

Title: VISTA Sponsor Handbook

Date issued: November 2018

Date posted: February 28, 2020

Unique identifier: VISTA 001

Topic: How to manage VISTA projects

Summary: This is a training tool designed to help VISTA sponsors manage their projects.

The contents of this document 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.

VISTA Sponsor Handbook

Welcome to the VISTA Sponsor Handbook. Click the link to "Letter from the Director" to begin.

Letter from the Director

Dear VISTA Sponsor:

AmeriCorps VISTA is committed to providing ladders of economic opportunity for more Americans to escape the grip of poverty. I, and many before me, have been inspired by the sacrifice and spirit of service and idealism common to VISTAs and the organizations that sponsor them. The work you do every day to deliver sustainable anti-poverty programming to your communities is inspiring and drives me and my staff to strengthen and improve the AmeriCorps VISTA program.

This *Handbook* provides you with a solid understanding of your important role to successfully lead the VISTA project and of how you can enhance the service of the VISTA members assigned to it. My hope is that you will use the *Handbook* as a reference document and, as necessary, you will contact your local CNCS State Office to discuss issues and share successes.

The work you do to create and enhance opportunities that lift people out of poverty is essential. A testament to your power is the \$206 million leveraged and the 800,000 community volunteers recruited and managed by VISTAs in one year alone. But numbers only tell part of the story. It's also the doors that are opened and diplomas received and jobs landed and housing preserved and bellies filled and so many other results from your capacity-building efforts that translate into real benefits.

On behalf of our VISTA family, thank you for the important role you play in bringing the vision of VISTA into reality. As a former VISTA member myself, I know firsthand what it takes to manage a VISTA project, and I appreciate the work you do every day to strengthen organizations that are fighting poverty around the country.

Your leadership and participation are critical to the success of the VISTA project. From all of us here at AmeriCorps VISTA, we thank each and every one of you for your service.

In Service,

Desiree Tucker-Sorini
Director
AmeriCorps VISTA

Overview of the VISTA Sponsor Handbook

Introduction

The *VISTA Sponsor Handbook (Handbook)* addresses roles, responsibilities, and expectations related to VISTA project management for all project staff including project directors, supervisors (member or site), authorized representatives, fiscal staff, and more. Throughout this resource, links to more information or best practices are provided when available for each topic. This document is a companion resource to the [VISTA Member Handbook](#), which speaks to VISTA member policies, as well as to the VISTA Sponsor training resources available via the [VISTA Campus](#).

When a question or issue arises, VISTA project staff should first refer to this *Handbook* for information on how to proceed and consult with their CNCS State Office (CSO). While this *Handbook* covers many topics, CNCS State Offices know your project and can offer support and guide you to additional resources.

How to Use the VISTA Sponsor Handbook

The *Handbook* is designed to be a comprehensive, straightforward resource manual with easy-to-locate information that spans the entire lifecycle of a VISTA project. The *Handbook* contains content and guidance on all aspects of VISTA project management, including but not limited to VISTA member support, reporting requirements, preparing for new members, core responsibilities, and terms and conditions.

If there is a conflict between a provision contained in this *Handbook* and applicable federal regulations or Terms and Conditions of the Notice of Grant Award (NGA), the applicable regulations and/or the applicable Terms and Conditions of the NGA are the controlling authorities.

Handbook Design

The *Handbook* is organized into chapters that contain important guidance about specific requirements and responsibilities as well as success tips, templates, and best practices throughout the life cycle of a VISTA project. VISTA project directors, supervisors, authorized representatives, and others involved with the VISTA project will benefit from reviewing some or all of this information.

This electronic resource is easily searchable and contains links to additional resources and information. Also, this resource will be updated routinely with the most relevant information. As a result, we recommend that you do not print this resource but rather make an electronic bookmark for the *Handbook* and take advantage of the digital features. Not printing saves paper and ensures you always have the most current version of the *Handbook* at your fingertips.

Related Resources

Some sections conclude with a list of related resources and recommended links that point readers to additional information on selected topics.

The [VISTA Sponsor Resource Guide](#) is an at-a-glance snapshot of resources to assist sponsors with successfully managing VISTA projects.

Handbook Review and Management

The *Handbook* will be updated periodically but reviewed at least annually to ensure alignment among all VISTA resources and guidance. A change log will be maintained and included as part of this document to promote transparency and provide historical reference.

Notifications

When *Handbook* information is added or modified, VISTA Sponsors will be notified in a variety of ways including but not limited to email notification from VISTA headquarters and follow-up communications from CNCS State Offices.

Guidance Document Identifying Information

Title: VISTA Sponsor Handbook
Date issued: November 2018
Date posted: February 4, 2020
Unique identifier: VISTA 001
Topic: How to manage VISTA projects
Summary: This is a training tool designed to help VISTA sponsors manage their projects.

Version Control and Change Log

Below is an overview of revisions to the current version of the *Handbook*.

| Version | Date Issued | Change Log | Description |
|------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|---|
| 2018.1 (currently effective) | November, 2018 | N/A | First version <i>VISTA Sponsor Handbook</i> (née VISTA Supervisor Manual) |

Definitions

Definitions

The following are some common words and phrases used throughout the *Handbook*. See [45 C.F.R. §2556.5](#) for additional specific definitions in the VISTA Regulations.

An **Applicant for VISTA service** refers to an individual who is in the process of completing, or has completed, an application for VISTA service as prescribed by CNCS, but who has not been approved by CNCS to be a candidate.

The **Application for VISTA service** refers to the materials used by CNCS to capture information on an individual's eligibility and suitability for VISTA service.

A **Candidate**, when used in the context of an individual who has applied for VISTA service, refers to an individual whose application for VISTA service has been approved by CNCS, but who has not taken an oath, alternative oath, or affirmation to serve in the VISTA program. Candidates may include those who were enrolled in the VISTA program at a prior time.

CNCS refers to the Corporation for National and Community Service, established pursuant to section 191 of the National and Community Service Act of 1990, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 12651. CNCS is also sometimes referred to as “the Corporation.”

CNCS State Offices are the branches of CNCS that administer the VISTA and Senior Corps programs. Each CNCS State Office is led by a State Program Director (SPD) and may also include one or more State Program Officers (SPOs). The SPD reports to an Area Manager or equivalent CNCS official.

Cost Share refers to when an entity, such as a VISTA sponsor, reimburses CNCS part or all of the expenses associated with the operation of a VISTA project, such as the costs for one or more VISTAs, Leaders, or Summer Associates placed at a VISTA project.

The **Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended**, or **DVSA**, is the Federal law enacted by Congress that outlines the purposes of the VISTA program and the parameters within which it may operate.

A **Leader**, or a VISTA Leader, is a VISTA member who serves at a VISTA project in a prescribed leadership capacity. A leader may be a former VISTA, AmeriCorps member, or Peace Corps volunteer who demonstrated to CNCS exemplary skills and leadership in community service. Leaders serve different functions depending on the needs of local projects, including recruiting and coordinating VISTAs, preparing in-service trainings, identifying new funding sources, and serving as liaisons between the community and CNCS.

A **Memorandum of Agreement** is a written agreement between CNCS and a sponsor regarding the terms of the sponsor's involvement and responsibilities in the VISTA program.

An **Oath** is the confirmation and formal commitment to VISTA service, taken in accordance with 5 U.S.C. 3331, by an individual who is a U.S. citizen or national. The taking of the Oath formalizes an individual's enrollment into the VISTA program.

Project or VISTA project means a set of VISTA activities operated and overseen by, and the responsibility of, a sponsor, to realize the goals of Title I of the DVSA.

A **Project applicant** or **VISTA project applicant** is an entity that submits an application to CNCS to operate, oversee, and be responsible for a VISTA project.

A **Project application** or **VISTA project application** refers to the application materials prescribed by CNCS to ascertain information on an applying entity's eligibility and suitability to operate, oversee, and be responsible for a VISTA project.

The **Project director** or **VISTA project director** is the staff person of the sponsor who has been assigned by the sponsor the overall responsibility for the management of the VISTA project.

Site or VISTA site or VISTA project site means a location where VISTA members serve. VISTA projects may operate at one or more sites. The sponsor itself can be a site and it may or may not have members serving on its premises.

The **Sponsor, VISTA sponsor**, or **VISTA project sponsor** is a public agency or private nonprofit organization that receives assistance under Title I of the DVSA, and is responsible for operating and overseeing a VISTA project. A public agency may be a federal, state, local, or tribal government.

A **Summer Associate** refers to a type of VISTA member who is enrolled for VISTA service, during a period between May 1 and September 15, and who is also subject to terms and conditions of service that differ in certain respects from that of members whose service terms last for a year. A Summer Associate must be available to provide continuous full-time service for a period of at least eight weeks and a maximum of ten weeks.

The **Supervisor** or **VISTA Supervisor** is the staff member of the sponsor or a subrecipient who has been assigned by the sponsor or the subrecipient the responsibility for the day-to-day oversight of one or more VISTAs.

The ***VISTA member, the VISTA, or the VISTA*** refers to an individual enrolled full-time for VISTA service in the VISTA program, as authorized under Title I of the DVSA. ([Review eligibility requirements here.](#))

The ***VISTA program*** is the acronym for the Federal government program named Volunteers in Service to America and authorized under Title I of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 4950 *et seq.*

VISTA service refers to VISTA service activities performed by a VISTA member while enrolled in the VISTA program.

Sharing Feedback

Sharing Feedback

Suggestions regarding new content, corrections, and deletions are always welcome. The electronic format allows the *Handbook* to change according to the needs of its users.

To offer suggestions, send an email to vista@cns.gov and copy your corresponding [CNCS State Office](#) on the email.

About CNCS

About the Corporation for National and Community Service

In 1993, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) was established under the [National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993](#) to connect Americans of all ages and backgrounds with opportunities to give back to their communities and their nation. CNCS merged the work and authorities of two predecessor agencies, ACTION and the Commission on National and Community Service.

CNCS empowers and supports Americans to tackle persistent challenges such as helping youth succeed in school, securing safe affordable housing for economically disadvantaged families, or helping communities respond to disasters. Through this work, CNCS achieves its mission of improving lives, strengthening communities and fortifying the civic health of our nation.

At its inception, CNCS was directed to manage three main programs:

- [AmeriCorps](#), which incorporated the longstanding [VISTA](#) program, the new [National Civilian Community Corps](#) (NCCC) program, and the new [AmeriCorps State and National](#) program, the full-time demonstration program that had been established under the National and Community Service Act of 1990
- [Senior Corps](#), which incorporated the [Foster Grandparent](#), [Senior Companion](#), and [RSVP](#) programs
- Learn and Serve America, formerly known as Serve America^[1]

AmeriCorps and Senior Corps members serve at more than 50,000 locations across the country to meet community needs related to [education](#), [health](#), [energy and conservation](#), [economic development](#), [veterans and military families](#), and [disaster services](#).

CNCS is part of our nation's history of commitment to building a culture of citizenship, service, and responsibility. For more information on the history of CNCS, see the [National Service Timeline](#). For a list of acronyms related to national service, see the [Acronyms section](#).

^[1] Effective in 2011, the Learn and Service America program is no longer operating.

CNCS Strategic Plan

CNCS Strategic Plan

[CNCS' Strategic Plan](#) leverages the strength of grantees, participants, programs, state service commissions and the American public to build a network of programs that offer effective solutions in six priority areas: Disaster Services, Economic Opportunity, Education, Environmental Stewardship, Healthy Futures, and Veterans and Military Families.

