Is AmeriCorps VISTA Right for Your Organization?

A Guide to Becoming an AmeriCorps VISTA Project Sponsor

VISTA

Volunteers In Service To America

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About AmeriCorps VISTA

About AmeriCorps VISTA

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 support projects at nonprofit, grassroots organizations, and local government agencies that operate programs to help alleviate poverty in the United States. VISTAs strengthen and support these organizations by improving their infrastructure, expanding community partnerships, securing long-term resources, training program participants, and developing other activities that help build long-term sustainability for overcoming poverty. Any nonprofit organization, educational institution, or state or local government agency is eligible to sponsor a VISTA project.

VISTAs are men and women ages 18 and older who commit a year of full-time service to help local communities develop lasting solutions to poverty in America. VISTAs serve as change agents who build infrastructure that strengthens programs—with the ultimate goal of helping low-income people overcome poverty. VISTAs are passionate in their desire to create positive, long-term, sustainable change.

The skill sets and education level of VISTAs are as diverse as the communities they serve. Many VISTAs have college degrees or at least several years of work experience. Still others are recently retired professionals looking for a way to spend their retirement years benefiting a low-income community. In addition to their existing skills, VISTAs receive training in community mobilization, asset identification, fundraising, capacity building, and program sustainability.

The VISTA program has been addressing the needs of low-income communities since 1964. More than 40 years later, more than 170,000 committed individuals have joined forces with 15,000 local organizations to strengthen low-income communities and help people escape poverty across the nation. VISTA alumni represent a powerful network of diverse Americans in careers that include teachers, media celebrities, nonprofit visionaries, physicians, lawmakers, state Supreme Court justices, and CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. VISTA is part of the AmeriCorps national network of service programs that also includes State and National and NCCC (National Civilian Conservation Corps).

URGENT CARE UNIT OPEN

What has VISTA Achieved in Communities Like Yours?

- In a year, VISTAs helped their sponsoring organizations generate more that $87 million in cash funding. The average amount per organization was nearly $92,000.
- In-kind support generated by VISTA was valued by sponsoring organizations at nearly $50 million.
- Each year, VISTAs recruit more than a million community volunteers, who in turn provide more than 14.5 million hours of service to their communities.

Who Can Start a VISTA Project?

Any nonprofit organization or public agency with a project concept designed to alleviate poverty within a community may apply to sponsor a VISTA project. Potential sponsors must have the capacity and commitment to recruit, train, supervise, and otherwise support VISTAs.

What Can VISTAs Do for Your Organization?

- VISTAs enable an organization to turn dream projects into reality. They mobilize local human, financial, and material resources to expand the capacity of low-income communities to build on their own resources and address the challenges they face.

About VISTAs

- VISTAs must be at least 18-years-old; there is no upper age limit.
- VISTAs must be U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents of a state.
- VISTAs serve for one year, full-time at a nonprofit organization or public agency (referred to as sponsoring organizations).
- In return for their service, the VISTA program provides VISTAs a modest living allowance, health care coverage, training, and travel expenses. VISTAs also may be able to defer student loan repayment while they serve. Some VISTAs may be eligible for child care benefits.

Through These Doors
Pass The Greatest People

- Upon completing a year of service, VISTAs may receive a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award* equal to the maximum amount of the federal Pell Grant. VISTAs can use the education award to help pay for college, graduate school, or vocational training, or to help pay back qualified student loans. Or VISTAs may choose to receive an end-of service stipend instead of the education award. The stipend currently accrues at $125 per month of service.
- If a VISTA candidate is willing to move to a new community to serve, the candidate may be eligible for modest relocation allowance.
- VISTAs receive training in interpersonal and leadership skills.

Who are VISTAs?

VISTAs come from all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some VISTAs are recent college graduates looking for an opportunity to serve their community and country and gain real world experience and skills they might not receive in an entry-level position at a corporation, public agency, or nonprofit organization.

Many VISTAs come from the local community being served. They are involved citizens with significant work and community experience. They are networkers who understand the community's history, recognize its assets, and know how to get things accomplished.

Still, other VISTAs are recently retired professionals looking for a meaningful way to spend their retirement years. They are interested in providing their time and skills to benefit the community.

What is the VISTA Experience Like?

