



# VISTA

Volunteers In Service To America

## Request for AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Papers - 2016

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## SUMMARY

The Illinois Corporation State Office (CSO) of the [Corporation for National and Community Service \(CNCS\)](#) seeks concept papers for the AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program from innovative, high-performing, and outcome-driven organizations that share the AmeriCorps VISTA's mission: providing long-term solutions to eliminate poverty.

## AGENCY DESCRIPTION

CNCS is a federal agency that engages Americans in service through its core programs: [Senior Corps](#), [AmeriCorps](#), the [Social Innovation Fund \(SIF\)](#), and the [Volunteer Generation Fund \(VGF\)](#). CNCS leads President Obama's national call to service initiative, [United We Serve](#). As the nation's largest grant-maker for service and volunteering, CNCS plays a critical role in strengthening America's nonprofit sector and addressing our nation's challenges through service. CNCS's mission is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.

## ELIGIBLE SPONSORS

Public organizations such as state and local government organizations, Indian Tribes, and nonprofit private organizations may apply to become AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors. All organizations with an IRS 501(c) status that focus on anti-poverty community development are eligible to apply, however, **organizations that focus solely on advocacy and lobbying are not eligible.**

Organizations can be locally, state, or nationally based. National organizations should consider applying to AmeriCorps VISTA Headquarters for AmeriCorps VISTA sponsorship if AmeriCorps VISTA members will serve in more than one state.

Each AmeriCorps VISTA project's goal must incorporate plans to sustain project outcomes after the project agreement ends. Sponsors must be able to direct the project, recruit, and supervise AmeriCorps VISTA Members, and provide the necessary administrative support to complete project goals.

AmeriCorps VISTA project beneficiaries are low-income individuals and impoverished poverty communities. Sponsors develop and manage projects with input and involvement from the beneficiaries being served.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Authorized in 1964, the AmeriCorps VISTA program supports efforts to eradicate poverty by engaging citizens in a year of service. As defined by the [Domestic Volunteer Service Act](#), the AmeriCorps VISTA program is designed to “generate the commitment of private sector resources, to encourage volunteer service at the local level, to support efforts by local agencies and community organizations to achieve long-term sustainability of projects....” AmeriCorps VISTA projects focus on building organizational capacity and strengthening organizational infrastructure to bring both individuals and communities out of poverty.

The AmeriCorps VISTA program places members at sponsoring organizations. Sponsoring organizations absorb most of the costs for project supervision, administrative overhead, and logistical support. The AmeriCorps VISTA program provides a small living allowance and specified [benefits](#) to members during their service. AmeriCorps VISTA resources are intended as short-term support for an organization—project’s last, on average, approximately 3 years. Therefore, a sponsor’s commitment and community buy-in are crucial to a project’s success.

## CORE VALUES

AmeriCorps VISTA projects must operate under the following principles:

- **Anti-Poverty Focus** – The purpose of AmeriCorps VISTA is to support efforts to fight poverty. Any nonprofit organization, educational institution, or tribal or public agency with a program that is poverty-related in scope may be considered for AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsorship. The project should address helping individuals and communities out of poverty, not simply making poverty more tolerable through short-term services.
- **Community Empowerment** – Sponsoring organizations ensure that the project engages residents of low-income communities 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 assets, strengths, and resources.
- **Sustainable Solutions** – AmeriCorps VISTA Members provide short-term human resources to build long-term sustainability of anti-poverty programs. All AmeriCorps VISTA projects should be developed with the goal to phase out the need for AmeriCorps VISTA Members and strengthen the ability of the project to continue indefinitely.
- **Capacity Building** – AmeriCorps VISTA Members do not provide direct services to low-income individuals; rather they work to increase the capacity of organizations to fight poverty. Through activities such as fundraising, establishment of community volunteer recruitment and management systems, community outreach, and collaborative development, AmeriCorps VISTA Members mobilize local resources to achieve lasting solutions to poverty. Projects focus on achieving impactful outcomes on the community and/or beneficiary population.

## ABOUT AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBERS

AmeriCorps VISTA Members come from diverse racial, social, geographic, and economic backgrounds. They live and serve in some of our nation's poorest communities. Each member makes a year-long, full-time commitment to serve at a specific project.

Members provide capacity building services, or in-direct service. AmeriCorps VISTA Members do not perform direct service or physical labor. For example, if the proposed project's goal is to provide access to more affordable housing, then an AmeriCorps VISTA member could design a Volunteer Recruitment Program or serve to develop an Outreach and Engagement Plan once housing units are available. Constructing the homes or demolishing structures at the location of a future housing unit are not appropriate AmeriCorps VISTA activities. AmeriCorps State, AmeriCorps National, or AmeriCorps NCCC members, however, can perform direct service activities. [More examples](#) about the difference between direct and indirect service are available on the VISTA Campus and the [What VISTAs Members Do](#) section on CNCS's main website.

