VISTA 101: Understanding VISTA

An online orientation to help you decide if VISTA is right for your organization

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VISTA 101: Understanding VISTA

- Do you want to increase your ability to end poverty in your community?
- Could you use help tracking donors, recruiting volunteers, or developing other systems that build your capacity to meet the needs of the low-income community?
- Do you have a dream project that addresses a community need but not the resources to get it off the ground?

AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) is a national service program dedicated to ending poverty by building the capacity of nonprofit organizations and public agencies.

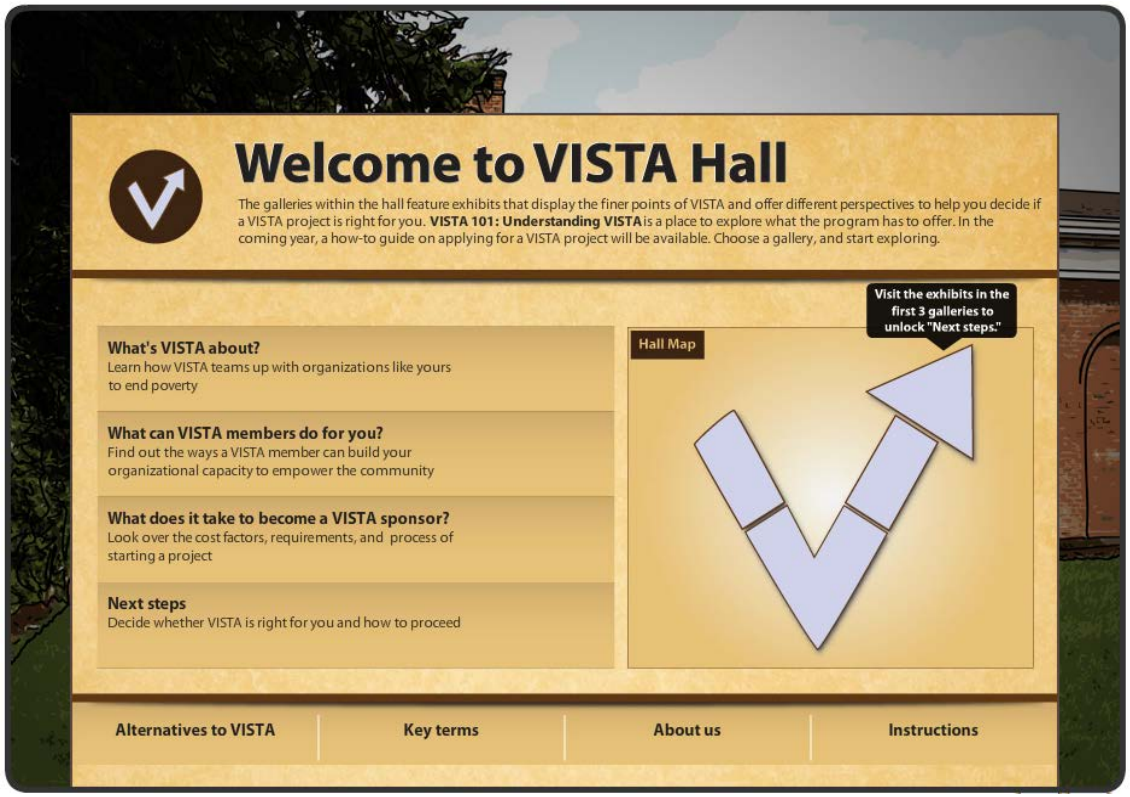
A federal program administered through the Corporation for National & Community Service (CNCS), VISTA attracts more than 7,000 Americans a year to engage in anti-poverty activities in communities throughout the nation.

New projects, small and large, typically last for 3 years with VISTA members placed at single or multiple sites.

Is applying for a VISTA project right for your organization? Click "Begin" to decide for yourself.

BEGIN

Explore VISTA Hall



RUSS: Hi, I'm Russ. I'm a state director with the Corporation for National and Community Service and one of your guides. I work with the VISTA projects in my state, through all stages of the process. Thank you for your interest in VISTA! We hope this resource will help you make a good decision on whether pursuing VISTA is the right move for you.

I'd like to take a second to introduce you to the other guides who will be showing you around VISTA Hall. Joel is a community member recruited to help provide guidance to a new VISTA project in his neighborhood. Cece is a VISTA member who just began her year. Her focus will be on developing a recruitment system for volunteers. Lisa is a brand new VISTA sponsor, and the process her agency went through to decide whether or not to pursue a VISTA project is still fresh in her mind.

What's VISTA about?

Learn how VISTA teams up with organizations like yours to end poverty

What can VISTA members do for you?

Find out the ways a VISTA member can build your organizational capacity to empower the community

What does it take to become a VISTA sponsor?

Look over the cost factors, requirements, and process of starting a project

Next steps

Decide whether VISTA is right for you and how to proceed

To begin your orientation, choose a gallery to enter, and take a look around. You'll find exhibits that will give you the background you need to make a choice on whether VISTA is right for you.

The galleries within the hall feature exhibits that display the finer points of VISTA and offer different perspectives to help you decide if a VISTA project is right for you.

VISTA 101: Understanding VISTA is a place to explore what the program has to offer. In the coming year, a how-to guide on applying for a VISTA project will be available.

If at any time you decide VISTA is not what you are looking for, click “Alternatives to VISTA” to check out other options in the national service family.

Choose a gallery, and start exploring.

Alternatives to VISTA

Key terms

About us

What's VISTA about?

To help you decide if VISTA is right for your organization, explore these various aspects of the program.

RUSS: To kick off, we'll take a closer look at the VISTA program to see if it might be right for you.

1a. VISTA overview & mission

VISTA's mission is to strengthen and supplement efforts in low-income communities to eliminate and alleviate poverty by engaging volunteers from all walks of life, all geographical areas, and all age groups in a year of full-time service.

VISTA aims to build capacity in nonprofit organizations and public agencies to help them more effectively generate the commitment of private sector resources, to encourage volunteer service at the local level, and empower individuals and communities to raise their standards of living.

If you'd like more information on the concepts that underlie VISTA, the text of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act, the law that authorizes VISTA, is available online.

RUSS: VISTA taps the skills, talents and passion of nearly 7,000 Americans each year to support community efforts to overcome poverty.

Now let's learn about the 4 key principles of VISTA.