The Strategic Plan provides a roadmap for using national service to address critical challenges facing our communities and our nation. It builds on the strong foundation of national service that has developed over the past four decades and the vision set forth in the bipartisan [Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009](#).

About AmeriCorps VISTA

About AmeriCorps VISTA ⁱⁱⁱ

[AmeriCorps VISTA](http://www.nationalservice.gov/vista) (Volunteers in Service to America) (www.nationalservice.gov/vista) is an anti-poverty program that provides full-time and Summer Associate service members to nonprofit organizations and local agencies that serve low-income communities. The program's purpose, as defined by law, is to strengthen efforts to eliminate poverty by encouraging people from all walks of life to engage in meaningful volunteer service. The DVSA, the VISTA program's authorizing legislation, describes four main objectives of the program:

1. To generate the commitment of private sector resources
2. To encourage volunteer service at the local level
3. To support efforts by local agencies and community organizations to achieve long-term sustainability of projects
4. To strengthen local agencies and community organizations that serve low-income communities.

The program was first envisioned by President John F. Kennedy when, in 1962, he commissioned a task force to explore the creation of a national service program modeled after the Peace Corps, whose purpose would be to assist Americans afflicted by poverty. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson realized that vision and created what was then known as Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA).

In 1965, the first VISTA members began serving in migrant farm worker camps in California, the hollows of eastern Kentucky, and urban neighborhoods of Hartford, Connecticut. Since then, more than 220,000 VISTA members have served in all 50 states and U.S. Territories. AmeriCorps VISTA members serve in tribal, rural, suburban, and urban communities. Poverty exists in many forms, which is why VISTA's model is driven directly by communities in need. Whether that need is expanding job-training services for out-of-work coal miners in Kentucky, recruiting disadvantaged youth for computer literacy and coding classes in Minneapolis, or combatting homelessness among our veterans, AmeriCorps VISTA members help others while gaining valuable skills for their careers.

"This is your job—to guide the young, to comfort the sick, to encourage the downtrodden, to teach the skills which may lead to a more satisfying and a more rewarding life. On your idealism and on your success rests much of our hope for the final elimination of poverty in our American life."

- President Lyndon B Johnson in his remarks to the first VISTA class in 1964.

In 1994, VISTA became a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service, founded by President Bill Clinton. In 2009 [The Serve America Act](#) was signed and expanded the national service programs administered by CNCS.

The VISTA program has been addressing the needs of impoverished communities for more than 50 years. ^{iv} VISTA builds the capacity of not only communities but also of the VISTA members who serve. It provides the opportunity to bring local and national resources to bear on local issues. VISTA also makes it possible to balance scarce skills with community knowledge and capital.

Legislative History

VISTA was originally created in 1964 by the Economic Opportunity Act as part of the "War on Poverty." In 1973, the program was reauthorized with the passage of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act, as amended, (DVSA) of 1973, as amended, and it became part of a new federal agency called ACTION, the Federal Domestic Volunteer Agency. In 1990, the National and Community Service Act of 1990 created the new AmeriCorps program and moved the national service programs in ACTION – the VISTA and Senior Corps programs - to the Commission on National Service. In 1993 a new federal agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), was created. VISTA formally fell under the AmeriCorps national service program umbrella and became known as AmeriCorps VISTA. In 2009, the DVSA was amended again upon the passage of the [Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009](#). The Serve America Act did not change the fundamental purpose or the structure of the VISTA program, but did codify project sustainability as a key objective of the program.

Legal Framework

VISTA operates under parameters defined by federal law, federal regulations, and agency policies and guidance. It can be helpful to know where to find the relevant legal requirements when learning how to manage the VISTA program at the local or national level. The following section is an overview of this documentation.

Legislation

The legislation under which the VISTA program operates is the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (DVSA), as amended, and certain provisions of the [National and Community Service Act of 1990](#) (NCSA), as amended. The DVSA is the VISTA program’s authorizing legislation, and it is the Federal law enacted by Congress that outlines the purposes of the program and the parameters within which it may operate. By law, CNCS cannot operate the program in any way that violates these parameters. [A current copy of the DVSA is available here.](#)

Regulations ^{[3],[4]}

Statutes, such as the DVSA, tend to be very broad. Congress often leaves the details of the law to the federal agency charged with its implementation. Congress grants executive branch agencies, such as CNCS, with authority to interpret the law and develop the programmatic details. Many of these details ultimately appear as regulations, codified in the *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR).

Regulations are developed through a process known as Rulemaking, which involves publication in the *Federal Register* of proposed regulations that allow for public comment. Taking the public comments into full consideration, the Federal agency thereafter publishes the regulations as final. Regulations have the weight of law, but they may be amended through the Rulemaking process at any time. The regulations that pertain to AmeriCorps VISTA are accessible [here](#).

Many *Handbook* passages refer directly to a corresponding VISTA Regulation from which the policy or procedure is crafted. VISTA regulations reflect how VISTA has decided to implement and interpret its statute, the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended ^[5] (DVSA), and they are legally binding. The regulations specifically address issues including but not limited to eligibility, termination, sponsors, Summer Associates, restrictions, protections, terms, and benefits.

Policies

As necessary, the Director of VISTA may issue written policies to clarify or update details of the program not defined elsewhere. These policies must be consistent with the statute and program regulations.

Program Guidance

Each year, the Director of VISTA issues program guidance to current and potential VISTA project sponsors and CNCS State Offices. This guidance provides directions about programming priorities and national initiatives. Current program guidance is available [here](#).

^[1] [45 C.F.R. §2556.1 \(2018\)](#).

^[2] [Click here](#) to review a timeline that celebrates 50 years of VISTA service.

^[3] [45 C.F.R. §2556.3 \(2018\)](#).

^[4] [45 C.F.R. §2556.7 \(2018\)](#).

^[5] [The Domestic Volunteer Service Act](#)

About VISTA Projects

About VISTA Projects

Nonprofit organizations, Native American Tribes, and state, city, and local government agencies are eligible to apply to be AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors. Eligible sponsorship by nonprofit organizations is not limited to those organizations designated by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as a “501(c)(3)” organization; eligible sponsorship may also include nonprofits with other IRS-designated 501(c) statuses that focus on anti-poverty outcomes. Organizations that focus solely on advocacy and lobbying are not eligible. Sponsors must be able to operate and direct the project, recruit and supervise AmeriCorps VISTA members, and provide the necessary administrative support to achieve the goals of the project. Sponsors must develop and manage projects with meaningful involvement of the low-income communities to be served.

Key Principles

VISTA embraces the following *key principles*:

Anti-poverty Focus — the statutory purpose of AmeriCorps VISTA is to strengthen and support efforts to eliminate and alleviate poverty and address poverty-related problems in the United States. Each VISTA project must focus on empowering individuals to emerge from poverty, not simply making poverty more tolerable. VISTA projects should focus on long-term solutions to poverty rather than short-term services.

Sustainable Solutions — AmeriCorps VISTA members serve as short-term resources to build the long-term sustainability of anti-poverty programs. Projects should be developed with a goal to phase out the need for VISTAs and have the project continue without them.

Community Empowerment — Prospective and current AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsors must engage people of the communities to be served by the project in planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating the project. Each project must be responsive and relevant to the lives of community residents, and tap into inherent community assets, strengths, and resources.

Capacity Building — VISTA members create systems that remain long after their term of service ends. VISTA projects expand the scale, impact, and resource-leveraging ability of specific anti-poverty programs of their sponsor. VISTA members strengthen sponsors' efforts by expanding community partnerships, securing long-term resources, and addressing specific local needs, with all activities focused on creating pathways out of poverty for low-income communities. VISTA members focus on building the capacity of specific anti-poverty programs and interventions and not on general capacity building for the organization as a whole.

Who is Who in the VISTA Network

At CNCS

The [Corporation for National and Community Service](#) (CNCS) has a headquarters office in Washington, D.C., and regional field offices, called CNCS State Offices, in most states and territories throughout the country. The CNCS State Offices administer the [VISTA program](#), the [Senior Corps program](#), and other CNCS initiatives.

VISTA Headquarters

VISTA Headquarters (HQ), in consultation with the CNCS State Offices and other CNCS staff, determines goals, policies, administrative procedures, training, and budgetary requirements for effective and efficient program operation. The HQ office performs the following tasks:

- Monitors progress toward achieving national program goals and priorities
- Allocates and monitors VISTA resources among CNCS State Offices
- Sets VISTA policies and procedures
- Prepares reports to Congress, the White House, and the public
- Researches and shares effective program models
- Develops and implements training, professional development, and technical assistance for VISTAs, VISTA Leaders, and sponsors
- Administers VISTA support services, such as health care, child care, payments and reimbursements for living allowances and travel, and enrollments in the Eli Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or end-of-service stipend
- Guides recruitment and outreach efforts to potential VISTAs and sponsors
- Develops and monitors the VISTA budget

VISTA Member Support Unit

The VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU) is part of VISTA HQ but, due to their special functions that support members, the VMSU merits additional explanation. The VMSU provides a full array of administrative support to VISTA members and alumni. This support includes assistance for the member application, enrollment forms, training events, active service, end of service, and post service. The VMSU also serves as the repository for VISTA member files and a primary resource to answer questions from members about their service, forms, travel, benefits, etc.

The VMSU handles administrative functions and activities including but not limited to:

- Approving relocation travel
- Arranging emergency travel
- Answering VISTA members' questions during their year of service
- Processing early terminations, requests for extensions and reenrollments, and close of service
- Assisting VISTAs with using the My AmeriCorps portal

VISTAs may contact the VMSU via the National Service Hotline at 800-942-2677 or at VMSU@cns.gov. The mailing address for the VMSU is:

VMSU
250 E Street SW
Washington, DC 20525

CNCS State Office

Nearly every state has a designated CNCS State Office to help develop, manage, and monitor VISTA programs in their state and sometimes in other states (for national projects). The roles of a [CNCS State Office](#) include outreach, project development, technical assistance, monitoring and evaluation, and VISTA member support. Each CNCS State Office is led by a State Program Director (SPD) and may also include one or more Program Officers (POs). Major duties of CNCS State Office staff are to:

- Manage a portfolio of VISTA and Senior Corps projects
- Provide technical assistance to project sponsors and monitor project/grants data indicators to affirm compliance with performance measurement requirements
- Assist current and potential sponsors in planning, designing, and submitting grant applications consistent with CNCS guidance
- Assure portfolio records are well organized and comply with office requirements
- Continually review and evaluate project operations through on-site compliance monitoring and electronic progress report review and feedback
- Respond to technical assistance requests from potential sponsoring organizations that wish to develop proposals for VISTA projects
- Assist potential sponsors in refining project goals and objectives, in determining if the project is in accordance with the VISTA mission, and in ensuring that self-sustaining activity will be achieved within the low-income community
- Approve or decline to approve VISTA member applicants
- Deselect VISTA candidates, as needed
- Remove VISTA members from VISTA projects, as needed
- Terminate VISTA members early from the VISTA program, as needed
- Approve or disapprove an organization's concept paper and application
- Arrange for sponsor training opportunities
- Approve or disapprove a sponsor's selection of a VISTA applicant
- Arrange for VISTA candidates to enroll in Virtual Member Orientation (VMO)
- Support VISTAs and sponsors during project implementation with in-service training and technical assistance
- Monitor project activities
- Review progress reports
- Close out VISTA projects
- Work with elected officials
- Conduct community outreach

Field Financial Management Center

CNCS operates a central financial service center, called the Field Financial Management Center (FFMC), which is part of the Chief of Operations team. The FFMC is located in Philadelphia, PA.