VISTAs commit to serve full-time for a year. In many instances, VISTAs reapply for a second year. During their term of service, VISTAs live among and at the economic level of the people in the low-income community where they serve. VISTAs serve at their projects without regard to regular working hours. It is a full-immersion experience. VISTAs may not work elsewhere or be enrolled in an educational institution during their term of service without the permission of the Corporation State Office.

** Check AmeriCorps.gov for the annual updated amount.*

Components of a Successful VISTA Project

Things to Think about Before Applying for a VISTA Project

The VISTA program embraces the idea that private citizens can contribute, on a voluntary basis, to the solution of poverty and poverty-related problems. The VISTAs' role in addressing the problems of poverty in a particular community is to mobilize community resources and increase the capacity of the low-income community. It is critical for the low-income community to be involved in both the planning and execution of the VISTA project.

The primary role of VISTAs is to help build a sustainable program. Hence, VISTAs do not perform direct service. Instead of tutoring youth, for example, VISTAs may help create or expand a tutoring program by recruiting community volunteers to tutor or by obtaining funding for the program. Rather than provide classroom training, VISTAs may help develop a job skills training program.

Although VISTAs produce results during their year of service, crucial to the concept of local self-reliance is that the sponsoring organization plans for the eventual sustainability of the VISTAs and for the absorption of the VISTAs' functions by the organization and community.

If you are interested in sponsoring a VISTA project, it is important that you identify how the project and VISTAs will help your organization and community build a sustainable program designed to lift individuals out of poverty.

Key Questions to Consider

- Is there a poverty-focused project my organization would like to start or expand?
- What are the long-term goals of the project?
- Are the project's goals to help move people and communities out of poverty (not just to make poverty more tolerable)?
- What population(s) does the project target?
- How will we include the local community in project planning and implementation?
- How will a VISTA support these efforts?
- How will we measure the project's impact?
- With what other community groups or organizations will we collaborate?
- Do we have the resources to support one or more VISTAs?

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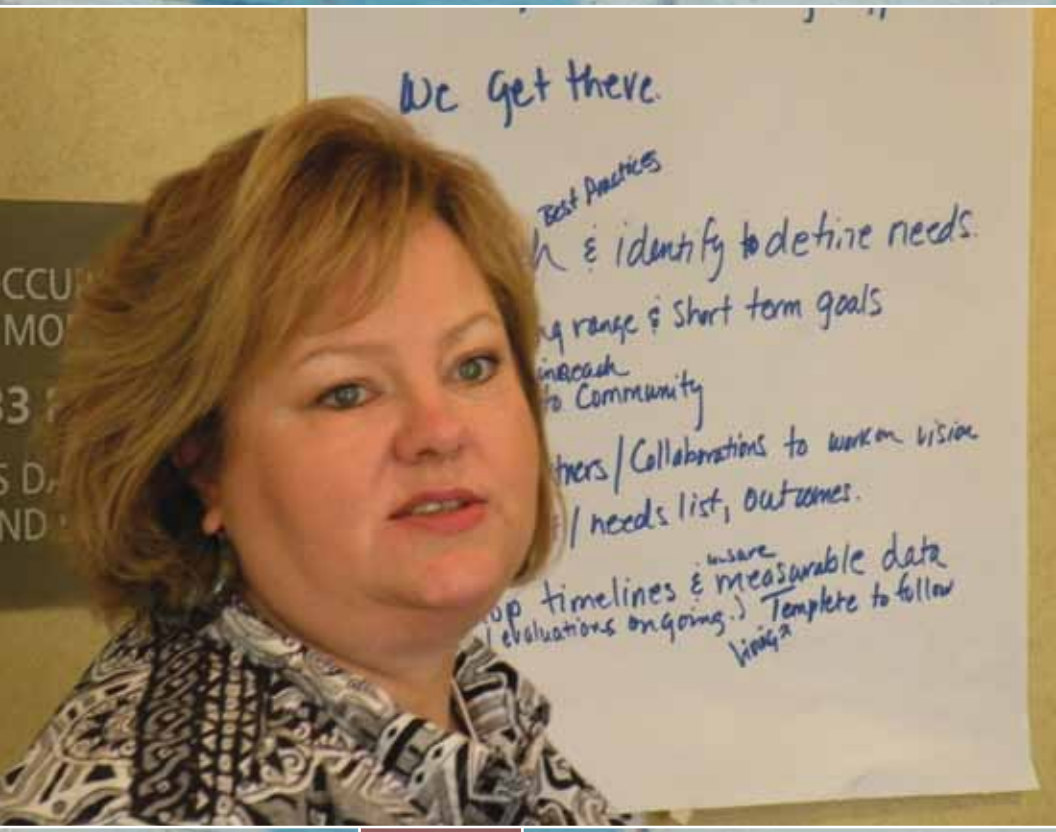
Types of Service Performed by VISTAs