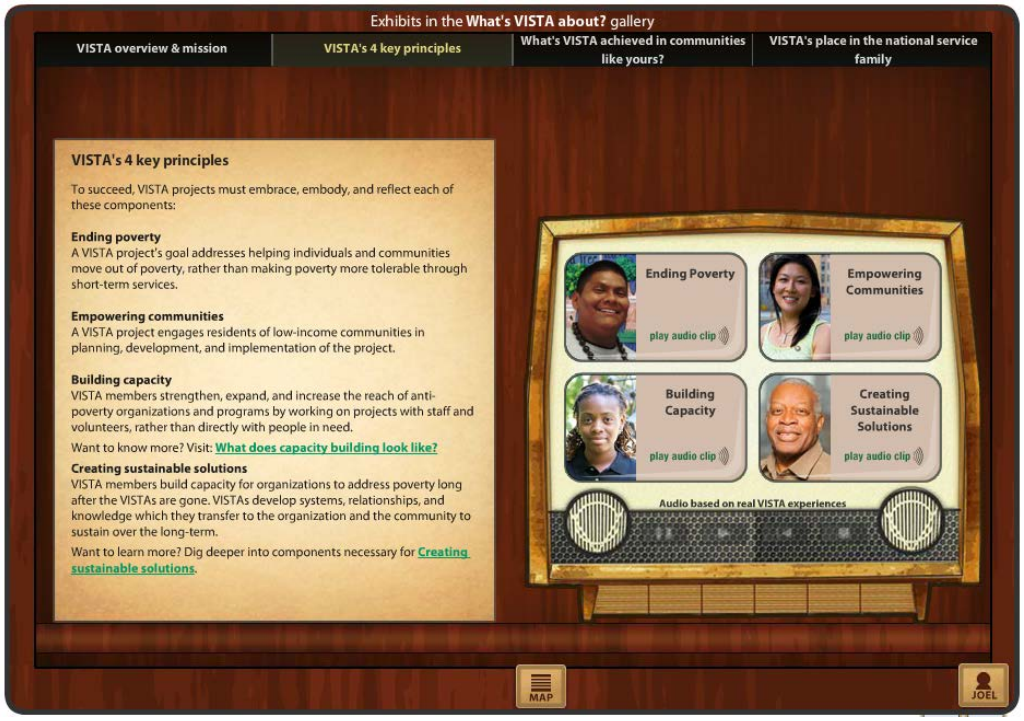
AmeriCorps VISTA is the national service program designed specifically to fight poverty. Founded as Volunteers in Service to America in 1965 and incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of programs in 1993, VISTA has helped lift communities and individuals out of poverty over the course of 5 decades.

The CNCS network of national service programs engages Americans in intensive service to meet critical needs in education, healthy futures, economic opportunity, environmental stewardship, veterans and military families and disaster services

1b. VISTA's 4 key principles

To succeed, VISTA projects must embrace, embody, and reflect each of these components:

JOEL: My name is Joel, and I'm a community member recruited to provide guidance to a VISTA project that just started in my neighborhood. When I started, I was interested in learning more about how VISTA makes a difference in these 4 ways. You can click any of the 4 to hear how VISTA has put these principles into action across the country.



Ending poverty

A VISTA project's goal addresses helping individuals and communities move out of poverty, rather than making poverty more tolerable through short-term services.

Our VISTA program fights poverty by focusing on workforce development in Native American communities. One of our VISTAs worked with a tribe in a remote area to develop a partnership with the local community college on a pre-apprenticeship program for various trades. Another VISTA wrote and won a grant for a youth

employment program.

Empowering communities

A VISTA project engages residents of low-income communities in planning, development, and implementation of the project.

Our VISTA program places importance on involving members of the community in our planning processes. By listening to the voices of those we are trying to help, we are more confident that we are meeting the needs of the community. It's less like we're providing a service than we're collaborating on solutions with the community directly.

Building capacity

VISTA members strengthen, expand, and increase the reach of anti-poverty organizations and programs by working on projects with staff and volunteers, rather than directly with people in need.

I serve because I knew my efforts would help my organization sustain its current programs and help them start other programs. These programs benefit people in need and aren't provided by anyone else in my county.

Want to know more? Visit: What does capacity building look like?

Creating sustainable solutions

VISTA members build capacity for organizations to address poverty long after the VISTAs are gone. VISTAs develop systems, relationships, and knowledge which they transfer to the organization and the community to sustain over the long-term.

Our VISTA program created a sustainable solution for meeting basic needs of homeless people and youth aging out of the foster care system. It was unique in our community. The VISTA came up with the concept for a monthly "Free Day of Laundry." People get breakfast and lunch while their clothes get cleaned. It provides a great services and really helps people out. A dedicated volunteer "facilitator" leads others to continue staffing this service now that the VISTA's assignment has ended.

Audio based on real VISTA experiences

Want to learn more? Dig deeper into components necessary for Creating sustainable solutions.

1b-1. What does capacity building look like?

Building capacity for an organization or providing direct service? Select which term best describes each activity.

	Capacity building	Direct service
Recruiting volunteers to build houses	X	
Mentoring teenagers		X
Building houses		X
Organizing a fundraiser	X	
Delivering meals on wheels		X
Developing a database for mentors	X	
Setting up partnerships in the community	X	
Teaching a financial literacy course		X
Providing health-screening services		X
Writing a curriculum for a financial literacy course	X	

How did you do? Still a little foggy on the difference between capacity building and direct service? Learn more about direct service vs. capacity building.

JOEL: I was also interested in learning more about how VISTA builds capacity in organizations and communities, and supports long-term solutions to the problems of poverty. VISTA members build capacity, rather than providing direct service. What does that mean?

RUSS: Hi, it's Russ back to talk more about what a VISTA can and cannot do. VISTAs generally do not perform direct-service activities like tutoring, manual labor, teaching, clerical work, or counseling. While these vital activities address individual clients' needs in the here and now, they are usually short-term solutions to long-standing problems. A VISTA's capacity-building efforts should be geared toward helping an organization or agency grow its ability to address poverty over the long-term.

1b-2. Direct service vs. capacity building

RUSS: Here are more explicit examples of the distinction between capacity building and direct service. Click each for their definitions.

Capacity Building

Efforts and projects that expand the capabilities of the organization and community, rather than the VISTA member being a direct service provider to people in need.

Direct Service

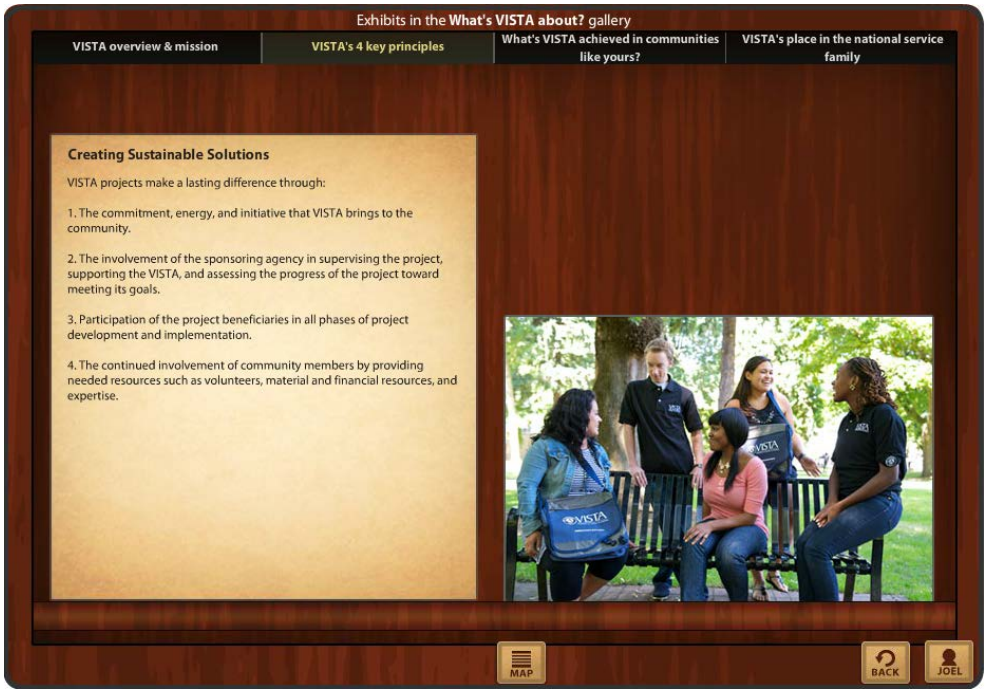
Provides immediate solutions to help people in need. These can include activities like tutoring, performing manual labor, teaching, doing clerical work, or counseling.