VISTA sponsors who are awarded grants will work with a Grants Officer (GO). The FFMC provides CNCS State Offices and sponsors with a GO to assist with managing grants for VISTA.

Office of National Service Trust

Frequently referred to as the Trust, the Office of the National Service Trust within CNCS manages the various functions related to the Eli Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. Duties of the National Service Trust include:

- Providing information to members and programs regarding the Trust
- Enrolling members in the Trust and documenting their service
- Providing Education Awards to members who successfully complete their service
- Helping members use their earned Education Awards and making appropriate payments to schools and loan holders as directed by members
- Helping members obtain forbearances on the repayment of their qualified student loans and making appropriate payments for interest that accrued while the members were serving
- Managing the investments of the Trust

VISTA members, alumni, sponsors, and CNCS State Offices can contact the Trust via the National Service Hotline.

National Service Hotline

Frequently referred to as the Hotline, this service is operated via a CNCS contract. The [National Service Hotline](#) is a service that provides general CNCS and AmeriCorps program information, eGrants (eGrants is an online system designed to automate the entire grants and project management process from application to closeout), and the My AmeriCorps portal help, and some program specific inquiries. VISTA Sponsors may call the Hotline with questions regarding eGrants technical issues, password assistance, and for general assistance. VISTA members may contact the Hotline with questions including but not limiting to the following topics: MyAmeriCorps portal, benefits, living allowance, required forms, and Education Awards.

As stated earlier, VISTAs may reach the VMSU and the Trust by calling the Hotline. Questions that cannot be answered by Hotline contractors are then elevated to the VMSU or the Trust as appropriate.

The Hotline can be reached at:

- Toll Free: 800-942-2677
- <https://questions.nationalservice.gov> (Submit questions via web form or use the live chat function.)

The Hotline maintains the following hours:

- January, May, June, July, August, and September
 - Monday through Friday: 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. (all times Eastern)
- February, March, April, October, November and December
 - Monday through Thursday: 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. (all times Eastern)
 - Friday: closed
- Federal Holidays: closed

At Your Project

The Community

Community, as distinguished from the sponsor, may be defined geographically (e.g., neighborhood), demographically (e.g., school children) or by affinity (e.g., individuals seeking food security for the household). In VISTA, the concept of community is meant to designate the residents of a low-income area. The central idea behind VISTA is that the project is conducted in partnership with the residents, not to or for them. Representatives of the community:

- Plan with the sponsor to develop a project
- Work with the sponsor directly and indirectly during project implementation
- Share, receive, and transfer skills, attitudes, and behaviors mutually
- Assume responsibility of the project's activities at the end of VISTA service (as appropriate)

Sponsors ^{[1] [2]}

A VISTA serves under the auspices of a sponsor: a federal, state, or local government agency, a government of an Indian nation, or a private or public nonprofit organization. The sponsor, in turn, partners both with the low-income community it serves through its mission or project design and with the VISTA.

The sponsor:

- Develops a project plan that incorporates the VISTAs to build long-term solutions to poverty-related issues within a local community
- Engages residents of the low-income community to ensure the project is responsive and relevant to the low-income residents
- Leverages community resources
- Expands the capacity of the community and its own organization to sustain the project when the VISTAs finish their terms of service
- Recruits VISTAs locally or nationwide
- Prepares a VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) for each VISTA member
- Supports the VISTAs as they work to expand the organization's capacity to sustain the project
- Supervises, trains, and provides administrative support to the VISTAs
- Monitors and reports on project progress, through Project Progress Reports (PPRs)
- Ensures compliance with the DVSA and regulatory requirements, and all applicable VISTA policies and guidelines
- In some cases, cost-shares with CNCS the VISTA living allowance and other project-related expenses

If awarded grant funds, the sponsor has these additional responsibilities:

- Comply with the terms and conditions of the Notice of Grant Award, the Uniform Guidance for Federal Awards at 2 C.F.R. Parts 200^[3] and 2205^[4], and account for grant funds
- Perform criminal history background checks for all project staff in covered positions – i.e., all project staff – assigned to the project who receive any portion of their salary from CNCS grant funding
- Pay the VISTA living allowance, end-of-service cash stipend (but not the Education Award) and other miscellaneous costs to VISTAs if receiving a Program Grant

Project Director

The project director is a staff person of the sponsor who has been assigned by the sponsor the overall responsibility for the management of the VISTA project. Project directors are responsible for executing all aspects of the project as outlined by the sponsor and are critical to ensuring the success of the VISTA project. Project directors might also be called VISTA project supervisors.

Authorized Representative

The authorized representative is the individual who has the authority to commit resources on behalf of the sponsor organization. This individual certifies the concept paper, authorizes the application, and must have a personal eGrants account in order to do so.

Supervisor

Supervisors directly supervise a VISTA member and are responsible for the day-to-day oversight for one or more members. This might be at the project level or a site/subrecipient level. Some supervisors might also be project directors and fulfill more than one role with regard to VISTA project management. Sponsors are responsible for ensuring all supervisors are trained.

VISTA Member

[AmeriCorps VISTA members](#), including VISTA Leaders, vary in age and hail from a range of diverse backgrounds and experiences. Each VISTA member commits to one year of full-time service on a specific project operated by a sponsor. Their work should focus on creating or expanding an organization's specific anti-poverty program and building the program's capacity to ensure sustainability once VISTA resources are withdrawn.

The AmeriCorps VISTA [Summer Associate Program](#) allows members to serve through an existing VISTA project for eight, nine, or ten weeks through the summer months. Unlike VISTA members who serve yearlong terms of service, Summer Associates generally perform direct service activities but can be assigned to short-term capacity-building activities as well.

Both VISTA members who serve a yearlong terms of service, and VISTA members who are Summer Associates, live and serve in some of our nation's poorest areas. They receive a modest living allowance and [other benefits](#) during their service. After successfully completing a term of service, VISTA members and Summer Associates may receive either a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, which can be used to pay for college or student loans, or an end-of-service cash stipend. Individuals interested in serving as a VISTA should apply at [here](#).

In Fiscal Year 2019, AmeriCorps VISTA plans to support approximately 8,000 full-time VISTA members and Summer Associates who will serve with approximately 850 sponsors. They will leverage human, financial, and material resources to develop sustainable solutions to problems in low-income communities across the country.

VISTAs make a full-time, one-year commitment to alleviate poverty in a particular community. VISTAs:

- Serve as a catalyst and change agent
- Mobilize community resources
- Increase the capacity of the low-income community to achieve its goals
- Ensure that the project activities are able to be sustained at the end of VISTA service
- Fulfill the VAD
- Follow the rules and guidelines in the [VISTA Member Handbook](#)

Leaders^[5]

Leaders have successfully completed at least a year of full-time service with VISTA, NCCC, or AmeriCorps State and National, or a full term with the Peace Corps, and have demonstrated to the VISTA program exemplary skills and leadership in community service. Leaders may not perform administrative or supervisory functions for their sponsor or CNCS State Office. Leaders are assigned to some larger projects or regions to assist sponsors and VISTAs in achieving project objectives and developing new project activities and sources of community support. Leaders coordinate VISTA members to increase the impact of the VISTA project.

Summer Associates^{[6], [7]}

The VISTA program allows for existing project sponsors to supplement their anti-poverty activities with an infusion of "hands-on volunteers" during the summer months. Unlike year-round VISTAs, Summer Associates are not limited in their ability to perform direct service activities. VISTAs may serve as mentors and coordinators for the Summer Associates. This summer program is a prime opportunity to introduce individuals, particularly college-age students, to national service with the hope it will lead to their participation in longer-term national service programs later on.

The Summer Associates program offers individuals the opportunity to participate for eight, nine, or ten weeks during the summer months in an intensive level of summer service that expands on existing sponsors' service plans. Summer efforts, combined with ongoing VISTA programming, should result in:

- Furthering one or more of the CNCS strategic initiatives
- A credible effort to help people escape poverty, not simply make poverty more tolerable
- Outcomes that increase the project's impact on those being served

^[1] [45 C.F.R. §2556.100 \(2018\)](#).

^[2] [45 C.F.R. §2556.105 \(2018\)](#).

^[3] [2 C.F.R. Part 200 \(2018\)](#).

^[4] [2 C.F.R. Part 2205 \(2018\)](#).

^[5] [45 C.F.R. §§ 2556.300-365 \(2018\)](#).

^[6] [45 C.F.R. §2556.500 \(2018\)](#).

^[7] [45 C.F.R. §2556.505 \(2018\)](#).

Managing a VISTA Project

Introduction

This chapter focuses on VISTA sponsor project management responsibilities. Project directors are designated by an organization and are responsible for managing VISTA resources and providing the support necessary to achieve project goals. Project directors also play an important role in the success of the project and in linking the sponsoring organization with CNCS and its VISTA program.

Overview of Core Sponsor Responsibilities

Sponsors have a number of responsibilities in executing their VISTA projects. It is critical that the project director and the authorized representative are familiar with the VISTA application and other key documents they commit their organization to, including the Memorandum of Agreement (MA) and, if applicable, the Notice of Grant Award (NGA).

The following list summarizes some core responsibilities of VISTA sponsors:

- Operate the project
 - In accordance with applicable laws, regulations, policies, certifications, and assurances
 - In accordance with the approved project application
 - With best efforts to accomplish the goals set out for the AmeriCorps VISTA members in the project application

- Consult with and involve the people of the communities to be served in planning, developing, and implementing the project
- Ensure the project director/supervisor named on the project application participates in supervisor training offered by CNCS
- Ensure the training of supervisors with support from the CNCS State Office
- In cases where the sponsor assigns VISTA members to subrecipient organization(s) separate from the sponsoring organization, enter into a Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with each subrecipient organization where member(s) are placed
- Ensure that all VISTA resources are used properly at all times
- Complete reporting requirements, including
 - Sponsor Verification Form (SVF)
 - Project Progress Report (PPR)
 - VISTA Progress Report Supplement (VPRS)
 - Federal Financial Report (FFR) - only if awarded a support or program grant
- For cost share projects, reimburse CNCS for biweekly payments to all cost share members for their living allowances
- Recruit and retain high-quality VISTA members for service
- Recognize the impact of VISTA members in your community and acknowledge CNCS as a funder

Member Experience

Member experience is another core responsibility that rests with the project director and supervisor(s). The member experience core responsibilities begin with planning for recruitment, which occurs well before the VISTA arrives onsite and continues throughout the VISTA member's service term.

- Prepare a VAD for each VISTA position that aligns with the goals described in the project application
- Recruit, screen, and interview applicants and make candidate recommendations to the CNCS State Office in advance of VMOs
- Provide an in-depth On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT) for all incoming VISTA members at the beginning of their service
- Supervise all assigned AmeriCorps VISTA members on a day-to-day basis, and ensure that subrecipient organizations provide day-to-day supervision and support
- Ensure the safety of all assigned VISTA members during the performance of their assigned duties, and notify your CNCS State Office promptly of any serious injury, harassment, and/or discrimination

Execute as Approved or Amend

Your approved project application is available on eGrants for review any time. This document captures the full scope of the project, including sites, VISTA assignments, and performance measures. The sponsor must execute the application as approved and consult the CNCS State Office to amend the application.

When it is approved and a VISTA project is awarded, the project application becomes part of the agreement between CNCS and the sponsor. The sponsor is obligated to execute the project as detailed in the project application. If changes in the community or organization make the approved project unrealistic or inadvisable, the sponsor should contact the CNCS State Office to discuss the circumstances and review the possibility of amending the project application to shift the approved project.

