CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
AmeriCorps VISTA Program Specific Questions
Last update 3/30/20

CNCS is closely monitoring the latest developments related to COVID-19. As Americans prepare for the possibility of a COVID-19 outbreak in their community, you may have concerns about the potential impact of this new virus on your program. To help address these concerns, we are providing you with these FAQs. They will be updated regularly.

These FAQs do not have the force and effect of law and are not meant to bind the public in any way. This document is intended only to provide clarity to the public regarding existing requirements under the law or agency policies. You should refer to CNCS’s statute and regulations for applicable requirements.

1. May AmeriCorps VISTA members teleserve full-time?
Yes, VISTA members may teleserve full-time. VISTA is granting two temporary exceptions to the teleservice policy: (1) VISTA members may exceed the two-day per pay period cap, and (2) all currently serving VISTA members are eligible to teleserve, regardless of when their service began. In accordance with VISTA policies, a VISTA project should ensure that the member has an approved teleservice agreement in place before permitting a VISTA member to engage in teleservice activities. The teleservice agreement can be found online here. Members who have an existing teleservice agreement do not need to complete a new one. [updated 3/18]

2. What if a VISTA member cannot teleserve due to lack of teleservice resources?
If a member cannot teleserve due to lack of teleservice resources or lack of assignments suitable for teleservice, the sponsor may grant up to 30 calendar days of emergency leave. This is a temporary exception to the policy permitting sponsors to grant up to five days of emergency leave. Section 105(b)(1) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, authorizes CNCS to provide leave allowances to members, and gives CNCS the discretion to make a temporary exception to the policy. [updated 3/18]

3. Who determines if a VISTA member should teleserve, be granted emergency leave, or continue reporting on site?
The health and safety of our AmeriCorps members is our top priority. What health and safety looks like for members varies by individual circumstances, which is why members will each decide for themselves if continuing to report on site or teleserve is most appropriate for them at this time.

Members who elect not to report to their service site should teleserve. Members who cannot teleserve due to lack of teleservice resources or lack of assignments suitable for teleservice, will be granted up to 30 days of emergency leave.
Members need to communicate their decision to their supervisor, via email. We ask that all our supervisors and sponsors fully honor and respect each member’s decision. [updated 3/20]

4. May a VISTA member teleserve if the member is quarantined?
If a member is not ill and is able to teleserve, the existence of a quarantine does not prevent teleservice. VISTA is granting two temporary exceptions to the teleservice policy: (1) VISTA members may exceed the two-day per pay period cap, and (2) all currently serving VISTA members are eligible to teleserve, regardless of when their service began. [updated 3/12]

5. Does a quarantine imposed by a federal, state, or local health officials count against a VISTA member’s leave time?
No, if a member is quarantined by a federal, state or local health official, it does not count against their leave time. When at all possible, members should teleserve if they are able to do so. Members who can teleserve should do so. See above regarding the availability of teleservice.

If a member cannot teleserve due to lack of teleservice resources or lack of assignments suitable for teleservice, the sponsor may grant up to 30 calendar days of emergency leave. This is a temporary exception to the policy permitting sponsors to grant up to five days of emergency leave. Section 105(b)(1) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, authorizes CNCS to provide leave allowances to members, and gives CNCS the discretion to make a temporary exception to this policy. Emergency leave does not count against a member’s personal or sick leave. [updated 3/12]

6. What should a VISTA who has reason to self-quarantine or would like to self-isolate do?
Members who can teleserve should do so. See above regarding the availability of teleservice.