1b-3. Creating Sustainable Solutions

VISTA projects make a lasting difference through:

1. The commitment, energy, and initiative that VISTA brings to the community.
2. The involvement of the sponsoring agency in supervising the project, supporting the VISTA, and assessing the progress of the project toward meeting its goals.
3. Participation of the project beneficiaries in all phases of project development and implementation.
4. The continued involvement of community members by providing needed resources such as volunteers, material and financial resources, and expertise.

JOEL: What does it mean for a VISTA project to achieve sustainability within a community? These are the critical elements.



1c. What Has VISTA Achieved in Communities Like Yours?

On average, a VISTA project generates $140,000 per year in cash and in-kind resources for a sponsoring organization. Want to learn more? Visit The value of a VISTA.

"VISTAs have built capacity and long term sustainability for a program that truly impacts the lives and well-being of citizens in our state that otherwise would not have had access to, in this case, the necessary medical coverage, medical care, prescription drug coverage, dental care and vision care that we feel they're entitled to."

"They work in the capacity building way, they don't do one-on-one activities, they do work that will affect a lot of recipients."

"We're there to develop systems, to develop the people around us to solve a problem."

"I think I am very proud of having been involved with a community resource center for foster children. Basically over the space of about 6 months, a couple of VISTA members created a new service center that is now serving over 1,300 foster children each month in the city of Mesa. It's generating about $800,000 each year in community resources and it all started with the idea of a couple of VISTAs, couple of community members coming together."

"In the Delta, Mississippi, Delta area, we had 34 VISTAs to help students, young children, learn how to grow food, build the capacity for food pantries and to learn about nutrition to help address the obesity problem that we have in Mississippi."

"I think partly, the immediate results that we're seeing is a group of people coming together that otherwise may not have worked together in this way. There's been some really important relationships developed that I think will be the foundation for our future work."

"We take great pride, I think, in those success stories where folks really do develop that capacity for self-sufficiency."

"There is a sense of both pride and engagement and concern and passion about making your community better. It is your slice of America. And as you make that better, you make your counties better, and you make your states better and you make this country better."

RUSS: Watch this video to hear some of my colleagues from the Corporation for National & Community Service talk about some VISTA projects that have had an impact in communities all over the United States.

1c-1. The value of a VISTA

How much do VISTAs give back to their sponsor sites?

RUSS: VISTAs aim to eliminate poverty in the communities where they serve. They accomplish this by growing the ability of their sponsoring organizations to meet community needs. Here is a dollars and cents look at the value VISTAs bring to their sponsoring organizations.

VISTAs bring in resources

In recent years, VISTAs across the U.S. have generated more than $160 million* in cash and in-kind resources annually for their sponsoring organizations.

That breaks down to more than $140,000 per VISTA project.

VISTAs engage volunteers

VISTAs recruit more than a million community volunteers each year*. These volunteers average 9 to 14 hours of service, with some individuals contributing significantly more. On a local level, these figures translate to

nearly 1,000 volunteers recruited per VISTA project.

According to Independent Sector, one volunteer hour is worth more than $20 to the beneficiary organization. That equates to more than a $180,000 value* for the volunteer hours generated per VISTA project over the course of a year.

VISTAs make things happen

Here is an example of a VISTA success story. When the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks started its VISTA project in 2006 with an aim of opening new Ohio Benefit Bank (OBB) sites to serve residents most in need, only 2 counties hosted sites. These maps show the effect of VISTA in the years since.

*Based on 2011 data

1d. VISTA's place in the national service family

As you explore VISTA, you may find that VISTA may not suit your goals and circumstances. Keep in mind other national service programs might be a better fit.

Want an example of how a VISTA position is different from an AmeriCorps State & National grant position? Visit the difference between VISTA & AmeriCorps members.

RUSS: On this chart, you'll find Learn & Serve and Senior Corps in the corners. While Learn & Serve America is a program that supports students in service learning throughout the United States, Senior Corps is a program that connects volunteers 55 and older with service opportunities.

AmeriCorps is made up of 3 main programs: The National Civilian Community Corps, also known as NCCC (N-triple-C), AmeriCorps VISTA, and AmeriCorps State and National grants.

What makes the VISTA program unique is its focus on building capacity and eliminating poverty. AmeriCorps State and National grants and NCCC members engage in direct service activities in a broad range of service areas.

Additionally, Senior Corps is a program of the Corporation for National & Community Service that connects volunteers 55 and older with service opportunities.

1d-1. The difference between VISTA & AmeriCorps members

SHARECorps--AmeriCorps VISTA

AmeriCorps VISTA members work on capacity-building initiatives that include:

- Recruiting and training new community trainers who will train benefits counselors across the state
- Creating educational materials
- Writing grants and soliciting in-kind donations
- Recruiting and coordinating volunteers for multiple projects, including community gardens, donation bins, and food banks

HarvestCorps--AmeriCorps State

AmeriCorps members work on direct service activities that include:

- Completing Ohio Benefit Bank applications for program participants
- Assisting with free electronic tax filing
- Delivering food to clients through childhood anti-hunger initiatives such as BackPack
- Offering evening meals, tutoring, and enrichment activities for the Kid's Cafe program

JOEL: A common question is "How is what a VISTA member does different from what an AmeriCorps member does?" Here is an example of how one program, the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Food Banks, runs 2 distinct national service programs: SHARECorps, a VISTA program, and HarvestCorps, an AmeriCorps State program. The programs meet community needs in different ways and draw from different backgrounds and skill sets for their members.

2. What can VISTA members do for you?

In this gallery, take a closer look at the background and capabilities of VISTA members.

CECE: Hi, my name is Cece and I'm serving as a VISTA this year, creating systems and recruiting volunteers with the goal of making a lasting change at my organization and in my community. In this gallery, you'll learn more about who can serve as a VISTA and the type of activities VISTAs perform.

2a. Who are VISTAs?