Guiding Questions for Implementation: Connections to Other Materials

After a VISTA project is awarded and moves toward and through implementation, the sponsor has responsibility for developing and using other official documents to support the project. These documents include, but are not limited to, VISTA Service Opportunity Listings (SOLs), VADs, and On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT) plans. These materials are submitted to and approved by the CNCS State Office. All of these materials should align with the content in the approved project application. If these official documents don't align with the approved project application, the CNCS State Office may ask for them to be revised to strengthen the connection to the application or for the project application to be amended to incorporate changes or additional information.

See [Preparing for New VISTA Members](#) for more information on VISTA SOLs, VADs and OSOT plans.

Memorandum of Agreement

A Memorandum of Agreement (MA) between the sponsor and CNCS is electronically "signed" by the CNCS State Director and the authorized representative of the sponsor. This agreement is a legally binding document that states the specific obligations of each party, as well as joint responsibilities. The MA is produced and can be accessed through eGrants. Sites are subject to the terms of the MA through their Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the sponsor rather than directly.

Memorandum of Understanding

In cases where the sponsor assigns VISTA members to subrecipient organizations, the sponsor enters into a MOU with each subrecipient that is a separate legal entity.

CNCS Support and Oversight

The CNCS State Office helps develop, manage, and monitor VISTA projects. They support your supervision of VISTA members and intervene in emergencies or difficult situations. Oversight is conducted through reviewing of reports, site visits, and compliance monitoring visits.

Training and Technical Assistance

CNCS staff also connect you to resources related to your specific training and technical assistance needs. The CNCS State Office can also provide technical assistance via conference calls, webinars, email, and site visits regarding:

- eGrants
- Recruitment
- Access to VISTA trainings
- Reporting
- Adjusting project plans, VADs, and OSOT plans
- Compliance monitoring of the project

Site Visits

Site visits, conducted by the CNCS State Office staff to support the sponsoring organization, are designed to meet specific needs, enhance project effectiveness, deliver technical assistance, and support and recognize project successes. Site visits are a method of exchanging information; ensuring compliance with general administrative, financial, and program requirements; providing technical assistance and guidance as needed; and assisting with project promotion. Not all site visits are classified as an official monitoring visit.

During the site visit, the CNCS State Office reviews the sponsor and project for administrative effectiveness, compliance, and quality. CNCS headquarters staff may also participate in site visits to the sponsor and subrecipient sites. CNCS staff members assess projects according to three categories:

- Sponsors and supervisors and their roles
 - VISTA recruitment
 - VISTA assignment
 - OSOT
 - In-service training
 - Career development assistance for VISTAs
 - Administration, including provision of supervision, transportation, and other support
 - Assessment of need for CNCS support and training
- Compliance
 - Programmatic
 - Fiscal
 - Legal and regulatory
- Community impact and self-sufficiency
 - Accomplishments
 - Troubleshooting and mechanisms for overcoming challenges
 - Resources generated
 - Sustainability: how the community is going to take over when the VISTA is gone

Quality Assurance and Compliance Monitoring

As a federal agency, CNCS has a responsibility and a requirement to ensure that federal assistance is properly managed and expended in accordance with federal statutes, regulations, and guidance. CNCS has an obligation to ensure that taxpayer money is used properly and efficiently.

Your CNCS State Office will follow your project's quality and compliance from its early stages through its conclusion. On an ongoing basis, they will:

- Assess the project's progress toward meeting the specific goals and objectives stated in the application work plan
- Assess project compliance with applicable program and fiscal requirements
- Identify and address specific technical assistance needs

A variety of tools and strategies are used to monitor compliance, including:

- Required reports, including the PPR, SVF, and FFR (as applicable)
- Other materials submitted as part of your project (VADs, SOLs, Future Plans Forms [FPF], etc.)
- Routine communications, by phone, over email, and in person at site visits and events

Each project receives a full on-site compliance monitoring visit from CNCS at least every six years, during which we visit sites, interview staff and VISTA members, and review project materials and documentation.

CNCS may also conduct a fiscal review or audit if a project received a grant.

Using eGrants

eGrants is an online system designed to automate the entire grants and project management process from application to closeout. It allows organizations to find funding opportunities, apply for projects, and manage reporting online. The system also allows CNCS to review applications, award grants, and manage those grants and projects efficiently and effectively.

eGrants is the Corporation for National and Community Service's web-based system for:

- Submitting and tracking concept papers and applications
- Negotiating and awarding projects
- Managing projects including processing amendments and continuations, and
- Progress reporting

Sponsoring organizations are required to use the eGrants system from application to closeout. The following activities take place in eGrants:

- Submission, negotiation, and approval of project applications, including concept papers, amendments, and continuations
- Award of MA
- Management of SOLs and VADs
- Recruitment and selection functions, including member applications, eligibility verification, and recommendation of applicants for service
- Management of VISTA member accounts, including FPFs
- Access of cost share invoices and statements
- Completion of project reports

There are many resources available to help you use the eGrants System, including an eGrants help desk through the National Service Hotline. eGrants works best when accessed via Internet Explorer and pop-up blockers are turned off.

Managing Accounts

eGrants allows for each sponsor to have multiple staff accounts, and each account is assigned specific user roles. Each individual must have their own account with the roles needed for their responsibilities. Grantee Administrators can approve new accounts for their organization and assign appropriate roles to each account. An overview of eGrants/My AmeriCorps user roles for VISTA programs is [available here](#).

Maintaining Current Sponsor Information

Sponsors are responsible for ensuring their organization's information is up-to-date in eGrants. If there are any changes to the organization's contact information, identifying information, or key staff (including project director and authorized representative), the sponsor should enter the new information in eGrants as well as notify the CNCS State Office directly. Additionally, project staff who have left the sponsoring organization or are no longer supporting the VISTA project should have their eGrants account deactivated.

VISTA Leaders & eGrants Accounts

VISTA Leaders may be given the role of Grantee Recruiter in My AmeriCorps, through eGrants, to support a project sponsor's recruitment activities. To hold the role of Grantee Recruiter, the Leader must apply for a separate eGrants account, after which the Grantee Administrator for the project may then approve the request by assigning the role of Grantee Recruiter to the Leader. In the

role of Grantee Recruiter, a VISTA Leader is able to edit SOLs, search for and contact VISTA candidates, and review applications. Although the role of Grantee Recruiter allows the user to approve or reject applications, a Leader may not do so. Only a project director or supervisor may approve or reject applications.

Under no circumstance can a Leader have “Grantee, Grantee Administrator,” or any other eGrants role assigned to them. In addition, VISTA Leaders may not access eGrants to work on project-management tasks – progress reports, for example – as this is a project staff function. Failure to comply with these provisions by a sponsor or Leader can lead to project closure.

How to Get Help

For technical assistance or troubleshooting payments, credits, invoice errors, passwords, cost share, or other system-related questions, contact the [National Service Hotline](#). You may contact your CNCS State Office for questions regarding content that is entered in eGrants.

My AmeriCorps Portal

[My AmeriCorps](#) Portal is an online space, accessed through eGrants by sponsors, designed to help manage the AmeriCorps experience online and in one place. Using [My AmeriCorps](#), sponsors can:

- Create and update SOLs and VADs
- Reach out to applicants whose interests and skills could make them a potential match for your service opportunities
- View applications
- Submit the Sponsor Recommendation and select applicants

The Portal is designed to group pending tasks requiring your attention by type (such as enrollment, recruitment, and exit) and display them in separate areas for ease of access. These areas are called Workbaskets and are specific to each user. This means a user can only view data and perform tasks in the Portal that are related to their assigned user roles.

Reporting

Sponsors and supervisors should be engaged in continuous monitoring of their project. Monitoring and oversight include assessing how well the project is being implemented and whether or not the project is on track to achieve its goals.

Sponsor Verification Form (SVF)

Biweekly verification of actively serving VISTA members is critical for timely and correct payment of living allowances. The Sponsor Verification Form (SVF) is a document in eGrants that lists the active VISTAs assigned to a project and their end-of-service dates. On a biweekly basis, the Sponsor must complete and submit the form within three (3) workdays of receipt to confirm which AmeriCorps VISTA members remained active during the previous pay period and which AmeriCorps members left service during the previous pay period. (This reporting requirement does not replace the requirement of the Sponsor to notify their CNCS State Office immediately regarding the departure [e.g., early removal or termination, AWOL] of any of its AmeriCorps VISTA members.) The sponsor must certify the SVF even if no VISTA members left during the pay period covered by the form. Regular submission of this form by supervisors is critical to avoid overpayments to VISTA members who have terminated service early or have already completed their term of service.

Instructions and a schedule for the SVFs can be accessed through the VISTA Campus [Reporting and Evaluation page](#).

Project Progress Report (PPR)

Purpose

Sponsors use the PPR to document project accomplishments during a certain reporting period, as well as challenges, support provided to VISTA members, and technical assistance needs. CNCS personnel use the PPR to assess progress and to determine what feedback, technical assistance or other interventions are needed.

The PPR helps sponsors and CNCS personnel to see whether sponsors are operating the project in accordance with the application, VISTA policies and regulations and whether sponsors are making adequate progress toward achieving the results specified in their approved application. Information from the PPR may also be used to fulfill requests for project information from other CNCS departments, such as the Office of External Affairs.

Timing

VISTA sponsors are required to submit PPRs at prescribed intervals to the CNCS State Office, typically quarterly for the first year and semiannually thereafter, unless otherwise specified by the CNCS State Office.

Generally, reports are due 30 days after the end of a reporting period. Sponsors will complete PPRs regardless of whether or not a VISTA was serving during that reporting period. Reports are submitted and reviewed via eGrants, and the reporting periods and due dates for each report are viewable there.

Data Collection

To support the submission of quality data, all VISTA sponsors should be mindful of creating data collection processes that will start on the first day of a project and that satisfy the data collection protocols for any performance measures that were selected. Key definitions and data collection protocols for each CNCS National Performance Measure are available [here](#).

Multi-site projects are especially affected by the need to set up an information collection process to collect data from sites. The [Working with Sub-Sites](#) section of the VISTA Campus provides technical assistance resources to assist multi-site projects in carrying out reporting.

Throughout project implementation, VISTA sponsors use their own processes to collect data that will be reported on the PPRs. This includes quantitative data for specific performance measures as well as qualitative information, such as stories, anecdotes, explanations on performance measure progress, and descriptions of activities collected by the sponsor from individual VISTA members, community members and project staff.

Feedback

Once the CNCS State Office reviews the submitted report, it will provide feedback via eGrants. The feedback will include any guidance on administrative procedures, or revisions to project plans, noting successes and accomplishments, necessary corrections or issues that need to be addressed, along with a timeframe for completion of outstanding items.

Instructions

Instructions for the PPR can be accessed through the VISTA Campus [Reporting and Evaluation page](#).

AmeriCorps VISTA members may inform the completion of the report by providing data to the sponsoring organization. They may also review the completed report. However, they should not be required to complete the actual report. This is a staff responsibility of the organization sponsoring the VISTA project.

VISTA Progress Report Supplement (VPRS)

The VISTA Progress Report Supplement (VPRS) is an addendum to the PPR required of sponsors. The VPRS is submitted on an annual basis and is intended to cover activities over a single fiscal year, regardless of the individual program year. Through the VPRS, sponsors submit specific performance data elements used by CNCS.