In determining whether the VISTA program is the right match for your organization's needs, think about the kinds of activities you expect VISTAs to perform. The role of VISTAs is to build the capacity and sustainability of the project and community to address poverty and poverty-related issues.

Below are some examples of the natural progression in the types of service performed by a VISTA. Except for discrete training purposes, VISTAs should not be involved in performing direct services such as tutoring, teaching, counseling, driving clients, painting, manual labor, or clerical work.

If the VISTA program does not quite meet your needs, you may consider other programs of the Corporation for National and Community Service, including AmeriCorps State and National, AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps), Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve America. For more information on these programs, visit www.nationalservice.gov.

Acceptable Service	Capacity Building	Sustainable Activities
Recruit volunteers	Develop forms, volunteer assignments	Develop volunteer handbook
Train direct service providers	Write training curriculum or train the trainer curriculum	Develop training manual
Coordinate projects	Develop procedures and systems	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/ coalitions	Develop leadership structure of task force/coalition	Create infrastructure
Conduct outreach	Design brochures, posters	Create mechanism for project evaluation


We Get there.
Best Practices
& identify to define needs.
range & Short term goals
to Community
thers / Collaborations to work on vision
/ needs list, outcomes.
timelines & measurable data
evaluations ongoing.) Templete to follow

The Cost Share Partnership: A Unique VISTA Opportunity

As a federally funded program, VISTA receives a limited financial allocation each year to support the work of VISTA projects across the country. You can increase the number of VISTAs to your agency by becoming a cost share partner.

As a cost share partner, a sponsor contributes the living allowance of one or more of its VISTAs (an average of $10,500 per year per VISTA). In exchange, the VISTA program provides each VISTA with health care coverage and either an education award* equal to the maximum amount of the federal Pell Grant or an end-of-service cash stipend of $1,500 upon successful completion of service. Other benefits include child care if eligible, and any travel or relocation costs for the VISTA. In addition, the VISTA program helps recruit and train the VISTAs, and may provide payroll services for VISTAs at no cost.

The cost share partner's portion of support does not have to be paid up front. Projects are billed monthly. For more information on becoming a cost share partner, request a brochure from the Corporation for National and Community Service office in your state.

** Check AmeriCorps.gov for the annual updated amount.*

Sponsoring a VISTA Project

STEP 1. Preparation

Once you decide to apply for a VISTA project, you should begin planning for project development and for how you would support VISTAs. When applying, you must demonstrate your plan for the following project elements:

Advisory Council: If at least 51 percent of your board of directors does not consist of members of the low-income community (or if you are a government agency), you must establish an Advisory Council of low-income community members to help plan the project, comment on the application, and support the VISTAs and the overall project.

Supervision: Who in your organization will supervise the VISTAs? How much time will the supervisor have to supervise a VISTA (supervisors at a minimum should meet with their VISTAs one hour per week on a one-on-one basis)? The supervisor serves as a manager and a mentor for VISTAs.

Site Location: Where will the VISTAs serve? Does your organization have the space and equipment to support additional persons?

VISTA Support: Is your organization prepared to assist VISTAs who might relocate by finding affordable housing? Does your organization have resources that may make the transition to the VISTA lifestyle easier? Can your organization offer a VISTA specific training and orientation necessary for the VISTA to be successful at the project?

Recruitment: If your project receives approval, how will you fill your VISTA positions? What strategies will you use to recruit candidates? How will you make effective use of the AmeriCorps online recruitment system?

STEP 2. Application Process

We accept and review applications for VISTA projects throughout the year, although project start-ups generally take place four to five times a year. The Corporation for National and Community Service office in your state is available to provide you with technical assistance at any point during the application process. We highly recommend that you contact the Corporation office in your state before completing the concept paper. All project applications must be submitted online via eGrants, the Corporation's online application and reporting system. For a directory of Corporation State Offices, visit www.nationalservice.gov.