VISTA members (also referred to as VISTAs) come from all walks of life but must meet certain qualifications and agree to abide by certain rules and expectations established by the VISTA program and the sponsoring organization.

CECE: Here are some of the basics about serving as a VISTA. Click each to learn more.

Basic requirements:

- Be at least 18 years old; no upper age limit
- Be a U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident
- Pass a criminal history review
- Meet knowledge, skill, and ability requirements set by the sponsoring organization

Terms of service:

- One year (365 days), full-time assignment
- May re-enroll for a second or third year (up to five terms)
- Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, though commonly work a standard, 40-hour week

Where they serve:

- In nonprofit organizations and public agencies
- Throughout the U.S. and certain territories, in urban and rural communities

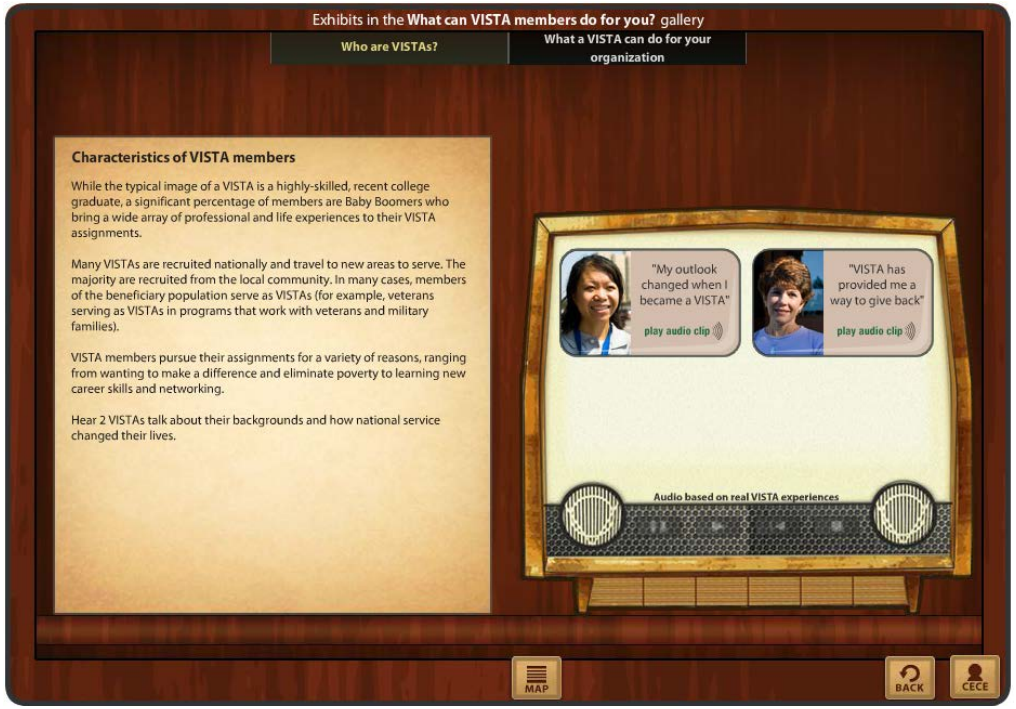
Benefits:

- While serving, VISTAs receive a modest living allowance that places them at the economic level of the low-income residents of the community where they serve
- VISTAs get an end-of-service education or cash benefit after completing their term
- VISTAs receive health coverage and may be eligible for child care and relocation assistance
- While serving, VISTAs receive professional development

Know someone who might be interested in becoming a VISTA member? Learn more at NationalService.gov.

Wondering who tends to serve as VISTAs and what motivates them to serve? Visit Characteristics of VISTA members.

2a-1. Characteristics of VISTA members



CECE: Through VISTA, I've met many people who are smart, hard working, and dedicated to making a difference.

While the typical image of a VISTA is a highly-skilled, recent college graduate, a significant percentage of members are Baby Boomers who bring a wide array of professional and life experiences to their VISTA assignments.

Many VISTAs are recruited nationally and travel to new areas to serve. The majority are recruited from the local community. In many cases, members of the beneficiary population serve as VISTAs (for example, veterans serving as VISTAs in programs that work with veterans and military families).

VISTA members pursue their assignments for a variety of reasons, ranging from wanting to make a difference and eliminate poverty to learning new career skills and networking.

Hear 2 VISTAs talk about their backgrounds and how national service changed their lives.

“My outlook changed when I became a VISTA”

"My VISTA service completely changed my life and the way I view the world. I grew up in an upper-class family and assumed that everyone worked white collar jobs.... The concept of being not having enough food, having to choose between rent and medicine, and simply doing without basic necessities was completely foreign to me. My outlook completely changed when I became a VISTA."

“VISTA has provided me a way to give back”

"My background comes from a series of failed attempts of trying to get it together and become self-sufficient.... I have been through a lot of life changes, homeless shelters, substance abuse, physical and emotional abuse, isolated relationships, denial, and a long list of other things that come with growing up in poverty. In the last 2 years, my life has been headed in a different direction. VISTA has provided me with the opportunity to learn so much about the community and give back in ways that I never would have considered."

Audio based on real VISTA experiences

2b. What a VISTA can do for your organization

Sample VISTA activities

RUSS: What's in it for me? That's a good question to ask.

- Research and apply for new funding sources, including grants
- Recruit and train long-term community volunteers
- Establish and cultivate new partnerships with donors, media, and community stakeholders
- Design and implement databases for keeping track of donors and volunteers
- Create templates for outreach and event planning
- Many more

VISTA members can engage in a wide variety of activities that build organizational capacity and empower the community. Here's a short list of common VISTA activities, though what a VISTA member does for your organization depends on the needs you identify.

General responsibilities of a VISTA

- Serve at project sites for a 12-month, full-time term
- Engage in capacity-building activities to build their organization's ability to end or reduce poverty in target communities
- Create sustainable projects that continue after their VISTA term of service ends
- Support efforts to gather data and information for reports
- Meet with a supervisor regularly to track progress and address issues
- Perform activities outlined in the original sponsor application (unless given approval by the CNCS State Office)

Let's also take a more general look at a VISTA's responsibilities, and the things that a VISTA *cannot* do.

Prohibited activities

- Replace the duties of an existing staff member
- Perform political or religious advocacy
- Take on outside, paying jobs while serving as a VISTA
- Manage or apply for CNCS grants or sub-grants

VISTAs serve in many different kinds of programs and empower communities in a variety of ways. Click to hear from a VISTA member and a sponsor.

A legacy… *"I'm working to create something that will out-last my year of service -- a legacy. If I do things right, I will make my own job obsolete!"*	**Fresh perspectives…** *"VISTAs have been able to bring fresh perspectives to systems at their sites. Being new allows them to see what is working to benefit the community and what's not."*

Want to learn more about how VISTA members have built the capacity of organizations across the country?

VISTA's key principles in action covers how the range of activities performed by members, with a single program, fulfill the main VISTA goals.

VISTA's focus areas in action shows VISTA member activities in a wide range of programs, from health care to education, and more.