All VISTA sponsors are required to submit the VPRS once per year by the deadline provided by the CNCS State Office. VISTA members may inform the completion of the report by providing data to the sponsoring organization. They may also review the completed report. However, they should not be required to complete the actual report. This is a staff responsibility of the organization sponsoring the VISTA project.

Instructions for the VPRS can be accessed through the VISTA Campus [Reporting and Evaluation page](#).

Informal Communication

Your CNCS State Office wants to hear regularly about the accomplishments of your VISTAs and your project's work in the community.

Sharing Activities and Accomplishments

While the CNCS State Office learns about project progress via standard reports, they are interested in hearing about major activities and accomplishments more frequently. Sponsors are invited to contact their CNCS State Office any time to share breaking news about major events, high profile visits, new initiatives, grants and donations, key collaborations, and significant benchmarks.

How CNCS State Offices Share Information

The CNCS State Offices regularly share information highlighting projects in the state with other CNCS units, such as VISTA Headquarters, Government Relations, and External Affairs, and will include accomplishment information you provide in their reports. CNCS may then use this information for congressional office updates and press releases to national media outlets.

Project Continuation

VISTA is a short-term resource and VISTA projects are generally ready for a successful transition away from VISTA support after about three years. VISTA projects are initially awarded VISTA resources for a period of about one year, and a continuation application for further resources must be submitted by a sponsor and approved by CNCS in order for VISTA support to continue into subsequent years beyond the first. VISTA sponsors are generally eligible to apply for up to two continuation periods. Each continuation period is for one year.

The process for a VISTA sponsor to attain continuation begins four months (120 days) prior to the end of the current project year. At this time the CNCS State Office may send an invitation to the sponsor to complete a continuation application. If the sponsor receives a continuation application invitation, the sponsor promptly completes a continuation application in eGrants and submits it no later than 90 days before the current project year ends.

The continuation process begins with a thorough review of the project's accomplishments to date, and concludes with a decision by the CNCS State Office whether to continue the project beyond the end of the current project year. If the project has been successful in meeting its goals and building sustainability, continuation is highly probable; however, a continuation is not guaranteed. Presuming there are no material issues with the continuation application, the CNCS State Office reviews the application within 15 business days of receipt or at least 75 days prior to the end of the MA.

The process for reviewing a continuation proposal is similar to the review process for an initial project application, but with several important differences. The CNCS State Office reviews the application for adherence to VISTA project guidelines and the state's annual plan for project development.

Criteria for Approval

The CNCS State Office bases the decision to continue a project on the following conditions:

- VISTA resources are available
- The project's progress toward achieving capacity-building and self-sufficiency goals
- The project's performance in meeting its goals and objectives
- The sponsor's compliance with provisions contained in the MA, the DVSA, VISTA regulations, and other applicable policies and guidelines
- Previous year's accomplishments, which must be included in the continuation proposal
- Long-range plans, especially regarding project sustainability, which must be discussed in the continuation proposal
- Timely submission of PPRs, monitoring reports, biweekly SVFs, and feedback from VISTAs to ensure the project is making substantial progress in meeting goals and objectives
- Level of recruitment and retention of VISTAs
- Ability to meet cost-share commitments

The CNCS State Office uses the following criteria in initial application approval but may also use them in reviewing continuations:

- Assess the project's involvement of stakeholders in project development and implementation through the duration of the project
- Assess the extent to which the project addresses the relevant needs of low-income communities and assess the project's compliance with the provisions of the [Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 \(DVSA\), as amended](#), and all applicable regulations, policies, and guidelines
- Assess the project's actions and efforts to build organizational and/or community capacity to sustain the project beyond the VISTA term of service
- Evaluate the intended outcomes on the targeted population and community that the project describes in the application
- Evaluate whether the project makes sufficiently clear in the application how VISTAs will be trained, supervised, and supported to ensure mission success, as well as compliance with DVSA program rules and regulations
- Evaluate how the project illustrates the relationship between key project elements throughout the application, including a statement demonstrating the need and intended outcomes, performance measures, and VADs

- Evaluate the application to determine how the project intends to ensure that VISTA and community resources are sufficient to achieve project goals
- Assess whether the project has made clear in its application that the project possesses sufficient management and technical capability to implement and oversee the project
- Assess whether the project, in its application, is requesting an appropriate number of VISTAs to achieve the project mission, and has an acceptable process in place to recommend to CNCS the selection of VISTAs who have the requisite skills and qualifications to meet established goals and objectives
- Assess whether, from the application, the VISTA project has provided sufficient detail and clarity to show how it will establish and implement a recruitment schedule and an onboarding process

If a continuation application is approved, the sponsoring organization and the CNCS State Office sign a new MA via eGrants for the new project period.

Instructions and Documents

[Click here](#) to review the VISTA application materials and instructions. Please pay special attention to the Documents section because there are some documents you will need to submit every year, such as two new letters of support, and some documents you need to submit only when there have been changes to them, such as the board of directors' roster.

Additional Years Beyond Year Three – Working with CNCS State Office

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

- The intermediary sponsor agrees to cost-share a significant portion of the VISTAs
- The sponsor acts as an intermediary organization and changes the sub-site organizations according to the three-year period
- The sponsor demonstrates an extenuating community need, such as being the only sponsor available in a high-poverty area for the VISTA project, and more time is needed to expand anti-poverty capacity
- The extension would not create or increase a dependency on VISTA resources

Project Changes and Amendments

Sometimes during a project year, the sponsor may have to modify its awarded application to reflect new performance measures, project staff or authorized representative, sites, budgets, and VISTA member activities. In this case, contact your CNCS State Office to discuss the proposed changes. Once the CNCS State Office has approved the plan, you will submit a project amendment. An amendment is the modification of an approved project application to reflect a significant change in program activities, budget, or other aspects of a project. Amendment requests are submitted via eGrants and must be approved by the CNCS State Office.

There are three main categories of amendments.

1. Programmatic changes - changes in the scope, objectives, goals, project period, and staff of the program as well as VISTA member activities
2. Performance measure amendments - used to add or remove a measure or change output or outcome targets
3. Budgetary changes - adding or reducing the number of VISTA member slots, adjusting a cost share component, or making changes to Support and Transportation or Program grant funds

The nature of the changes determines the amendment types that are necessary for the amendment application. There can be more than one type selected for each amendment. The CNCS State Office can help identify the amendment type(s) needed to capture the changes as well as support amendment set-up.

Marketing, Outreach, and Recruitment

Spreading the Word within Your Communities and Network

A range of marketing materials for VISTA sponsors is available on the [Sponsor a VISTA](#) page. Materials include print and digital resources from brochures, posters, and fact sheets to logos, photos, and impact graphics. Customizable flyers are available, as well as free recruitment gear such as pens, bumper stickers, and tote bags for outreach purposes.

The [Communications Guide for AmeriCorps and Senior Corps](#) has guidelines and resources to enhance engagement and announcement ideas, improve social media posts, and bolster your storytelling across digital and traditional media. Related resources are available on the [CNCS Newsroom](#)'s page for Communication Resources.

The [AmeriCorps & Senior Corps Official Branding Guidance](#) outlines requirements for using the AmeriCorps brand. Sponsors are responsible for securing permission from their VISTA members to use their photos, images, words, voice, or other likeness for marketing or outreach purposes.

Acknowledgment of VISTA and CNCS

Community members and legislators are interested in the impact of federal dollars in their areas, and VISTA sponsors are responsible for acknowledging VISTA and CNCS as financial supporters of their organizations. When recognizing the good work of VISTA members, it is critical to identify them as such and acknowledge CNCS as a funder. This includes referencing VISTA and CNCS on the sponsor's website, on business cards for VISTA members, on annual reports and other published materials, at events, in newspaper articles, and during radio and television presentations.

As an AmeriCorps VISTA sponsor, all digital properties, media materials, and other relevant items should reflect your association with AmeriCorps VISTA and CNCS. The beginning of your new program year is a great time to inventory your properties and materials to ensure they appropriately reflect your national service affiliation. Here are prime examples of how to implement AmeriCorps VISTA branding:

- Prominently display the standard AmeriCorps VISTA logo on websites, most notably in "About Us" and staff listing sections
- Use standardized language to describe the program in press releases and other public documents to identify the organization as an AmeriCorps VISTA sponsor with AmeriCorps VISTA members
- Display branded signs or posters at all sites where AmeriCorps VISTA members are serving, especially those which elected officials or private-sector partners visit
- Include the AmeriCorps VISTA logo on gear that you create for your organization's VISTA members, such as business cards and email signatures

Sharing the Member Stories

We encourage you and your organization to share stories about your AmeriCorps VISTA members' experiences. The best way to promote the AmeriCorps VISTA experience is through the words and narratives of our members and alums. There are many ways you can support AmeriCorps VISTA members and alums in learning to tell their stories. Use your social media platforms as well as local print and digital media to spread the word. Below are a few key ways to solicit input from your AmeriCorps VISTA members and alums:

- Share what led you to become a VISTA member. Here is an opportunity to share what inspires you to serve.
- Share the impact of your service on the community. You can do this through sharing an anecdotal story and/or statistics that show the significance of the work.
- If a current VISTA member, share what you will do after your service year. This is a chance to share the skills attained through service and how you plan to apply them in the future.
- If a VISTA alum, share how your service shaped your future (professionally and/or personally).
- If you started an organization because of your service, be sure to include that as well.

Branding Guidance

The Three 'R's of Branding

Reasons

It is important that we brand all AmeriCorps supported programs so we can call attention to the innovative work you are doing in communities across the country. These materials can be used to showcase your community impact.

Requirements

Branding AmeriCorps VISTA is fundamental, basic, essential, and required. AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors are required to verify that all digital properties, media materials, and other relevant items reflect their association with AmeriCorps VISTA. The beginning of your recruitment cycle is a great time to inventory your properties and materials to ensure they appropriately reflect your national service affiliation.

Resources

CNCS offers an array of available AmeriCorps VISTA and CNCS branding resources on our website.

Reasons to Brand AmeriCorps VISTA

There are many reasons to brand AmeriCorps VISTA:

- Sustainability: Affiliating with AmeriCorps VISTA provides a "seal of approval" to help programs generate private resources and achieve their match, stretching the return on federal investment
- Esprit de corps: Knowing that you are part of a large national movement and not just a small local project has positive impacts on morale, productivity, teamwork, and continuing service
- Recruitment: Maintaining a diverse high-quality applicant pool to fill over 8,000 AmeriCorps VISTA positions requires continual promotion of opportunities
- Lifelong Service: Building a successful AmeriCorps VISTA alumni movement will not be possible unless members understand what AmeriCorps VISTA is and how they are part of it

Branding is our opportunity to create something with lasting impact. It is how we tell our story of service and community impact, and it is the key to our success.

Resources and Recommendations

CNCS and AmeriCorps VISTA branding resources are available to all AmeriCorps grantees on our website. Camera-ready AmeriCorps and CNCS logos and other branded materials are downloadable [here](#).

Electronic CNCS and AmeriCorps VISTA branded materials are available for your use and include logos, photos, fact sheet template, press release template, and more. CNCS also offers free public outreach and education resources such as posters, bookmarks, and stickers. Visit CNCS's [Share Our Impact](#) page for downloadable images that can be easily printed and shared.

Go to the [CNCS Ordering System](#) or look under the [Marketing Materials area](#) of the Sponsor a VISTA Member page to order national service materials. Send an email to VISTAOutreach@cns.gov with any questions. Sponsors are responsible for securing permission from their VISTA members to use their photos, images, words, voice, or other likeness for marketing or outreach purposes.

Here is a quick list of resources and how best to use them for your program.