AmeriCorps VISTA Members cannot displace staff positions or staff duties. AmeriCorps VISTA Members are not considered employees of sponsoring organizations, nor are they considered employees of the federal government, except in [limited circumstances](#). Members are a federal resource recruited by a sponsoring organization to accomplish the project's goals.

While in service, AmeriCorps VISTA Members receive a modest living allowance and [benefits](#). Members also have the option to receive either an [Eli Segal AmeriCorps Education Award](#) or an end-of-service cash stipend after successfully completing a term of service.

Each AmeriCorps VISTA candidate must take a course explaining the [Terms and Conditions](#) of the program before they begin service. A quick overview of the [terms and conditions](#) of the VISTA program and [limitations on member activities](#) are also available on the VISTA Campus.

AmeriCorps VISTA members must also be at least 18 years of age and must be either a U.S. citizen, national, or legal permanent resident alien of the United State.

## CONCEPT PAPER REQUIREMENTS

Applicants must meet the requirements of sponsorship listed in the Concept Paper and the Application for Federal Assistance, as well as the Program Guidance for 2016. More information is available at the [Sponsor a VISTA Project](#) page on CNCS’s website.

When completing the application for AmeriCorps VISTA sponsorship, ensure the proposal:

- Reflects AmeriCorps VISTA’s anti-poverty mission and addresses the core principles
- Addresses one or more of the [CNCS Strategic Plan](#) Focus Areas and AmeriCorps VISTA Priorities

<a href="#">Education</a>	This focus area refers to unmet educational needs within communities, especially those that help at-risk youth to achieve success in school and prevent them from dropping out.
<a href="#">Healthy Futures</a>	This focus area addresses unmet health needs, including access to health care, increasing physical activity and improving nutrition in youth, and increasing seniors’ ability to remain in their own homes.
<a href="#">Veterans and Military Families</a>	This focus area refers to unmet needs of veterans, members of the armed forces, and family members of deployed military personnel.
<a href="#">Economic Opportunity</a>	This focus area addresses unmet needs of economically disadvantaged individuals, including financial literacy, affordable housing, and employment-related assistance.

- Demonstrates an understanding of the AmeriCorps VISTA program within the context national service
- Articulates clearly defined project goals with measurable impact under the appropriate [performance measures](#) for the AmeriCorps VISTA program
- Clearly states the applicant’s financial commitment towards the project and ability to effectively manage AmeriCorps VISTA resources

## ILLINOIS CSO PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS

The Illinois CSO seeks concept papers that align with the following CNCS Strategic Focus Areas: **Education, Veterans & Military Families, Healthy Futures, and Economic Opportunity.**

Concept papers for AmeriCorps VISTA projects should propose activities for a minimum of five (5) full-time AmeriCorps VISTA members. If an applicant is unable to administratively support this number of full time members, the applicant may collaborate with two or more partnering organizations. Narratives should also explain how the organization will collaborate with other national service program sponsors in the proposed service area(s).

Additional consideration will be given to concept papers/organizations:

- that serve rural areas
- develop intermediary projects that serve large portions of Illinois, or state-wide programs
- demonstrate an ability to provide matching, or [cost share](#), funds for the living allowance of one or more AmeriCorps VISTA members.

### **COST-SHARE, OR SPONSOR MATCH**

Cost Share Sponsors help extend AmeriCorps VISTA’s programmatic reach. To maximize federal resources, CNCS looks to project sponsors to pay for member(s) living allowances. The organization enters an agreement with CNCS to recruit for a predetermined number of cost-share positions. Once an AmeriCorps VISTA member is recruited and coded as cost-share by the CSO, the sponsor is billed for the number of days that member serves. Living allowance rates are based on the county in which the member serves. In Illinois, the living allowance rate generally falls between \$11,000 and \$13,000.

While not a requirement under current regulations, cost share agreements are strongly encouraged. Organizations that can support cost-share agreements are given preference. The amount an organization is expected to cost share coincides with the length of the AmeriCorps VISTA project.

For more information on cost-sharing, visit the [Cost Share Sponsors](#) section of the VISTA Campus.

### **RETURNING SPONSORS**

AmeriCorps VISTA projects are initially approved for a one-year period and considered for continuation based on an annual review for up to two additional years. The CSO reviews the project’s previous accomplishments, long-term plans for project sustainability, timeliness and completeness of required program documents, and member recruitment and retention.

Organizations that have previously sponsored AmeriCorps VISTA projects for more than 3 years can reapply to sponsor a new project with a new program emphasis. Prior sponsors must demonstrate a successful project management track record with quantitative and qualitative results.