Audio based on real VISTA experiences

2b-1. VISTA's key principles in action

VISTAs serving in the Second Harvest Food Banks' SHARECorps work on capacity-building initiatives, including resource and volunteer development.

Click a picture to hear more on how the activities of Second Harvest VISTAs tie back to VISTA's 4 key principles.

RUSS: To get a better sense of what a VISTA can do for you, let's take a look at how VISTAs with one program, the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Food Banks, work to fight poverty by building organizational capacity.

We'll hear VISTAs describe what they do in their own words.

Ending Poverty *"I worked as a trainer on a new program that was being promoted by the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks to bridge the gap between food pantry clients and the work-support programs that could provide them with stability. Despite their meager resources, these agencies managed to support thousands of people right in my hometown."*	**Empowering Communities** *"My position enables me to be a part of this community and recruit volunteers to provide necessary services to our clients at the Center for Respite Care. I am the liaison between community members who want to give back and the homeless population of Cincinnati. I provide a space and an outlet that encourages others to be better citizens and give someone a helping hand."*
Building Capacity *"My position as a volunteer manager was very important. The hard work of the volunteers I recruited, managed, and supported allowed Habitat's Re-Store to bring in enough revenue to cover all the administrative expenses of its Columbus affiliate. The affiliate, which builds 20 houses each year on average, was able to pay the salaries of its 20 staff members, the rent for its building, and all the utilities with the funds brought in by volunteers who were managed by an AmeriCorps VISTA member."*	**Creating Sustainable Solutions** *"My outlook completely changed when I became an AmeriCorps VISTA serving the Muskingum Valley Council, Boy Scouts of America in Appalachia, Ohio. I coordinated and created the framework for Exploring, a career-education program for high school boys and girls. Many of the students I recruited have already decided that they are going to pursue law, engineering, or firefighting as a result of their participation in Exploring.... Because of the groundwork I laid, the Muskingum Valley Council can continue my work to reach vulnerable youth and engage adults in meaningful volunteer work."*

Audio based on real VISTA experiences

2a-2. VISTA's focus areas in action

VISTAs serve in a wide range of nonprofits and public agencies, as you can see from these examples. You can consider applying for a VISTA even if your organization doesn't focus exclusively on ending poverty. If you have an idea for a new project or want to expand your ability to serve low-income community members, VISTA might be a resource that can help.

Different types of organizations engage VISTAs in ending poverty. Focus areas include:

RUSS: While VISTA's mission is to bring communities and individuals out of poverty, the topics listed here have been selected as focus areas. Click on each focus area to explore sample programs and the activities that VISTA members are performing.

Economic Opportunity: Housing, employment

Example program:

Oregon Microenterprise Network (OMEN) is a statewide association with a mission to increase opportunities for economically and geographically disadvantaged entrepreneurs by building the capacity and quality of Oregon microenterprise and entrepreneur development services. These programs provide training, lend money, and offer other enterprise opportunities to entrepreneurs with limited access to economic resources.

Sample VISTA activities:

- Assist with research and development of small business, organizational, and project sustainability best practices and procedures
- Research service gaps within the industry and help develop training plans to fill those gaps, such as asset building
- Assist in the expansion and coordination of twice-yearly industry support conferences, including increasing participation of minority communities
- Research and apply for new funding sources
- Perform tasks such as coordinating meetings, managing social media, and developing training materials

Education

Example program:

College Forward provides college access and college persistence services to motivated, economically disadvantaged students in order to facilitate their transition to college and make the process exciting and rewarding. College Forward believes access to higher education is the right of every young Texan.

Sample VISTA activities:

- Develop program-related training, curriculum, and curriculum guides
- Plan, improve, and implement student recruitment strategies, including the development of a student/parent database
- Facilitate program replication by identifying curricular units that are easily reproduced
- Research and prioritize relevant grant opportunities and cultivate relations with foundations and other potential grantors
- Recruit, train, and coordinate a minimum of 3 grant writing/research volunteers

Healthy Futures: Food security, anti-obesity

Example program:

The College Health Corps is a cohort of VISTA members who are placed at community- and campus-based sites throughout the state of Minnesota. Each cohort is dedicated to reducing health disparities and improving the health of low-income people.

Sample VISTA activities:

- Improve, expand, and initiate campus/community partnerships to create greater health care access and health literacy for underserved populations
- Build organizational capacity through the enhancement and management of the health center's volunteer program to increase community engagement in clinic services
- Develop and implement projects that address the root causes of community problems related to health care access for low-income individuals
- Continue development of a volunteer speakers' bureau to increase health care access and knowledge in the community
- Ensure ongoing development and implementation of Youth/Young Adult Advisory Board

Veterans and Military Families

Example program:

The West Virginia Commission for National & Community Service's VISTA veterans project addresses a variety of issues facing veterans in West Virginia.

Sample VISTA activities:

- Conduct asset mapping of veteran students' needs for colleges and universities
- Work with community organizations to expand capacity, research funding opportunities, assess issues

facing military families, and provide needed resources

- Research how best to connect veterans with needed services
- Establish community partnerships to expand the agency's efforts throughout the state to provide outreach to veterans
- Work on behalf of individuals experiencing issues such as homelessness, poverty, and trauma, particularly within veteran populations

3. What does it take to become a VISTA sponsor?

In this gallery, learn more about what starting a VISTA project involves, what you give, and what you can expect in return.

LISA: Hello, my name is Lisa. At my organization, we went through the process of becoming a VISTA sponsor last year. Russ, from the state office, and I will walk you through some things to consider if you're thinking about pursuing a VISTA project.

3a. Costs, eligibility & responsibilities

What are the costs?

VISTA members provide the time and effort to implement a project, while sponsors are expected to fund other aspects of the project to provide success.

Two major cost factors to consider include:

- **Staff time to develop an assignment, recruit, train and supervise VISTA members**. It's expected that sponsoring organizations also provide a high level of supervision, an orientation, and training opportunities to VISTA members.
- **The VISTA's living allowance**. Rather than a wage or salary, VISTAs receive a living allowance during their term of service. The living allowance is tied to the poverty rate and is often in the $10,500 range for a year. (The amount varies based on region.) While in most cases, the living allowance is covered by CNCS, there is also the possibility of a "cost-share partnership" that involves the sponsor taking on this cost. More on this topic appears later in this gallery, and your CNCS state office can provide more information.

Is our organization eligible?

Any private or public nonprofit, public agency, or tribal organization in the U.S. (and certain territories) with a project concept designed to reduce poverty within a community may apply to sponsor a VISTA project.

What responsibilities would we take on?

When it comes to bringing VISTA members on board, you must have the capacity and commitment to:

- Develop an assignment
- Recruit, train, and supervise members
- Support members as they carry out their assignment
- Provide adequate working space, including a computer, internet access, phone, and supplies
- Manage the overall project
- Collect performance measurement data and report it to CNCS

Questions on these topics? Contact your CNCS State Office.