Logo

[CNCS's website](#) has the AmeriCorps VISTA logos that you should use to brand any newsletters, signage, and collateral that you create for your program. The logo should be included in any item produced that mentions VISTA.

Website Reference

Prominently display your organization's connection to AmeriCorps VISTA on your website. Use the AmeriCorps VISTA logo, link to our [official website](#), and include your program narrative. This helps connect your organization to AmeriCorps.

Press Releases

Press releases help you pitch local media about your organization receiving AmeriCorps VISTA members. All press releases should directly reference AmeriCorps VISTA. When you plan press engagement or make pitches, please notify the Press Office at pressoffice@cns.gov and VISTAOutreach@cns.gov.

Gear and Branded Items

All full-time AmeriCorps VISTA members receive a branded polo and lapel pins. Site signs and additional materials are available at no cost through the CNCS publications site. You can also order a variety of branded shirts, pins, patches, and more [here](#).

Social Media

When using social media channels to amplify your work related to AmeriCorps VISTA, use #AmeriCorpsVISTA and #IamVISTA. Include photos and videos to further draw attention to your impact, and tag our accounts listed below:

- Twitter: [@AmeriCorpsVISTA](#), [@NationalService](#)
- Facebook: [Facebook.com/AmeriCorpsVISTA](https://www.facebook.com/AmeriCorpsVISTA), [Facebook.com/NationalService](https://www.facebook.com/NationalService)
- Tumblr (the official agency blog): [NationalService.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/nationalservice)
- Instagram: [@NationalService](#)

- YouTube: [youtube.com/nationalservice](https://www.youtube.com/nationalservice)
- Snapchat: [nationalservice](https://www.snapchat.com/nationalservice)

More social media guidance is available on the [National Service Social Media Hub](#).

Photography

Showcase AmeriCorps VISTA by using dynamic photos that convey impact, branding (“Display the A!”), and are easy to understand. Use photos to tell your story online by connecting with our social media sites. Whenever possible, try to feature AmeriCorps VISTA members and Leaders serving in their official blue-branded polo shirts. Sponsors are responsible for securing permission from their VISTA members to use their photos, images, words, voice, or other likeness for marketing or outreach purposes.

Co-Branding

Your organization does great work! AmeriCorps VISTA members help make it happen. Displaying our brands side-by-side reinforces our partnership, and ties your work into the narrative of powerful service nationwide.

Visits from Elected Officials and Corporate Partners

Prominently display the AmeriCorps VISTA logo in key locations when elected officials, corporate partners, and other key constituencies visit your site. Staff, volunteers, and program participants should be prepared to talk about the impact of your program.

Preparing for New VISTA Members

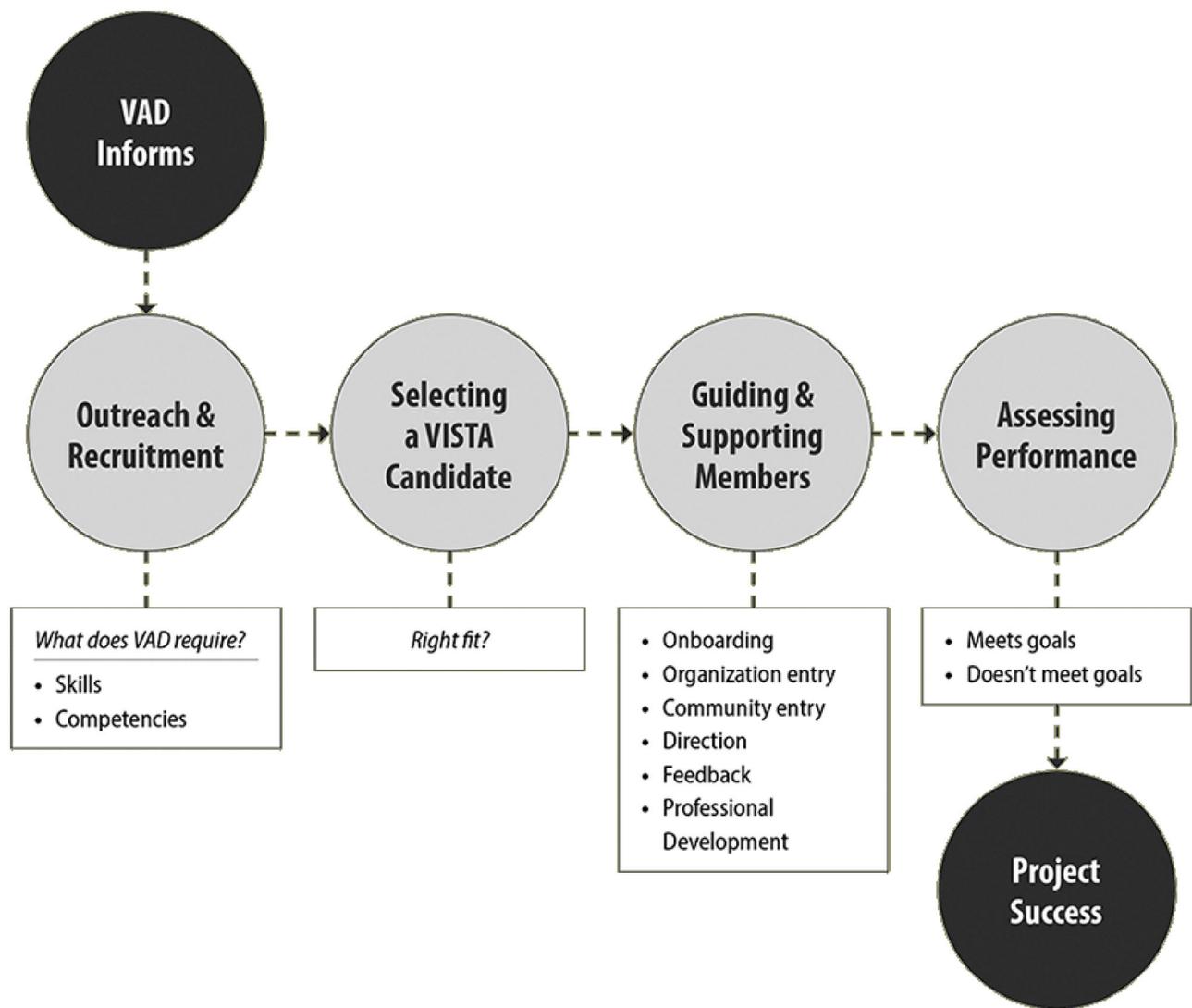
Introduction

Once an organization’s project application is approved, the CNCS State Office will discuss recruitment and orientation timelines with the project director. It is critical that project sponsors meet the recruitment, selection, and training deadlines provided by the CNCS State Office. A sponsor’s inability to recruit and place VISTAs is an important factor in future funding decisions and may affect an organization’s ability to host members going forward.

The VISTA Assignment Description (VAD)

VISTA sponsors are asked to fill out a VAD form for each VISTA member who serves on a VISTA project. A VAD explains a project position and role assigned to a VISTA member and includes goals, objectives, and activities a VISTA is expected to complete in order to satisfy project needs. Essentially, it is the VISTA member’s roadmap for their term of service. The VAD is developed by the sponsoring organization, submitted in eGrants, and reviewed for approval or returned for revisions by the CNCS State Office. All VISTA members must have their own individual VAD.

VADs are used during the recruitment process, to guide and support your VISTAs during their service years, and as an assessment tool to measure success. The VADs include activities that, taken together, make up the milestones identified in your project plan. The VAD can be adapted as the project evolves and the strengths of your VISTA become apparent. Significant changes should be discussed with, and approved by, your contact at the CNCS State Office.



Functions and Expectations/Purpose

The VAD provides a broad outline of what a VISTA member will work on during their year of service. Similar to a position description, it is valuable in recruiting VISTAs and as the basis of a detailed work plan by breaking down objectives identified in the VISTA project application into a realistic set of activities to reach those objectives. These activities can be adapted as the project evolves, which means VADs should be updated at least every project year, and to match the unique strengths of the VISTA members serving with your project.

The VAD will also be used to orient the VISTA to the project, organization, and community. The VAD can also be used to identify areas for skill development and to assess how well the VISTA is doing.

Writing VADs

There are five elements to a VAD: title, project details, project goal statement, objectives, and member activities.

Title

Give each VAD a distinct title (with the word “VISTA” in it) related to the position to be filled. If creating multiple, similar VADs, create a naming system that includes a unique identifier for each position in addition to the descriptive title. Moreover, be sure to clearly indicate whether the VAD is for a VISTA member, Leader, or Summer Associate. Having a specific, descriptive title is key to ensuring the correct VAD is attached to each member.

Project Details

Each VAD contains the sponsor name, project name, site name, and focus area(s). When a VAD is entered, the dates of the current MA are used as the project period; when a VISTA member is assigned to the VAD, their particular service term replaces those dates.

Project Goal Statement

The VAD begins by stating the overall goal of the project (as opposed to the overall goal of the specific VISTA position). This is a good jumping-off point in describing the assignment to the VISTA member. The statement provides context for how the project addresses poverty and how the VISTA activities will build capacity. The project goal must:

- Address poverty by VISTA efforts
- Describe who (population) will be served
- Include verbs to describe the VISTA activities
- Define how the VISTA activities will build capacity
- State the specific product(s) or service(s) resulting from VISTA efforts

Objectives

Articulate what the VISTA will achieve throughout the assignment in order to reach the project's goal. Include multiple objectives that link the overall project goal and the VISTA member's activities. Use active verbs. Include a performance period (what month of service you want the VISTA member to work on the objective) with a clear beginning and end for each objective. It is helpful to be specific with performance periods, as your VISTAs will use that information to guide their service terms. For example, a performance period could be, "First through third month of service."

Member Activities

Identify the specific activities the VISTA will carry out to achieve the objectives. Activities that include the desired outcome or deliverable are most informative and effective. Use active verbs and avoid vague statements such as, "will assist with..." Activity statements should be specific enough that someone unfamiliar with the project can understand the expectations of the VISTA.

Revising VADs

Sometimes during a VISTA's term of service, it becomes apparent that a VAD needs to be revised. This may be because a VISTA's progress on activities is faster or slower than anticipated or their service focus may have changed. In these instances, it is important to revisit the VAD, in collaboration with the VISTA member and CNCS State Office, to make official changes in eGrants. After submitting a revised VAD in eGrants, the CNCS State Office will review it for approval or additional changes.

Changes in the VAD can affect performance measures and how data are gathered. When you update the VAD, it is important to revisit your data collection methods to make sure they still align with the new VAD activities.

Additional Resources: VAD

The *VAD Training Manual* is available [here](#). This manual is a step-by-step guide to learn how to create, edit, save, and archive VADs using the My AmeriCorps Portal section of eGrants.

Recruitment

Sponsors are responsible for recruiting qualified and committed VISTA members, but there are a variety of resources available to support all stages of recruitment.

Stages of VISTA Recruitment

The recruitment tasks are broken up into five steps:

1. **Plan** – Determine required skills; develop a clear VAD; create a compelling SOL; develop a strategy to find qualified applicants; and determine, along with the CNCS State Office, the appropriate VMO, which will inform the VISTA member's start date and term of service
2. **Market** – Advertise and publicize the open position(s)

3. **Screen** – Review applications in eGrants and identify committed and qualified applicants
4. **Interview** – Get to know top applicants, assess their fit for the position through whatever interview method is appropriate, and conduct reference checks
5. **Select** – Make recommendation(s) to the CNCS State Office for approval through the Sponsor Recommendation/Rejection tab in the applicant’s eGrants application

Getting Ready for Recruitment

It can take a lot of time and energy to find the right candidate for your VISTA position, so it is important to start recruitment planning early and to partner with your CNCS State Office throughout the process to determine when the recruitment process should start. After you have coordinated with your CNCS State Office and determined your recruitment timeline, it is important to know what tasks go into each part of a recruitment plan and who will be responsible for them so your sponsor has the highest chance of success in finding qualified applicants in a timely manner.