VISTA

Governance
& Leadership
ENVIRONMENT
VISTA ROLE
Capacity Building
Transfer of Knowledge
Transfer of Relationships
Transfer of Products
Direct Service
FORCES
GOOD

The Concept Paper

To apply for a VISTA project, your organization must submit a concept paper via our eGrants system to the Corporation for National and Community Service office in your state (For a directory of state offices, visit www.nationalservice.gov). EGrants is a web-based system in which project applications are submitted, assessed, approved or disapproved.

In your concept paper, your organization must demonstrate that the project:

- Helps people overcome poverty
- Brings individual empowerment to community members and institutionalized enhancement to your organization
- Includes outcome-based reporting that measures the actual impact of the project on those being served

The Application

If the state office approves your concept paper, you will be invited to submit an application. After the state office receives the application and the required supporting documents, the staff reviews the application and, in most cases, approves or disapproves it within 10 workdays.

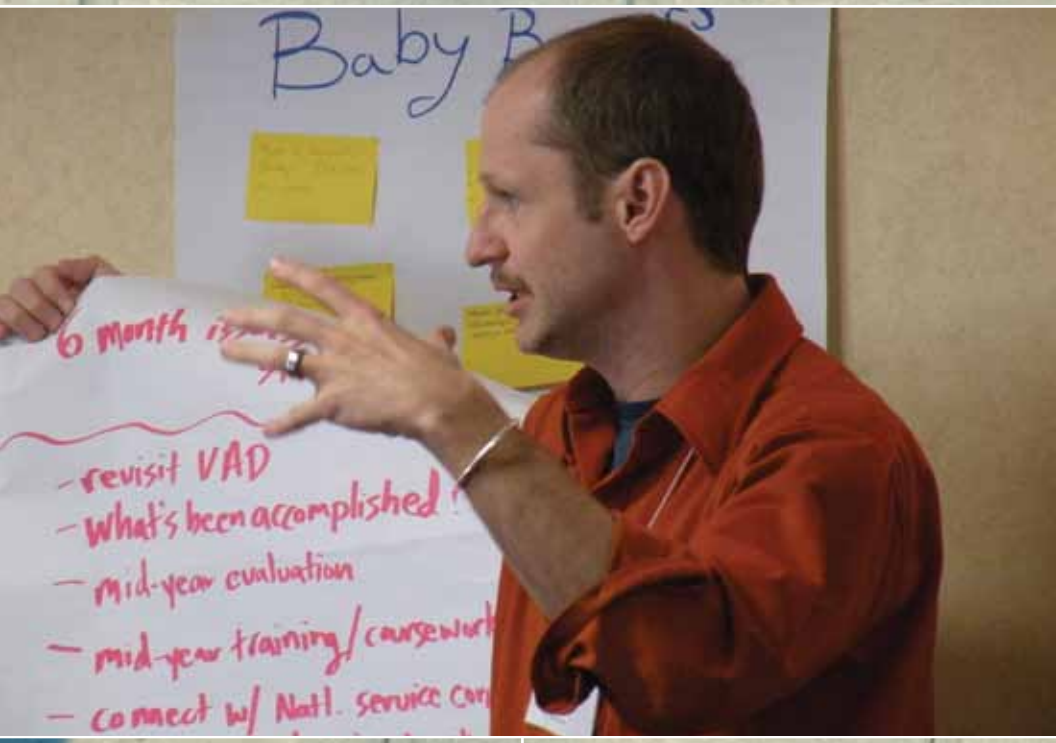
Final Approval and Memorandum of Agreement

If the state office approves your project, a Memorandum of Agreement is signed between the Corporation for National and Community Service and your organization. This legally binding document discusses the federal law, regulations, and policies applicable to VISTA and outlines the specific legal obligations of each party, as well as any joint responsibilities.

STEP 3. Supervisor's Orientation

Once your application receives approval, your organization must designate a VISTA supervisor to become better acquainted with the VISTA program and assume the supervisory role for the new project.