If a member cannot teleserve due to lack of teleservice resources or lack of assignments suitable for teleservice, the sponsor may grant up to 30 calendar days of emergency leave. This is a temporary exception to the policy permitting sponsors to grant up to five days of emergency leave. Section 105(b)(1) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, authorizes CNCS to provide leave allowances to members, and gives CNCS the discretion to make a temporary exception to this policy. [updated 3/12]

7. What should a VISTA member do if a service site is closed for a significant amount of time?
If the physical service site is closed, the VISTA should teleserve, if they are able to do so. See above for details. If the service site is ceasing operations altogether, the VISTA Supervisor should contact the assigned Portfolio Manager/Program Officer. [updated 3/12]

8. Is medical documentation necessary to receive a prorated end-of-service benefit if a member needs to early terminate due to coronavirus issues?
No. As a temporary exception to VISTA policy, a member may submit a written statement describing the member’s circumstances in lieu of medical documentation. [updated 3/12]

9. Can VISTA grant funds be used to offset costs of additional expenses related to coronavirus?
No. The use of VISTA grant funds is restricted to payroll, supervision, training, and travel. [updated 3/12]

NationalService.gov
10. Can a VISTA member be reimbursed for traveling to be tested for COVID-19?
The best source for COVID-19 resources is the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Follow their guidance on who should be tested and measures for testing. If testing is recommended, and traveling to get tested presents a financial hardship, members should contact the VISTA Member Support Unit at vmsu@cns.gov for emergency funds assistance. [updated 3/18]

11. Should we continue to place and plan on members participating in upcoming VISTA Member Orientations (VMOs)?
The VISTA Member Orientation scheduled for April 13, 2020, has been canceled. At this time, we plan to hold the VMO scheduled for May 11, 2020, and will update you immediately if there are any changes to the schedule.

The VISTA program will contact candidates enrolled in the April VMO and advise them they have been moved to the May VMO. Candidates will be directed to contact their VISTA supervisor if the change in start date raises challenges. [updated 3/18]

12. What provisions are available for VISTA members that have child care issues because of school closures?
The AmeriCorps Child Care benefit provider is making every effort in following CDC recommendations while the country is taking safety measures to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). If you have questions about the childcare benefit, please contact the provider, GAPSI, at:
Phone: 855-886-0687
Email: AmeriCorpsChildCare@gapsi.com

If child care services are unavailable due to school and daycare closures, VISTA members may use emergency leave to provide child care. [updated 3/18]

13. A VISTA project’s fingerprint location has notified them that they will be closed for 6 weeks. Are there any alternative solutions to fingerprinting VISTA members at this time?
VISTA has developed a virtual alternative to fingerprint submissions for background checks.

For all VISTA members who started service on March 16, 2020, AmeriCorps VISTA will be conducting online name-based criminal history background checks. This means VISTA members do not need to physically go get fingerprinted and mail fingerprint cards to VISTA Headquarters. VISTA members are still required to complete a criminal history background check, via the online name-based process.

Members who started service on March 16 will receive an email from VISTAFingerprint@cns.gov with instructions and timelines for completing the online criminal history background check. Questions about this process should be directed to VISTAFingerprint@cns.gov.

If a member started service prior to March 16 and has not yet submitted fingerprints, they will also receive an email from VISTAFingerprint@cns.gov with instructions and timelines for completing the online criminal history background check. [updated 3/18]
14. Can an alum who is exited AmeriCorps/NCCC/Peace Corps early for compelling circumstances due to the coronavirus be eligible to apply to serve as a VISTA Leader in the future?
Yes, if a member early exited a service program for compelling circumstances due to the coronavirus, and completed at least 75% of their service term, they are eligible to apply to serve as a VISTA Leader in the future. [updated 3/18]

15. Can VISTA assignments be amended to add activities related to COVID-19 response efforts? Can the activities include direct service?
Yes, on a limited basis, sponsors may participate in short-term response activities in low-income communities following an emergency such as COVID-19.

In response to COVID-19, VISTA members may engage in limited direct service activities that are not part of their original project application, for a short period of time, generally for up to 30 days.

In making changes to VISTA assignments, the sponsor must ensure:
• The sponsor and VISTA member both voluntarily wish to be involved in such service.
• Appropriate supervision and other supports are available to the VISTA.
• The services activities will not endanger the safety of the VISTA. VISTA members may not engage in medically related activities that put them in direct contact with individuals known to be diagnosed with or potentially exposed to COVID-19.
• The service activities are targeted to the low-income community.