Roles and Responsibilities

Project directors, and sometimes supervisors, are responsible for recruiting qualified and committed VISTA members and/or VISTA Leaders to fill the VISTA position(s) at their projects. Supervisors should check with their project director for specifics about how recruitment of VISTA members and/or VISTA Leaders will be handled.

Each sponsor will delegate recruitment roles and responsibilities differently depending on what works best given the structure of the organization and the project. The important thing is to make sure these roles are clearly delineated and everyone knows their responsibilities. If your sponsor needs assistance in determining the best way to divide up these recruitment roles, consider reaching out to your CNCS State Office for assistance.

The CNCS State Office is responsible for final approval and selection of all applicants. Supervisors must submit their recommendations via the portal in eGrants, but the applicant is not guaranteed to become a VISTA. Final approval and selection authorities remain with the CNCS State Office.

Elements of a Recruitment Plan

Plan

The first steps for recruitment are to

1. Identify which vacant VISTA positions you will recruit for
2. Work with your CNCS State Office to identify the ideal start date and corresponding VMO
3. Determine what skills and experiences you are looking for in an ideal candidate
4. Consider what educational attainment or professional certifications applicants should have (or be willing to obtain, such as First Aid certification)
5. Include any other relevant recruitment factors, such as personality type, strengths, or supervision style

It is important to develop a clear VAD during your planning phase. The VAD is a useful recruitment tool because it shows applicants exactly what will be expected of them throughout a service term. More information on VADs is provided in a later section.

After the VADs have been created, you will use that information to [create a compelling SOL in eGrants](#). The SOL is the VISTA version of a “job posting.” By reading the SOL, applicants should have a clear understanding of what your organization is: its mission, what roles and responsibilities a VISTA member will take on, the benefits being offered, who to contact with questions, and the application deadline. Once you have crafted your SOL, the CNCS State Office will review and either approve the listing or make recommendations for edits. The listing will go live only after the CNCS State Office has approved it.

The sponsor should also develop a strategy to find qualified applicants. Questions to consider during this stage are what platforms to use (print, online, verbal) to share the listing, what community partners and networks can help spread the word about the opportunity, and what methods can be used to actively recruit applicants, such as seeking out and sending messages to individuals on LinkedIn. You will also want to build in time to develop and document the processes you will use to identify the best candidates.

Marketing

Based on the skills and experiences for which you seek in a VISTA, it is a best practice to tailor your marketing to locations and social media platforms that will reach those demographics. For example, if you are looking for an applicant

who has experience in grant writing, it would be beneficial to reach out to area colleges and universities and speak with professors who teach classes in grant writing or nonprofit management and ask them to promote your opportunity.

It may also be helpful to utilize your organization's marketing or human resources team for additional ideas and support.

No matter what your recruitment method is, you should always direct applicants to complete an application through the My AmeriCorps portal at <https://my.americorps.gov>.

Member Screening

While these are the minimum standards set forth by CNCS, your sponsor should have additional screening standards specific to the VISTA position. You should review applications for a complete motivational statement, related job and community service experience, skills and education related or transferable to the VISTA position, and two completed professional references recommending the applicant for service. [This guide](#) is a good resource on selecting VISTA members.

Screen for Eligibility

Applicants must meet the following minimum standards of eligibility.

- Be at least 18 years old upon entering VISTA training. There is no upper age limit.
- Hold one of the following citizenship/legal residency statuses: US citizen, US National, Lawful Permanent Resident Alien, and persons legally residing in a state that have any of the following legal residency classifications: refugee, asylum or asylee, temporary protected status, or deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA) status.
- Not be listed in the National Sex Offender Public Website (NSOPW) as having been convicted of sex-related crimes.
- Not have been convicted of murder.
- Be willing to submit fingerprints for an FBI criminal history background check.
- Be in a position to offer full-time service for one year without regard to regular working hours.
- Be able to relate previous education, training, military, or work experience, and demonstrate other relevant skills or interests necessary to perform a specific VISTA assignment.
- Be willing, to the maximum extent practicable, to live among and at the economic level of the low-income people served by VISTA projects.
- Not be in the immediate family (e.g., spouse, domestic partner, parent or guardian whether by blood or adoption, child whether by blood or adoption) of a project site staff member or a project site's board of directors.
- Not be a close relative, whether by blood or adoption (e.g., grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, first cousin) of a project site staff member or a project site's board of directors.

Screen for Suitability

CNCS also must take an applicant's criminal history into account when determining the suitability and fit of an applicant to a particular position/program. Making such a determination can be complex. The sponsor's role in the process includes the following:

- Review an application for disclosure of a criminal history and inform the CNCS State Office of a potential applicant's disclosed criminal history early. The CNCS State Office may need additional information from the sponsor or the candidate to adjudicate a candidate's criminal history before approving a person for service.
 - The CNCS State Office may not support the candidate's selection for service based on the nature of the crime, how recent the crime occurred, recidivism, the population against which the crime happened, or probation or parole status.
 - Additionally, a sponsor should also follow their own agency's policies on what offenses would disqualify a VISTA from serving at their organization.
- Ensure the applicant's criminal history has been accurately reported on the application, and discuss the disclosed history during the interview.
- Inform all applicants that they must submit to an FBI criminal history check and a search on the National Sex Offender Public Website. As a threshold matter, if the applicant is found in the NSOPW, or they have been convicted of murder, they cannot serve as a VISTA. Additionally, CNCS separately assesses other criminal history-related factors in determining whether the VISTA member or candidate is suitable to serve. Specific sponsor guidance for this process is available [here](#).

Interview

Interviews should be scheduled with multiple candidates whose applications demonstrate a strong potential fit.

Interview methods can vary based on your organization's capacity and the applicant's location. Interviews can occur over the phone, via Skype, or in person. While it may not be possible to provide the same interview method for all applicants, it is important to ask the same interview questions of everyone so you ensure consistent and fair comparison.

It is helpful to have a list of interview questions established beforehand so that you can adequately assess an applicant's fit for the position. Sample questions are available [here](#) and [here](#). Another best practice is to include questions regarding the VISTA program and its [terms, conditions, and benefits](#). These are important questions to ask to ensure the applicants know the following:

- They are not interviewing for employment with the organization
- They will be performing indirect service
- They are receiving a living allowance instead of a salary
- The amount of their living allowance
- That CNCS is not responsible for providing them housing or assisting them with securing housing.

Applicants who relocate should also be aware that they are eligible to receive relocation assistance after starting service. (See [Relocation Assistance](#) for more information.)

Additionally, if the candidate disclosed a criminal history in their application, you will want to discuss that with them to get additional information that will need to be provided to the CNCS State Office.

Having the position's VAD available for the applicant to review during the interview is another best practice. This way, the applicant can self-assess their ability to complete the outlined activities, and you are able to ask VAD-specific questions that may shed more light on a person's fit for the position.

In addition to interviewing strong applicants, you should also review references. Each applicant should provide two completed professional references in their application. (A professional reference is an individual who can speak to the candidate's work, volunteer, or educational experiences. Personal references, peers, and family members are not acceptable references.) You should review both of these references' responses and follow up with them as necessary to ask any additional questions or for clarifying information.

During interviews, all applicants should be notified that full disclosure of any criminal history is important for VISTA service, and the individual who is chosen for the position will undergo a [National Sex Offender Public Website](#) check prior to approval and an FBI check upon starting service. Applicants should be encouraged to disclose any criminal history that was not noted on the application. For applicants who disclosed a criminal history on their application, the interviewer should follow up on this during the interview to get a verbal narrative of the incident(s). The CNCS State Office will ask for this information if the applicant is recommended for service. If an applicant who has disclosed a criminal history is under serious consideration, the sponsor should notify the CNCS State Office as soon as the information is disclosed.

Recommending Selection

Once you have conducted all of your interviews and reference checks, you will hopefully have identified an applicant you would like to recommend that CNCS select for service. After you have verbally advised the applicant that you are recommending them to CNCS for selection, let the applicant know the CNCS State Office needs to provide final approval, and the applicant has agreed to accept the position, you will use the Sponsor Recommendation/Rejection tab in the person's application to offer the selection. In this tab, you will complete narratives answering the applicant's strengths and weaknesses, the type of supervision they will need, their community service experience, and whether they are available to serve on a full-time basis. Once you have completed this tab, the applicant will be able to accept the position in their member portal to confirm their plan to serve with VISTA.

The CNCS State Office then reviews the candidate's application. The CNCS State Office will make sure the applicant meets the minimum eligibility requirements, which include verifying that candidate will be at least 18 on the first day of service and that the applicant does not appear on the National Sex Offender Public Website.

The CNCS State Office will also review the narratives, experiences, criminal history, and references listed in the applicant's application to see if the applicant will be a good fit for VISTA and the project. Some CNCS State Offices may conduct additional interviews with a candidate, especially those applying to a Leader position.

Finally, the CNCS State Office will make sure the applicant's Social Security number and citizenship/legal residency status are verified. Sometimes an applicant's information cannot automatically be verified. In such cases, applicants will be informed that they need to provide additional documentation, such as a birth certificate or passport, to the National Service Hotline. The sponsor may be asked to assist in getting and submitting this supporting documentation for the applicant.

Once a CNCS State Office has made the determination to approve the applicant selection, they will officially approve the applicant as a candidate for VISTA service, enroll them in VMO, and set their service term start and end dates.

VISTA Virtual Member Orientation (VMO)

The VMO is a self-directed online orientation that introduces VISTA members to the terms, conditions, and benefits of service and key programming principles at the start of their service. VMO includes tutorials, online readings, and two live webinars.

In an effort to facilitate effective communication about the VMO requirements and expectations with sponsors and supervisors, the CNCS State Office will forward details to VISTA supervisors about each VMO in which they have candidates enrolled.

Member Experience

The Curriculum

The VMO develops knowledge essential for success in VISTA service. The curriculum guides the VISTA through issues of legal and regulatory compliance, achieving the goals and objectives of the VISTA assignment, managing their benefits, and professional development opportunities.

Requirements for Success

In order to participate successfully, a person (candidate or VISTA member) must have reliable access to the Internet and a telephone (VOIP, landline or cell phone service), a high-school equivalence of English language proficiency, adequate equipment (laptop or desktop computer), and, finally, comfort with computer-based, distance learning.

The VISTA Training Unit does not recommend attempting to complete [My AmeriCorps](#) onboarding screens, the tutorials on the [VISTA Campus](#), or attending the webinars on a smartphone or other mobile devices. Additionally, public spaces—cafes, streets, lobbies—are not conducive to participating in webinars. The syllabus requires a space where a participant can easily hear, follow on screen, and respond verbally and in writing. Thus, each VMO attendee should have access to a phone and an individual laptop or computer work station with reliable Internet access in a quiet area.

