurements include assessing how well the project is being implemented and whether or not the project is achieving its objectives. A complete description of the performance measurement process is available in Chapter 7.

Appendix D

VISTA Cost Share Program

VISTA receives an appropriation from Congress each year to support the work of VISTA projects across the country. VISTA uses cost share as an effective strategy to expand the number of VISTAs that can be supported each year. Through cost sharing, a sponsoring organization pays the living allowance for some or all of its VISTAs (including VISTAs, Leaders, or Summer Associates).

Cost sharing is an excellent way to leverage additional funding resources and see where the dollars will be matched by AmeriCorps VISTA. In finding funding for your organization's share of the partnership, consider approaching:

- Community foundations
- State government funding source
- Municipalities and school districts
- Colleges and universities
- Local corporations

The VISTA program covers the cost of a series of benefits and services for the AmeriCorps VISTAs and your organization. These benefits and services include:

- $4,725 education award or $1,200 post-service stipend
- Health coverage for all VISTAs assigned to your project
- Payroll services. VISTAs receive their paychecks directly from the VISTA program
- Travel costs associated with training; moving allowance for VISTAs relocating to serve
- Liability coverage, under the Federal Employees Compensation Act and the Federal Torts Claims Act, for all VISTAs
- Child care for income-eligible VISTAs
- FICA (Social Security)
- Assistance with recruiting VISTAs

Cost-share discussions with your state office should begin before the project renewal process starts. The Memorandum of Agreement reflects the partnership agreement between the sponsoring agency and the Corporation for National and Community Service. Specific language is used in the Memorandum of Agreement for cost-sharing.

For more information on becoming a cost-share partner, contact your State Office.

VISTA Assignment Description

The VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) is important to the success of the VISTA project. Ideally, it describes the tasks for which the VISTA will be responsible, with rough timelines for the VISTA's year of service, and an indication of the sponsor's priority of those tasks. The well-written VAD informs the applicants so they can assess their interest in and capacity to carry out the work. The VAD also indicates for the candidates how they might focus their skills, and where they may need training or further information.

Tips for Preparing a VAD

1. Provide each VISTA with an individual assignment description that describes the capacity-building activities the VISTA is responsible for completing.
2. Include enough detail in the VISTA assignment description to guide the VISTA while still allowing for flexibility in carrying out day-to-day tasks and activities.
3. The VISTA assignment description should identify key capacity-building tasks and activities that the VISTA can realistically accomplished in a year.
4. Review the VISTA assignment description and the VISTA project plan side by side to ensure strong links between both documents. Provide the VISTA with a copy of the VISTA Project Plan to help the VISTA put his/her activities into the context of the entire project.

Additional Tips for Preparing VISTAs to Carry Out Their Individual Assignments

1. If the VISTA will provide raw data that address results identified in the project plan, then be sure to train the VISTA on these responsibilities.
2. If the VISTA will complete monthly reports, then review these reporting forms to ensure that they address the activities and steps described in the assignment description.

The document on the next page provides a VISTA Assignment Description format for your consideration.

VISTA Assignment Description Template

A VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) can be designed in many different ways; you can use any model that works well for your project. This sample VAD, developed by Project STAR, can be modified to meet your needs.

VISTA Project:	**VISTA Name:**	
Site Name:	**Assignment Area:**	**Date:**

VISTA Activities and Steps Checklist	Planned Period of Work
Goal *(from VISTA Project Plan):*	
Activity 1: 　　Step 1: 　　Step 2: 　　Step 3:	
Activity 1 Comments/Summary of Accomplishments:	**Activity 1 Completed (date):** _____
Activity 2: 　　Step 1: 　　Step 2: 　　Step 3:	
Activity 2 Comments/Summary of Accomplishments:	**Activity 2 Completed (date):** _____
Activity 3: 　　Step 1: 　　Step 2: 　　Step 3:	
Activity 3 Comments/Summary of Accomplishments:	**Activity 3 Completed (date):** _____
Activity 4: 　　Step 1: 　　Step 2: 　　Step 3:	
Activity 4 Comments/Summary of Accomplishments:	**Activity 4 Completed (date):** _____

Appropriate Tasks for VISTAs

The goals and objectives in the project plan and activities in the VISTA assignment description should lead to measurable outcomes and the sustainability of project activities by the community being served.

VISTAs should:

- Build partnerships with local public and private sector organizations and businesses
- Recruit, screen, train, and coordinate part-time volunteers
- Write grant applications for funding and other resources
- Solicit donations and other in-kind support for the project
- Publicize the project
- Create community events to support the project
- Mobilize resources in and outside of the community to support the project
- Promote project sustainability

VISTAs must not:

- Displace staff of the sponsoring organization
- Supervise employees or volunteers of the sponsoring organization
- Have primary responsibility for completing renewal application or progress reports
- Spend the majority of their time providing direct services to individual clients or community members
- Have an eGrants account
- Engage in activities designed to influence the passage or defeat of legislation or proposals by initiative petition
- Take any action with respect to a partisan or nonpartisan political activity that would result in the identification or apparent identification of the VISTA program with such activity. Such activities include those that involve elections, voter registration, voter transportation to the polls, and efforts to influence legislation. See Chapter 14 of the VISTA Handbook for more detailed information.
- Give religious instruction, conduct worship services, or engage in any other religious activity as part of their duties, or in a way that would be perceived as part of their duties by members of the community in which they serve. See Chapter 14 of the VISTA Handbook for more detailed information.

Types of Service Performed by VISTAs

In determining whether VISTA is the right match for your organization's needs, think about the kinds of activities you expect VISTAs to perform. The role of the VISTA is to build the capacity and sustainability of the project and community and to work themselves out of a position. The chart below lists some examples of the natural progression in the types of service performed by a VISTA. Except for training purposes, VISTAs should not perform direct services, such as tutoring, teaching, counseling, driving clients, painting, manual labor, or clerical work.

Acceptable Service (not direct)	Capacity Building	Sustainable Endeavors
Recruit volunteers	Develop forms, volunteer assignments	Develop volunteer handbook
Train direct-service providers	Write training curriculum or manual; train trainers	Develop training manual and train the trainer curriculum
Coordinate project	Develop procedure and system	Develop volunteer management system and procedural guide
Public speaking	Develop speakers' bureau	Develop community partnerships
Write press releases	Develop press kits, media database	Secure media partners
Organize fundraising events	Grant writing, develop database	Secure project staffing
Organize task forces & develop coalitions	Develop leadership structure of task force or coalition	Create infrastructure
Conduct outreach	Design brochures, posters	Create mechanism for project evaluation

AmeriCorps VISTA is an anti-poverty program of the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency that improves lives, strengthens communities, and fosters civic engagement through service and volunteering. VISTA offers service opportunities to individuals 18 or older without regard to race, color, national origin, disability, gender, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation or other nonmerit factors. Applicants must be U.S. citizens, U.S. nationals, or lawful permanent residents.