VISTA member assignments may also be modified to include indirect service and teleservice activities that were not part of the original assignment. Sponsors must notify their Program Officer/Portfolio Manager via email to report the new activities that will take place, and the members who will participate in those activities.

All VISTA program policies, terms and conditions remain in effect and benefits and protections afforded and provided to VISTAs and sponsors shall continue as if the VISTAs are in traditional service at the originally assigned site. [updated 3/18]

16. I am unsure of who my CNCS Portfolio Manager/Program Officer is and how to contact them. What should I do?
Please visit NationalService.gov/about/contact-us/state-offices, and contact the State Program Director or Senior Portfolio Manager listed for the state in which your sponsoring organization is located. [updated 3/20]

17. I oversee an intermediary VISTA project. Should members communicate their plans to use emergency leave to their site supervisors or to me?
As the intermediary project director, you are responsible for knowing the status of each member serving with your project, and for timely communicating such information to VISTA program as needed. Please ensure that you are in close communication with members and/or site supervisors with your project. Understanding the operating status of a site and/or member will help you ensure the guidance is followed and will also help you determine when you need to contact your Program Office or Portfolio Manager. [updated 3/20]
18. If a member chooses to continue reporting to site now, will the member be able to utilize teleservice or emergency leave at a later date?
Yes, a member may utilize teleservice or emergency leave at a later date during this critical time. We understand that this is a constantly evolving situation and that a member’s individual circumstances may also change. [updated 3/20]

19. If a member utilizes emergency leave, is a sponsor still required to make sponsor benefit payments such as housing or gas cards?
A member utilizing emergency leave is still considered to be in a service status, and therefore will continue to receive standard benefits from CNCS (e.g. living allowance). We understand that some projects elect to provide additional benefits to members as part of their service commitment. While CNCS does not require sponsors to provide additional benefits to members, we do require additional benefits to be offered and available equally to all members at a site. This includes members who are teleserving as well as those utilizing emergency leave. Please note that a sponsor’s withdrawal of benefits originally provided to members may impact their ability to continue or complete their service term. [updated 3/20]

20. Can VISTA members use a combination of emergency leave & teleservice?
Yes, VISTA members may use a combination of emergency leave and teleservice. VISTA members must communicate their emergency leave and teleservice schedules to their supervisor. [updated 3/20]

21. May a VISTA teleserve from a place other than their residence?
VISTA members, with supervisor approval, may teleserve from a location other than their current residence. VISTA members should request, and supervisors should approve the new location in writing, via email. This is a constantly evolving situation, and for that reason, all VISTA members must be prepared to report back to their service site within 24 hours. [updated 3/20]

22. What emergency travel benefits are available to VISTA members?
Under section 105(b)(1) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, CNCS is authorized to provide VISTAs such “travel and other support” that is necessary and appropriate to carry out the purpose of the VISTA program. Accordingly, CNCS may provide VISTAs certain emergency travel benefits to VISTAs to support their continued service in the VISTA program during this critical time.

Therefore, members who need to travel for circumstances related to COVID-19 may be eligible for emergency travel benefits. This may include members who need to travel to an alternate location due to housing closures and members who need to travel due to their own illness or that of an immediate family member.

The VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU) will follow up individually with members approved for emergency travel who are scheduled to complete service in the near future and entitled to Close of Service travel. The VMSU will determine the appropriate benefit.

To request emergency travel, the VISTA supervisor should send the VISTA Member Support Unit (vmsu@cns.gov) an email titled “Emergency Travel – Member’s Name”, with the following information:

- VISTA Member’s Name
- National Service Participant ID (if available)
- Contact phone number and email for VISTA member
23. Is emergency assistance available to VISTA members?

Under section 105(b)(1) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, CNCS is authorized to ensure that VISTAs have available “allowances and other support’ that will enable them to continue their VISTA service and thereby carry out the purpose of the VISTA program. Accordingly, CNCS may provide VISTAs certain emergency assistance to support their continued service in the VISTA program during this critical time.