The CSO’s decision to continue a project is based on funding availability, program performance and compliance, and CNCS’s strategic priorities. More information on [project continuation](#) is listed in the AmeriCorps VISTA Supervisors Manual and the [Selection of AmeriCorps VISTA Sponsors and Projects Guidelines](#) in the federal register.

## HOW TO APPLY

### CONCEPT PAPER

Applying for VISTA is a multi-tiered process. Organizations interested in hosting VISTA Members must first submit a concept paper. **Concept Papers must be submitted in [eGrants](#) by Monday, November 2, 2015 by 4:00pm CST.** To create an account and access eGrants, and instructions for the AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper, scroll down to the *Resources* section of this document.

Concept papers must be created under the following Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for consideration: **AmeriCorps VISTA State FY 2016 Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA)**

Only concept papers submitted in eGrants will be considered. Submitting a concept paper does not guarantee approval or resource commitment. Submissions are evaluated on the information included in the narratives and are subject to the availability of current program resources.

### MANDATORY TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE WEBINAR

**The Illinois CSO is hosting a mandatory technical assistance webinar on October 15, 2015, at 1:00 PM CST.** Representatives from organizations that want to apply for AmeriCorps VISTA resources must attend this session to be considered for sponsorship. Call information and the link to the online portion of the webinar is included below:

**Illinois Conference Line: 1.877.953.4376**  
**Illinois Conference Line Passcode: 61187838**

[→ Join Skype Meeting](#)

Please follow the link below to find support for Skype for Business:

<https://support.skype.com/en/skype/windows-desktop/>

### APPLICATION

If a concept paper is accepted, the organization will be invited to submit a full application to the IL CSO for review and approval. Once the application is approved, the organization will sign a Memorandum of Agreement (MA) with CNCS. CNCS Program Officers will work with each organization to provide guidance, technical assistance, and monitoring project progress.

### EXPECTATIONS FOR ACCEPTED PROJECTS

Once the MA is signed, Program Officers will work with sponsoring organizations to support their AmeriCorps VISTA project. Sponsors will designate a staff member to supervise the project and send the individual to a [supervisor training](#) prior to recruiting AmeriCorps VISTA candidates. Sponsors are expected to [develop assignment descriptions](#), [recruit](#) and [orient](#) incoming members, and identify [ongoing training](#) opportunities for members who serve at their organization. Sponsors are also expected to [report on project progress](#) and [verify when members serve](#) for the duration of the project.

## SCHEDULE

All times are indicated in Central Standard Time (CST)

<b>Day</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Action</b>
Thursday,	10/1/2015		Request for Concept Papers for AmeriCorps VISTA Projects in Illinois
Thursday,	10/15/2015	1:00pm, CST	Mandatory Technical Assistance Webinar for organizations interested in sponsoring an AmeriCorps VISTA project in Illinois
Monday,	11/2/2015	4:00pm, CST	Concept papers due in eGrants
Tuesday, Friday,	11/3/2015 11/13/2015		Concept paper review
Monday,	11/16/2015		Illinois CSO announces concept paper decisions
Tuesday, Monday,	11/17/2015 12/7/2015	12:00pm, CST	Organizations with accepted concept papers write and submit project applications
Tuesday, Friday,	12/8/2015 1/8/2016		Illinois CSO reviews submitted applications
Wednesday,	1/13/2016		Illinois VISTA Projects are announced
TBD	January 2016		IL CSO Program Officers begin technical assistance to incoming project sponsors
TBD	April 2016		Project Supervisors attend AmeriCorps VISTA Supervisor Training
	May 2016-- August 2016		AmeriCorps VISTA members begin service at new projects

## RESOURCES

- [VISTA 101: Understanding VISTA](#)
- [VISTA 201: A Guide to Applying to become an AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsor](#)
- [AmeriCorps VISTA Supervisors Manual](#)
- [Is AmeriCorps VISTA Right for Your Organization?: A Guide to Becoming an AmeriCorps VISTA Sponsoring Organization](#)
- [Sponsor and AmeriCorps VISTA Project](#)
  - FY2016 Program Guidance
  - AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper Instructions
  - AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application and Instructions
- [VISTA Performance Measures](#)
- [eGrants Log-in screen and tutorial to create and manage an eGrants account](#)
- [AmeriCorps VISTA Performance Measure Module in eGrants](#)
- [www.nationalservice.gov](http://www.nationalservice.gov)
- [www.vistacampus.gov](http://www.vistacampus.gov)

For more information or questions about any item noted in this document, please contact the Illinois Corporation State Office at [IL@cns.gov](mailto:IL@cns.gov).