All VISTA supervisors must attend a Supervisor's Orientation at least three months prior to the date their VISTAs begin their term of service. Your state office will arrange for your participation in a Supervisor's Orientation, which usually lasts three to four days. At training, supervisors learn more about the terms and conditions of VISTA service and specific ways they can support the VISTAs at their organization. You will also learn about the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) that you will provide each VISTA. The VAD outlines the project activities assigned to each VISTA.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6 month
- revisit VAD
- What's been accomplished
- mid-year evaluation
- mid-year training/coursework
- connect w/ Natl. service

At training, supervisors also begin planning an On-Site Orientation and Training for their new VISTAs. This orientation, which should occur at the project site during the first two weeks of a VISTA's service, provides the opportunity for VISTAs to become acquainted with the community, learn more about their organization, and gain the knowledge and skills they will need to be successful on the project.

STEP 4. Recruiting VISTAs

Now, you are ready to recruit VISTAs for the VISTA project. Start by posting a description of your project and the VISTA(s) assignment description in the Corporation's online recruitment system available through eGrants. This system, often referred to as the Portal, enables potential candidates to search for projects to which they might be interested in applying. In turn, your organization can search the Portal for candidates who meet your selection criteria.

Once you have posted your description in the Portal, you should begin a local recruitment campaign to attract qualified, skilled, and self-motivated candidates. Determine your audience, and then market your program through several venues:

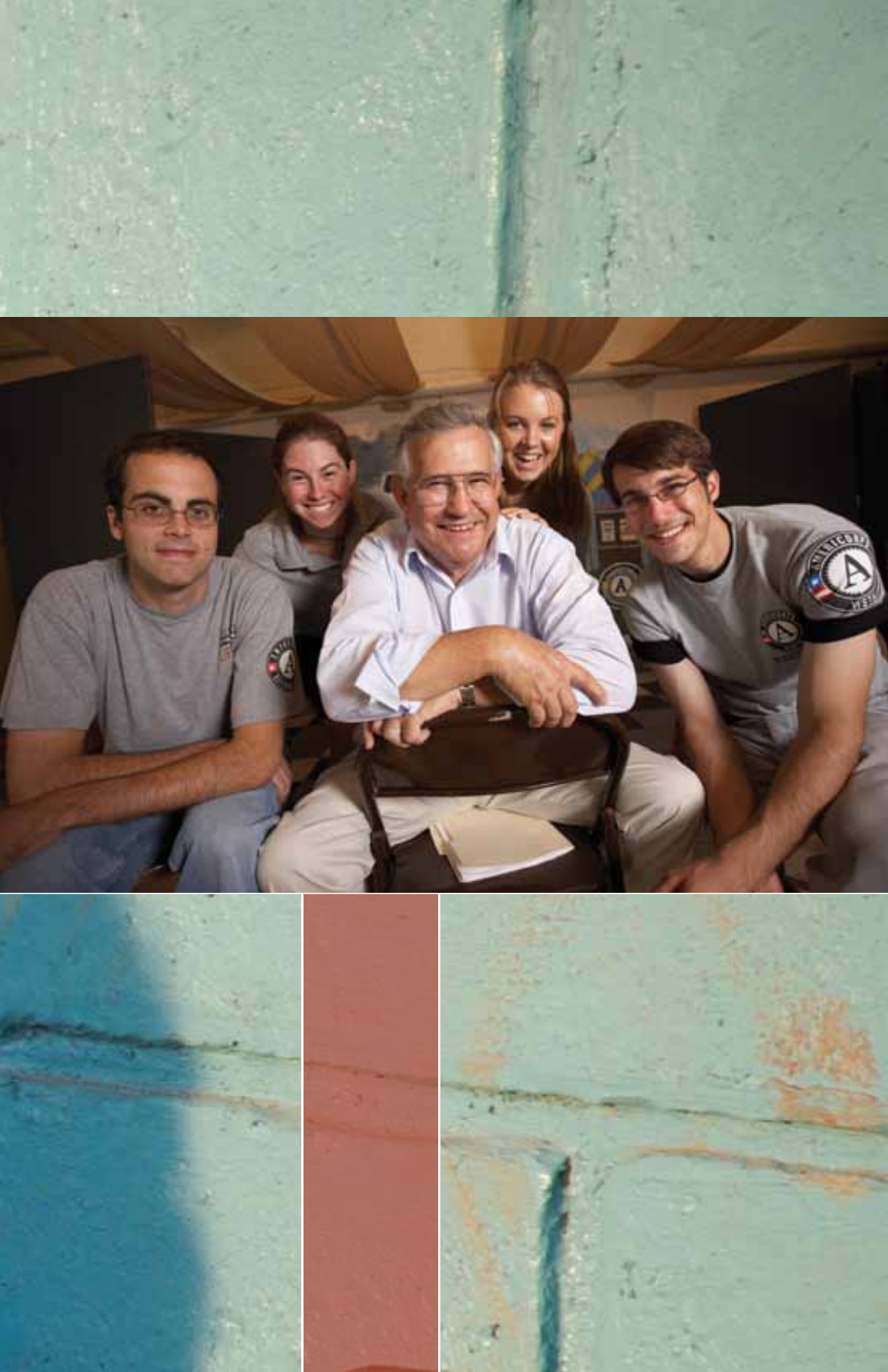
- Promote your positions at college job and volunteer fairs.
- Post fliers on community bulletin boards.
- Post the opportunity on community listservs, blogs and websites.
- Utilize local media to help you recruit VISTAs.
- Speak to local community groups, especially those who volunteer regularly.