Therefore, for the duration of a VISTA’s term of service, emergency assistance may be available if the assistance is essential to the VISTA’s capacity to serve effectively. Emergency funds may be appropriate in extraordinary circumstances that present the VISTA member with an undue financial hardship. VISTA members may be eligible for a one-time payment of up to $500 to cover emergency costs. This benefit will be paid via the voucher process and may take up to 8-10 weeks to process.

To request emergency assistance, the VISTA supervisor should send the VISTA Member Support Unit (vmsu@cns.gov) an email titled “Emergency Assistance Request – Member’s Name,” with the following information:

- VISTA member’s name
- National Service Participant ID (if available)
- Contact phone number and email for VISTA member
- Name of VISTA Supervisor and VISTA Project Director (if different people)
  - The supervisor must also cc the project director (if different) on the email
- Written statement from the VISTA member detailing:
  - The circumstances surrounding the emergency costs
  - An explanation of why the emergency assistance is essential to the VISTA’s ability to serve effectively
  - The cost of the item(s) associated with the emergency assistance

The VMSU will follow up with the member to process the request. [updated 3/24]

24. What coverage is provided for COVID-19 testing under the VISTA health benefit? If a VISTA member is diagnosed with COVID-19, what is covered under the VISTA health benefit?

A VISTA member must be enrolled in either the AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance or the AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefit Plan to receive health benefit coverage. If a member is not already enrolled, they can enroll now at Americorpsvista.imglobal.com/.
The best source for COVID-19 resources is the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Follow their guidance on who should be tested and measures for testing. If testing for COVID-19 is recommended, testing is covered under both the AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance and the AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefit Plan. If a VISTA member is diagnosed with COVID-19, both the AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance and the AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefit Plan will cover medically necessary care, in accordance with the benefit plan.

For further questions about the VISTA health benefit, please contact International Medical Group at:
Telephone: 855-851-2974 (toll-free) or 317-833-1711
Email: VISTAcare@imglobal.com [updated 3/30]

25. I have a Project Progress Report (PPR) due soon. Due to the COVID-19 response, our VISTA members have been on emergency leave, the project has not met planned accomplishments for the reporting period, and/or I am not able to collect data from some sites. What should I do?
You should complete the PPR by the established due date and include the information you have available. Document your challenges, how you mitigated them, and any technical assistance you need from CNCS. The PPR is a way for sponsors to document project accomplishments during a certain reporting period, as well as challenges, support provided to VISTA members, and technical assistance (TA) needs. CNCS personnel use the PPR to assess progress and to determine what feedback, technical assistance, or other interventions are needed.

By completing the PPR, you are providing CNCS with information about your COVID-19 related challenges in implementing the project, which allows CNCS to work with you on potential changes to programming, flexibilities, or other technical assistance that your organization, partners, staff, and members need. You can document what has transpired (successes, challenges, changes in member status and recruitment plans, TA needs, etc.) in the narrative section of the PPR. Please be specific in the narrative section. For performance measures, if you would like to provide any additional information for a performance measure set, you should provide it in the “Sponsor Note” section. If targets are not on track to be achieved, provide an explanation, such as “No data from ABC After-School Program due to March 12, 2020, closure at XYZ Elementary School in response to COVID-19.” [updated 3/30]

26. I am a currently serving VISTA and would like to change my End-of-Service Award from the Education Award to the Cash Stipend, but missed the 10th-month deadline. Am I still able to switch to the Cash Stipend?
Yes, as a temporary COVID-19 related exception to policy, members are allowed to change their End-of-Service Award from the Education Award to the Cash Stipend during this time. You must submit a request to change your End-of-Service Award from the Education Award to the Cash Stipend to the VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU) at VMSU@cns.gov at least one week prior to your end of service. One week is required for the Corporation for National and Community Service to complete the necessary actions to make the change to your End-of-Service Award status.

Individuals will not be allowed to switch their End-of-Service Award if:
- The individual already completed service.
- The member selected the Cash Stipend and wants to switch to the Education Award.
Members should contact the VMSU at VMSU@cns.gov if they have any questions or to submit a request. [updated 3/30]