RUSS:

The out-of-pocket costs are frequently a top question asked by potential VISTA sponsors. It's not possible to say exactly what the costs will be until you are further along in the application process. Calling your CNCS state office might be your best bet to get an accurate picture of costs.

Here is also what you need to know about eligibility to become a VISTA project sponsor, and what responsibilities you'll take on if you partner with VISTA.

3b. Three steps to become a VISTA sponsor

LISA: Now I'll walk you through the 3 steps an organization or agency must take to become a VISTA sponsor. First, there is upfront planning. Then there is applying for the project. Last is implementation. Let's go through these steps together.

Step 1: Plan

Do you have everything in place to launch the VISTA project application process? Planning involves working with potential project beneficiaries to determine what you want to accomplish; assigning supervision responsibilities and work space for your VISTA; and thinking about how to recruit VISTA candidates. Visit Step 1: Plan for more on what you need to know to get ready.

Step 2: Apply

The application process includes 3 tasks: the concept paper, application, and Memorandum of Agreement. Visit Step 2: Apply to learn more about what the application process entails.

Step 3: Implement

What's involved once your VISTA project is up and running? Find out about start-up and ongoing tasks, including how to recruit and support VISTA members and carry out project planning. Visit Step 3: Implement to learn more about next steps after you have the green light to bring a VISTA on board.

How long does it take to bring a VISTA member on board?

The length of the planning and application process varies from state to state. Your best bet for learning a timeframe is to contact your CNCS State Office.

3b-1. Step 1: Plan

LISA: Upfront planning is essential. In this first step, there are a number of issues that your organization needs to think through carefully before applying to sponsor a VISTA project. Click on each for more information.

Community participation

VISTA projects are designed with, not for, members of the community. How will you involve potential project beneficiaries in planning, developing, and implementing your project? One possibility is to establish an advisory group of low-income community members.

Project supervision

Who in your organization will supervise the VISTA? Who has the time to serve as manager and mentor? Ideally, supervisors meet with VISTAs frequently. These meetings are in addition to providing an initial orientation, organizing ongoing training, and handling the spontaneous issues that arise.

Site location

Where will the VISTA serve? Does your organization have the space and equipment to support 1 or more VISTAs?

VISTA support

Your new VISTA may need assistance relocating. Will you and your organization be able to help the member find affordable housing, if needed? Can you help the VISTA m develop specific skills needed for the work? Can you support the VISTA's professional development during service and help prepare him or her for life after service?

Recruitment

If you're approved to sponsor a VISTA project, how will you fill your VISTA position? What channels will you use to recruit potential VISTAs?

Move on to Step 2: Apply

3b-2. Step 2: Apply

LISA: In the application step, there are 2 documents your agency will have to prepare and send to VISTA, and one final document to sign that makes the agreement official. Click on each to learn more.

Writing a concept paper

To apply for a VISTA project, submit a "concept paper" (based on a set of instructions provided by the CNCS State Office) that describes your proposed project. It should demonstrate how your project:

- Helps people overcome poverty
- Complements your organization's current activities in this area
- Leads to organizational capacity building
- Is an appropriate use of VISTA resources

The CNCS State Office can provide assistance with writing and submitting the concept paper in the Corporation's online project application system, eGrants.

Submitting an application

If the concept paper is approved, your organization will be invited to submit an application. The application allows you to provide more details about your proposal, including a project plan that contains goals, activities, and outcomes. Technical assistance from the CNCS State Office is available to help you prepare your application.

Receiving and signing the Memorandum of Agreement

If your application is approved, you will receive a Memorandum of Agreement, a legally binding agreement signed by both CNCS and an authorized person in your organization. It clarifies federal law, regulations, and policies that apply to VISTA. It also outlines the specific legal obligations and joint responsibilities of each party.

Move on to Step 3: Implement

3b-3. Step 3: Implement

LISA: For the sake of clarity we're dividing this third step into 2 parts – start-up tasks and ongoing tasks. Start-up begins when your agency officially assumes the position of sponsoring a VISTA project. Ongoing tasks are just that. Click on each to learn more.

Start-up tasks

- Attend a Supervisors' Orientation
- Create a VISTA Assignment Description (VAD)
- Recruit VISTA(s)
- Select VISTA(s)
- Provide orientation and training

Ongoing tasks

- Supervise VISTA(s)
- Manage the project and report progress
- Close-out the project

Attend a Supervisor Orientation

Each sponsor will send a supervisor to a 3- to 4-day orientation training organized and arranged by CNCS at least 3 months prior to the day the VISTA's service begins. The supervisor will learn more about the terms and conditions of VISTA service, specific ways to support the VISTA at the organization, and certain reporting responsibilities.

Create a VISTA Assignment Description (VAD)

The VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) is written by the supervisor to outline the project activities assigned to the VISTA. A good VAD defines goals, activities, and tasks for each VISTA.

Recruit VISTA(s)

To attract skilled, qualified, and self-motivated people to apply:

- Post your project description to the CNCS online recruitment system
- Begin a *local* recruitment campaign to attract candidates
- Post flyers on community bulletin boards, as well as on your organization's website and job search websites

Select VISTA(s)

Interested candidates will submit applications through the My AmeriCorps Portal. You'll review applications and conduct interviews with the most qualified. Be sure to check references. Once you've chosen someone, submit his/her information to the state office for approval. The state office makes the final review and decision.

Provide orientation and training

The selected VISTA will attend a 3- to 4-day orientation and training workshop sponsored by CNCS prior to serving at the project site. During the VISTA's first two weeks of service, the project supervisor will host an orientation at the project site. This provides the VISTA with an opportunity to learn about the community and the organization, as well as help the VISTA acquire the knowledge and skills needed for success.

Supervise VISTA(s)

Meet with the VISTA in person frequently (at least weekly) and manage any issues that may arise.

Manage the project and report progress

Although the VISTA carries out the assignments throughout the year, the sponsor is responsible for making sure that the multiyear project is on track. The supervisor has several reporting obligations related to the VISTA's presence and the project's progress.

Close-out the project

VISTA projects typically last as long as 3 years, after which it's up to the community organization to maintain the infrastructure and programs developed with the help of the VISTA(s).

3c. VISTA projects: How do they work?

Becoming a VISTA sponsor doesn't mean you'll have to go it alone! It's a collaboration that includes your organization, your CNCS State Office, and the community you serve.

RUSS: A VISTA project has many moving parts. Here's a look at who does what in the collaborative process of a starting a new project

The State Office:

- Provides technical assistance in completing applications and developing appropriate project plans and assignment descriptions for each VISTA
- Supports VISTA members with administrative matters
- Works with sponsors and VISTA members to resolve conflicts
- Reviews sponsor-generated reports

The Community:

- Provides partnerships
- Participates in the planning, development, and implementation of the project
- Identifies resource providers

Learn more in Common models of VISTA sponsorship.

CNCS has different funding arrangements that can affect what a VISTA project costs. Learn more about the Funding options for VISTA projects.