Be creative and choose venues that you think will get you the most qualified applicants possible. If you are able to provide housing, be sure to include it in your recruitment materials.

STEP 5. VISTA Selection and Approval

Selection

To determine an applicant's suitability for VISTA service with your organization, it is important that you be thoroughly familiar with the VISTA application and the application process.



Interested applicants should submit an AmeriCorps Member Application, which can be completed online at https://my.americorps.gov or obtained by contacting your Corporation State Office. You may ask applicants to submit a resume in addition to the application.

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

Also, make sure to check their references.

Approval

You have narrowed down your selection to those candidates you regard as well suited for VISTA service and selected them in the online recruitment system. Now, you must submit their applications and a Pre-Service Orientation travel information form for each candidate you recommend for selection to your state office for approval. Please make sure candidates know the state office, not you, makes the final selection decision.

When the Corporation State Office receives the applications online, Corporation staff reviews them for eligibility and suitability. VISTA supervisors are notified of those applicants approved by the state office, at which point the approved applicants become VISTA candidates. At this point also, the sponsor can give official notice to the applicant.

STEP 6. VISTA Training

At this time, the state office issues a formal invitation to the candidate to participate in Pre-Service Orientation (PSO). Before a candidate becomes a VISTA, the candidate attends PSO, which is a three-to-four day training arranged and conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service. The training covers the terms and conditions of VISTA service, provides an opportunity for state office staff to ensure that the candidate will be a good match for the project, and introduces the candidate to some general skills related to getting started and community entry.

For a candidate to attend PSO, the candidate's application must be submitted to the Corporation State Office for approval at least 45 days in advance of the PSO. Candidates also complete enrollment materials online. If your candidate does not have Internet access, you will need to provide an opportunity for the candidate to complete the enrollment materials and some initial online training regarding the terms and conditions of VISTA service.

Mission, Vision & Strategy
Strategic Relationships
Program Delivery & Impact
Governance & Leadership
Resource Development
ENVIRONMENT
Program Delivery & Impact
VISTA ROLE
Capacity Building
To start, strengthen, or expand programs

Prior to their candidates attending PSO, project supervisors must provide candidates with a copy of their VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) and review its contents with them. Candidates must be reminded to bring their VADs with them to the PSO.

Thirty days prior to the candidate's start date, the project supervisor must submit an On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT) plan to their Corporation State Office for review and approval. Ask your state office for a copy of the VISTA OSOT Guidance.

Timeline

To ensure your candidates receives approval in time to attend PSO, please follow the training timeline provided by your state office.

When a candidate successfully completes PSO, the candidate officially becomes a VISTA and begins his/her term of service. Upon returning to the project site, the new VISTA should begin the On-Site Orientation and Training arranged by the VISTA supervisor.

STEP 7. Project Implementation

By now, your supervisors are trained, your VISTAs are recruited and trained, and you are ready to begin implementing your project with the assistance of your new VISTA. During the first year, the VISTA supervisor is required to complete quarterly Project Progress Reports in eGrants. In subsequent years, reporting may be reduced to two Project Progress Reports a year. You must also verify the status of your VISTAs each pay period.