3c-1. Common models of VISTA sponsorship

There are multiple VISTA sponsorship models that address varying organizational arrangements and community needs. Within the models are various options. While all these types of projects exist throughout the U.S. and its territories, it's important to recognize that your organization should determine which one fits your specific circumstances. VISTAs can accommodate your organization's scope, needs, and goals.

All options are not appropriate for all organizations; the sponsorship model is determined by the organization itself.

CNCS State Offices work closely with sponsoring organizations to help them develop the type of project that is most effective for achieving their community goals. Contact your state office with questions.

RUSS: VISTAs can serve at a wide variety of organizations – from small, one location agencies to large, multi-state ones with many sites across the country.

Let's take a look at the different formats VISTA projects take, from a single site to multi-site and even multi-state.

The CNCS State Office works closely with potential sponsors on determining the most appropriate model for a specific organization. If you have questions, get in touch with your state office.

Single-Site Projects

One or more VISTAs are placed with a sponsoring organization at one location. There is no limit to the number of VISTAS placed with a sponsor.

Multi-Site Projects

Option 1:

VISTAs are placed with a sponsor that has **multiple sites** within the state.

Option 2:

An intermediary project with experience in VISTA and the capacity to maintain a federal grant serves as an administrative agent to CNCS and the VISTA program for smaller community-based organizations. Those smaller organizations, whose project goals may differ greatly from one another, are considered sub-sites. The number of sub-sites and VISTAs at each site varies according to the project goals and capacities of each sub-site.

Multi-State Projects

Individual affiliate sites of the same organization apply separately and work in collaboration with multiple CNCS State Offices.

3c-2. Funding options for VISTA projects

Standard project	Cost-share partnership

▪ Sponsor funds local operating and logistical costs, including office space, computer, and training for the VISTA member
▪ CNCS provides VISTAs' living allowance and other important benefits, including:
  ▪ Health coverage
  ▪ Travel relocation (if needed)
  ▪ Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or post-service stipend
  ▪ Liability coverage
  ▪ Other benefits
	▪ Sponsor funds local operating and logistical costs
	▪ Sponsor covers part or all of the living allowance of one or more VISTAs
	▪ CNCS assumes remaining costs, including the benefits for VISTAs described above

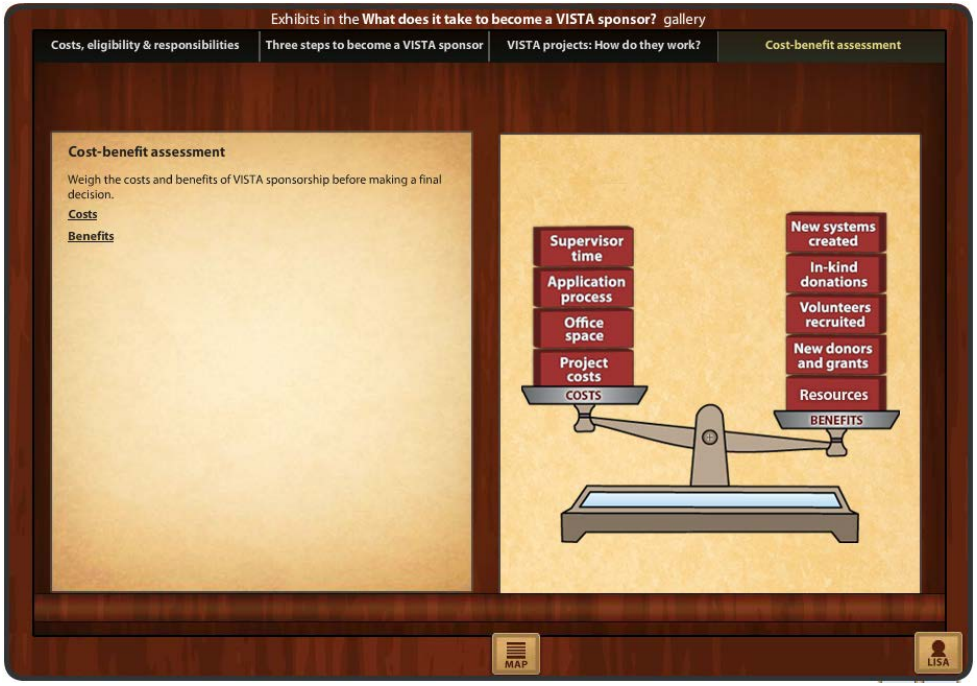
RUSS: Now let's take a look at 2 funding arrangements available to sponsoring organizations that take on a VISTA project: the standard project and the cost-share partnership. The main difference in these arrangements is how much of a VISTA's project cost the sponsor provides. Note that in the standard project, CNCS provides the VISTA members' living allowance. In the cost-share partnership, that cost is taken on by the sponsoring organization.

Which model is best for you?

Contact your CNCS State Office for more information on VISTA models in your state.

3d. Cost-benefit assessment

Weigh the costs and benefits of VISTA sponsorship before making a final decision.



Costs

Time and money are costs associated with starting a VISTA project. Here's what you'll need to give:

Time

- Preparing an application
- Participating in supervisor training
- Providing VISTA supervision
- Completing ongoing reporting
- Addressing issues that arise

LISA: As you've seen, starting a new VISTA project is not a simple endeavor. It takes a lot of work.

When my organization was making the decision to apply for a VISTA not so long ago, we asked ourselves, "Is it worth it?" "What are the benefits?"

Like every other organization and agency out there, we have specific priorities, capabilities, and resources. It was our process to weigh all the factors before arriving at our decision.

In your own case, you might decide that this is a great time to make this investment. You might also decide that the timing is not right. It's important to gauge your own community's readiness. Is there sufficient interest in this kind of project and a potential to build real partnerships? In the end, the most important question for us was, "Will the benefits outweigh the costs?"

- Closing out the project and transitioning

Money

- Reimbursement of member (e.g., for transportation related to duties)
- Supervisor's time
- Housing support (when appropriate)
- Office supplies and equipment
- Project costs

Benefits

While the benefits of a VISTA project will vary, some may include:

- Make progress toward solving critical, unmet community needs
- Build organizational capacity (for example, through creation of new systems for tracking donors or recruiting volunteers)
- Launch new projects or expand existing ones
- Create new and lasting connections to the community
- Generate new funding and volunteer resources (on average $140,000 in cash and in-kind resources per VISTA project and more than a $180,000 value for the volunteer hours generated, according to 2011 data collected by VISTA)
- Access talented, highly-motivated individuals offering consultative and developmental services as VISTAs
- Network within the National Service community

4. Next Steps

Is a VISTA project right for you?

Based on your understanding of your own work and VISTA, how would you answer these questions?