As a sponsoring organization, you join approximately 1,200 organizations across the country working to eliminate poverty with the help of VISTA. Fighting poverty in all its manifestations is tough work; it requires sacrifice and mettle. But with the implementation of your VISTA project—what started as a dream or an idea in response to an unmet need—you are contributing to the day that every child has the opportunity to succeed, that every adult can make the transition from homelessness, and that every poor working American can gain financial assets.

STEP 8. Closeout

When your project ends, you will be expected to provide a final Project Progress Report and submit any financial reports, if required. If you are a cost share sponsor, you will also need to submit payment for the final invoice approximately a month after the project closes.

Glossary of Terms

Concept Paper—The narrative project summary that a potential sponsoring organization must submit to the Corporation State Office for approval before beginning a project application.

Corporation for National and Community Service—An independent federal government agency that administers the AmeriCorps national service network, including VISTA.

Cost Share—A special arrangement between the Corporation for National and Community Service and the sponsoring organization in which the sponsoring organization agrees to share a portion of the cost of supporting VISTAs.

In-Service Training—Training arranged and conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service to build VISTAs' skills in their assignment areas and to share best practices with other VISTAs. VISTAs are required to attend In-Service Training near the beginning of their service start date.

Locally Recruited—A VISTA candidate who was recruited from the local community and approved by the state office.

Member Application—The Corporation for National and Community Service application that potential VISTAs must complete. The state office approves or disapproves all VISTA applications.

Memorandum of Agreement—A legally binding document between the sponsoring organization and the Corporation for National and Community Service; includes applicable federal laws and regulations and outlines the specific obligations of each party, as well as any joint responsibilities.

Nationally Recruited—A VISTA candidate who was recruited nationally and approved by the Corporation for National and Community Service; can be identified through the web-based recruitment system.

On-Site Orientation and Training—An orientation that supervisors arrange for VISTAs; occurs at the project site during their first two weeks of service; provides candidates an opportunity to become acquainted with the community and their sponsoring organization; helps VISTAs acquire the knowledge and skills they need to be successful on the project.

Pre-Service Orientation (PSO)—A required training in which potential VISTAs learn the terms and conditions of VISTA service and are introduced to certain leadership skills; candidates do not officially begin their term of service as VISTAs until they successfully complete PSO.

Project Application—The Corporation for National and Community Service application that potential sponsoring organizations must complete after the state office approves their concept paper.

Sponsoring Organization—A nonprofit organization or public agency designated the responsible party for a VISTA project.

State Office—The Corporation for National and Community Service office located in your state; the primary point of contact between the Corporation and the sponsoring organization.

Supervisor's Orientation—A required training for supervisors of VISTA projects; organized and arranged by the Corporation for National and Community Service; supervisors must attend an orientation at least three months prior to the day VISTAs begin their term of service at the supervisor's VISTA project.

My AmeriCorps Recruitment System—An online database where sponsoring organizations post their project and VISTA position descriptions to recruit applicants; potential applicants may post their VISTA application so that sponsoring organizations can search for applicants with specific skills, interests, or locations; visit www.americorps.gov.

Term of Service—The length of time (typically one year) VISTAs serve with a sponsoring organization to complete one cycle of VISTA service. The term of service for VISTAs serving their first term of service begins the day after they complete Pre-Service Orientation and take the Oath of Service.

Contacts and Resources

Recruit AmeriCorps Members/The Online Recruitment System—To post your AmeriCorps VISTA project and VISTA Assignment Descriptions in the My AmeriCorps Recruitment System, visit: *www.americorps.gov/for_organizations/members/index.asp.*

AmeriCorps VISTA—For more information on AmeriCorps VISTA, visit: *www.americorps.gov/vista.*

AmeriCorps VISTA Supervisors—For guidance to manage you project, visit: *www.americorps.gov/for_organizations/manage/index.asp.*

Corporation for National and Community Service State Offices—For a directory of Corporation for National and Community Service state offices, visit: *www.nationalservice.gov/about/contact/stateoffices.asp.*

AmeriCorps Member Application—Potential VISTAs may begin the application process online in the My AmeriCorps portal at *https://my.americorps.gov/mp/login.do.*

Project Application—To begin an AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application, contact your Corporation State Office or visit: *www.americorps.gov/for_organizations/apply/index.asp*.

Visit *www.nationalservice.gov* for more information and to find the Corporation State Office in your state. The Corporation State Office can provide additional technical assistance.

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