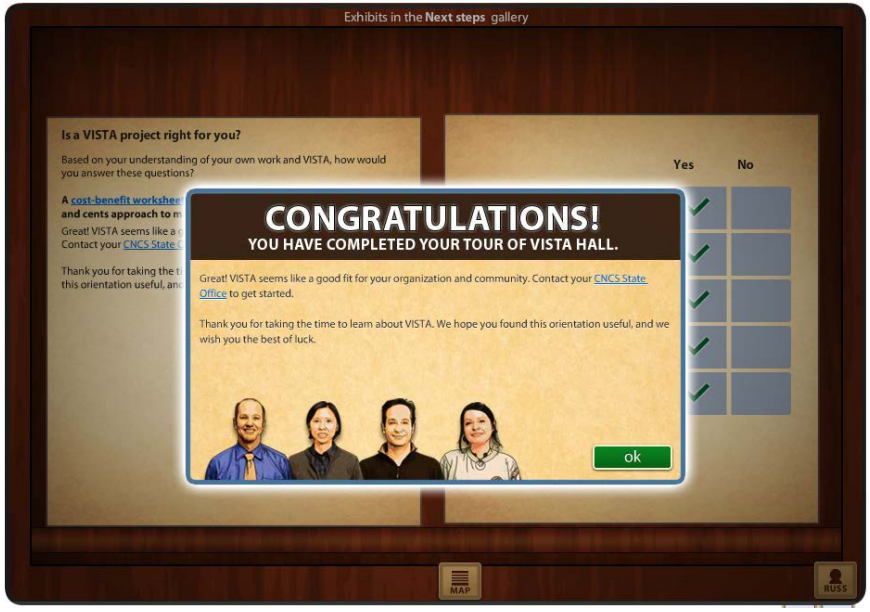
- Is your organization or agency addressing poverty?
- Do you engage residents of the low-income community in creating solutions?
- Are you dedicated to building your capacity to grow and sustain services?
- Do you have the ability to create community partnerships needed to support a VISTA project?
- Can you cover the time and money it takes to manage a VISTA project?

If you answered "yes" to every question:

Great! VISTA seems like a good fit for your organization and community. Contact your CNCS State Office to get started.

RUSS: Thank you for taking the time to learn about VISTA, the tasks and responsibilities of sponsors, and the costs and benefits of a VISTA project.

We hope that you have enough information to decide whether VISTA is the right fit for you. Don't forget to contact your CNCS state office if you have questions.



If you answered "no" to any question:
It looks like VISTA may not be the perfect fit, but if you'd like more information before making a final decision, you can talk with someone at your CNCS state office to learn more.

You may also want to consider Alternatives to VISTA (PDF) to view other national service opportunities. Visit the Fit Finder tool to determine if another AmeriCorps opportunity is a better fit.

A cost-benefit worksheet pdf is available to help you take a dollars and cents approach to making a decision.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about VISTA. We hope you found this orientation useful, and we wish you the best of luck.

Alternatives to VISTA

Does it sound like VISTA won't work for you? We appreciate your considering us. It's possible that these other national service programs might better suit your needs.

AmeriCorps State and National grants

AmeriCorps members engage not only in capacity building but also in direct service. Sample activities include:

- Tutoring and mentoring youth
- Providing job placement assistance to unemployed workers
- Addressing childhood obesity through in-school and after-school physical activities
- Weatherizing and retrofitting housing units for low-income households

Like VISTAs, AmeriCorps members mobilize volunteers and strengthen the capacity of their host organizations. They serve full- or part-time for one year (365 days), or during the summer. To learn more about whether these programs are a good choice for you, visit the Fit Finder.

AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC)

Each year, AmeriCorps NCCC engages teams in projects in communities across the United States. Service projects, which typically last from 6 to 8 weeks, address critical needs related to natural and other disasters, infrastructure improvement, environmental stewardship and conservation, and urban and rural development.

Sponsoring organizations request the assistance of AmeriCorps NCCC teams by submitting a project application to the regional campus that covers that organization's state.

Senior Corps

Senior Corps works with thousands of nonprofit organizations and local agencies—both secular and faith-based—to promote service opportunities for older Americans. Using Senior Corps volunteers helps these organizations meet their core missions. Senior Corps volunteers provide invaluable skills and experience along with their dedication and concern for their communities.

More information on how nonprofit organizations and public agencies can engage Senior Corps is available

here.

Additional national sites related to volunteerism include serve.gov and allforgood.org.

Know someone who might be interested in becoming a VISTA member? Learn more at NationalService.gov.

Key terms

Capacity building
In the VISTA context, capacity building means "to strengthen, expand, and increase the reach of anti-poverty programs; to work on projects expanding the capabilities of the organization and community, rather than the VISTA member being a direct service provider to people in need."

CNCS
The Corporation for National & Community Service is an independent federal government agency that administers the national service network, including AmeriCorps VISTA, AmeriCorps State and National, National Civilian Community Corps, and Senior Corps.

Direct service
Immediate solutions to help people in need. Direct service includes activities such as tutoring, performing manual labor, teaching, doing clerical work, or counseling, through which members provide immediate help to people in need. While direct service provides short-term solutions to long-standing problems, direct service performed by VISTAs may create a dependency, and ultimately hinders the creation of long-term solutions to the problems of poverty.

Sponsor or sponsoring organization
A sponsoring organization is a nonprofit organization or public agency that applies for and is awarded a VISTA project, entering into a legal agreement with CNCS. Sponsoring organizations are also referred to as "sponsors."

CNCS State Office
This refers to a local office of CNCS focused on the federal administration of VISTA projects (as well as Senior Corps) within a state. State offices conduct public outreach, recruit sponsoring organizations, and provide program support. This is your best place to get your questions answered and to think through your initial ideas for starting a VISTA project. You can find your state office here.

VISTA
Throughout this online orientation, you might hear the word VISTA used to mean different things. Here is a breakdown of 3 ways of looking at VISTA:

- **AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)** is the name of the national service program dedicated to ending poverty by building the capacity of nonprofit organizations and public agencies that

serve clients in need. It's a program of the Corporation for National & Community Service (CNCS).

- A **VISTA project** is initiated as a concept by a nonprofit organization or public agency to build capacity to end poverty and is then approved by CNCS through an application process. Once the project is in place, it becomes a collaboration among the sponsoring organization, CNCS, and representatives of the community.
- A **VISTA member (or VISTA)** is an individual engaged in a service term dedicated to building the capacity of an organization to end poverty. A VISTA is the driving force behind implementing a VISTA project.

About Us

This online orientation was created for VISTA by Education Northwest and Bank Street College under a cooperative agreement with the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS).

Created in 1993, the **Corporation for National and Community Service** supports service at the national, state, and local levels through programs such as AmeriCorps (including VISTA) and Senior Corps. Members and volunteers serve with national and community nonprofit organizations, faith-based groups, schools, and local and public agencies to meet community needs in education, the environment, public safety, homeland security, and other critical areas.

Education Northwest strives to create vibrant learning environments where all youth and adults can succeed. Since 2001, Education Northwest, in partnership with **Bank Street College**, has collaborated with VISTA to create engaging online and face-to-face learning opportunities.

Contact

For questions related to becoming a VISTA sponsor, contact your CNCS State Office.

If you have questions or feedback on the content or structure of this site, please contact vistacampus@etr.org or call (800) 860-2684.