Learning Objectives

The VISTA Training Unit, the CNCS State Offices, project directors, and VISTA supervisors work together to implement the following syllabus, which is accessible [here](#):

1. Self-Directed Pre-Service Coursework: Terms and Conditions; Civil Rights and Responsibilities; Benefits; Mission and Program Goals; VISTA Campus Overview; and Test Your Knowledge Quiz—located on the VISTA Campus
2. Onboarding Forms: Direct Deposit, W4, Designation of Beneficiary, and End of Service Benefits Selection
3. Pre-Service Webinar: “Countdown to VISTA Service” provides overview of onboarding requirements, housing and relocation, preparing for service, and background check processes
4. Induction Webinar: “Launching Your VISTA Service” (a review of program principles, benefits, and support systems), Overview of first month of service, Swearing-In
5. FBI fingerprint check
6. Early-Service Coursework: tutorials on poverty, getting to know the community, the VAD, and preparing for OSOT
7. OSOT and VAD review with supervisors

Member Responsibilities

Mandatory Attendance of Candidates/Members

CNCS expects all candidates and VISTA members to fully participate and complete all aspects of the VMO syllabus—onboarding forms, online coursework, webinars, criminal history check, and proper submission of the oath form. Failure to participate and complete assignments may lead to deselection or termination of service.

Candidates and VISTA members are recommended to log in and participate individually from their personal or project-furnished computer—this pertains not only to completing online coursework but to joining webinars as well. Participating as a group on a single computer prevents an individual from fully participating and prevents the Training Unit from recording an individual’s attendance. However, sponsors bringing on a large group of candidates may have them participate as a large group.

Emergency absence during VMO will be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

Mandatory Portal Onboarding Forms Prior to VMO

Once the CNCS State Office enrolls a candidate in VMO, the candidate will receive an email directing them to the [Starting VISTA](#) page of the VISTA Campus.

This page links the candidate to the [My AmeriCorps Portal](#) to complete the online onboarding forms:

- Direct Deposit
- W-4
- Unpaid Compensation
- End of Service Benefit (Education Award or Stipend).

The email also links them to the required [pre-service coursework](#) on the VISTA Campus.

The VISTA program recommends that the sponsor impress upon the candidate the importance of completing these onboarding forms as soon as possible. Incomplete forms or coursework will prevent the VISTA from starting service as planned.

Mandatory Online Coursework Prior to VMO

The VISTA Training Unit will direct candidates to the [Starting VISTA](#) page, where they will be registered and required to complete a number of online, self-directed tutorials.

Candidates are required to complete all pre-service coursework and accept the Terms and Conditions of Service prior to arriving at their service sites. Failure to complete the coursework (to include accepting the terms and conditions) will prevent the candidate from starting service and receiving relocation support.

Special Needs – Physical, Linguistic, and Other Accommodations

If a VISTA candidate or member has a need for physical accommodation, due to a vision or hearing impairment, limited mobility, or use of hands, for example, the candidate or member is expected to alert the CNCS State Office and/or VISTA Training Unit as soon as possible. Certain impairments will prevent the candidate from participating in the VMO.

If the candidate or member has low English language proficiency, lacks reliable connectivity to the Internet, lacks basic computer literacy, is uncomfortable with computer-based learning, only has access to a smartphone, or does not have a workspace conducive to learning, the CNCS State Office and the VISTA Training Unit must be alerted as these will prevent the candidate or member from participating in the VMO.

Requirement to Take the Oath or Affirmation of Service

As a condition of entry into service, VISTA candidates are required to take the same oath or affirmation as individuals entering federal employment, as set forth in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, VISTA's authorizing legislation.

Completing the Oath:

A CNCS representative, most often the VISTA Training Specialist, administers the Oath or Affirmation of Service during the "Launching Your VISTA Service" webinar.

Upon completion of the "Launching your VISTA Service" webinar, the VISTA member will log in to My AmeriCorps (my.americorps.gov) to complete and electronically sign the Oath form.

Alternate Oath for Legal Residents (Non-Citizens)

A VISTA candidate who is not a U.S. citizen or a U.S. national, but who legally resides within a state (someone who is a permanent legal resident alien or otherwise is a legal resident of a state) must take the Alternative Oath of Service, as set forth in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended.

Log in to My AmeriCorps (my.americorps.gov) to complete and electronically sign the Alternative Oath form as described above.

Alternate Oath for Religious Reasons

On rare occasions, a candidate may object to taking the Oath of Service, as set forth in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, for religious reasons. If a VISTA candidate states that they cannot pledge, swear, or affirm allegiance

to any country, flag, or political institution for religious reasons, the candidate may take the Alternative Oath for religious reasons. This is in accordance with applicable federal law and regulations prohibiting religious-based discrimination in federally conducted programs such as VISTA.

The VISTA member will need to contact the VISTA Member Support Unit to request to complete the Alternative Oath form. The member may then log in to My AmeriCorps (my.americorps.gov) to complete and electronically sign the Alternative Oath form as described above.

Supervisor Responsibilities

First and perhaps foremost, the VISTA Training Unit, VMSU, and CNCS State Office rely on the supervisor to inquire as to the candidate's ability to succeed in the VMO.

Once a candidate is placed in a VMO, the sponsor and supervisor must be able and prepared to support the syllabus in terms of:

- Ensuring the candidate meets the requirements to successfully participate in a VMO
- Furnishing a work station (individual access to a computer and phone beginning on the first day of service)
- Aligning the VISTA member's service schedule so they can fully participate in the VMO webinar on their first day of service
- Providing the candidate with the fingerprint kit
 - The CNCS State Office will send fingerprint kits and a return shipping label to the sponsor before the VISTA candidates arrive on site. The kits contain print cards and directions on how to acquire print services as well as how and where to send those prints. Those prints must be received at VISTA headquarters no later than 30 days after the VISTA member's service start date. The VISTA may request an extension if required by emailing vistafingerprint@cns.gov.
- Supporting the candidate's participation in the VMO in every regard
- Implementing an OSOT
- Reviewing the VAD with the candidate to clarify activities, answer questions, and ensure the candidate understands the goals
- Ensuring the candidate submits their Oath form in My AmeriCorps on the first day of service, by 11:59pm local time.
- Ensuring the member submits their fingerprints cards to VISTA HQ within the deadline (30 calendar days from the VMO)
- Obtaining emergency contact information for the VISTA member

Supervisors are encouraged to attend the induction webinar with their candidates.

Planning for On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT)

A VISTA member's orientation begins with the VMO, which combines self-directed online tutorials on the VISTA Campus and live webinars and continues through to the face-to-face OSOT provided at the project site. OSOT begins on the VISTA member's start date. During OSOT the VISTA is formally oriented to the assignment, sponsoring organization and community by the project sponsor/supervisor. The OSOT differs from VMO in several important aspects:

- The OSOT is presented by the project sponsor/supervisor, and addresses the specifics of the project, the VISTA's assignment and the community; the VMOs are conducted on a national basis by CNCS staff, presenting a national curriculum.
- The OSOT is a longer, slower-paced training, typically lasting four to six weeks after the VISTA member's start date and is implemented by the supervisor, co-workers, community members, and others; the VMOs are self-directed online tutorials on the VISTA Campus and live webinars which typically take about two weeks to complete prior to the VISTA member's start date.
- The OSOT prepares a VISTA member to serve effectively in the sponsoring organization and the target community; the VMO orients the VISTA member to the VISTA program and support system of CNCS.

Purpose

OSOT is the second step in the VISTA member's training continuum. Its primary purpose is to build on concepts introduced through the VMO. OSOT introduces the VISTA to the sponsor, the community, and the goals and operation of the VISTA project and provides VISTA members the basic knowledge and skills they need to get started on the project.

The scheduling of OSOT should be timely enough to provide the VISTA member with the immediate information and skills needed to begin their service, yet flexible enough to allow VISTA members to satisfy personal and adjustment needs.

Sponsor's Responsibility

Develop an OSOT plan that is consistent with project goals and that meets minimum desired outcomes.

- Submit OSOT plan to the CNCS State Office 30 days prior to the VISTA member's start date
- Involve the VISTA in an ongoing evaluation of activities of OSOT and adjust plans, as necessary, to meet individual VISTA's needs
- Begin process of defining in-service training needs based on OSOT outcomes and evaluation

NOTE: For multi-site VISTA projects, sponsors should provide a general OSOT to all VISTAs to orient them to the sponsor, the larger VISTA project, and relevant policies and procedures to the VISTA project. Additionally, sponsors should be collecting and reviewing OSOT plans from each site 30 days prior to the VISTA member's start date. The site OSOT plans should be on file at the sponsor and available for review by CNCS.

OSOT Learning Objectives

By the end of OSOT, the VISTA member should have achieved the following learning outcomes:

- Understand common expectations and agreements for a working relationship between the VISTA member and supervisor:
 - Supervisor's other roles and responsibilities
 - Supervisor's management style
 - Scheduled meetings and interactions between VISTA member and supervisor
 - Clarification of the lines of communication between VISTA member and supervisor
 - Delineation of the support provided to the VISTA member
 - Mutual understanding of the terms and conditions of VISTA service
 - Chain of command
- Understand the mission and goals of the sponsoring organization:
 - Mission
 - History
 - How the organization functions (as a nonprofit, municipality, state, county, or federal entity)
 - Role in the community
 - Staff (introductions)
- Recognize the context of the VISTA project:
 - VISTA project and its history
 - How and where the VISTA member fits
 - Introduction to the community
 - Socioeconomic and political structure of the community
 - Potential resources that can be applied to achieve project goals
 - History and present status of community self-determination and problem-solving efforts
- Understand the organization's culture and policies (and where VISTA policy overrides organizational policy):
 - Roles and responsibilities
 - Time and attendance, service hours
 - Personal leave
 - Medical leave
 - Teleservice
 - In-service mileage reimbursement/travel policy and procedure
 - Working with the media
 - Fundraising activities
 - Evaluation of individual VISTA members and of the project
 - Reporting requirements for the VISTA project
- Develop, with the supervisor, a personal work plan, based on the VAD that specifies:
 - Tasks and activities for a specific period to accomplish the goals and objectives in the project work plan
 - Training needed for the assignment, which builds on the VMO and OSOT toward the personal and professional development of the VISTA member

Depending on the project, the supervisor may deem it necessary for the VISTA member to receive training in such areas as computer skills, public speaking, group facilitation, conflict resolution, needs assessment and asset mapping, grant writing, and/or negotiation and interviewing skills.

A VISTA member may also need specific training in issue areas and on such topics as domestic violence hotlines, early childhood literacy, laws regarding foster care, credit management, and microenterprise VISTA development. The VISTA member's actual

needs depend on the requirements of the project and the experience, skills, and educational background the VISTA member already possesses.

Suggested Orientation and Training Methods

The methods the supervisor may use for orientation and training include:

- Brainstorming, discussion, and negotiation between the sponsor and VISTA member, or among the supervisor, VISTA member, and a larger team (e.g., with other project staff)
- Interviews and discussions with key community leaders or even with a random sample of residents and community members
- Homework – e.g., have the VISTA member review the project proposal the sponsor submitted to CNCS, the MA between CNCS and the sponsor, the VAD, and other pertinent organization position papers
- Field trips and strategically assigned tasks the VISTA member needs to complete
- Shadowing others who are performing similar work
- Attendance at staff, advisory board, and community meetings
- Asking staff, colleagues at other organizations, and experts to share some time reviewing their “tricks of the trade” or providing specific skill training
- Free or low-cost skill training from various community resources, such as:
 - Community colleges
 - Libraries
 - Community resource and technology centers
 - Trade associations
 - Community adult education programs
 - Resources located on the VISTA Campus including [Early-Service Coursework](#) (can be incorporated into the orientation process)
 - The [VISTA Professional Webinar Series](#) calendar of events, located on the VISTA Campus
 - The in-depth VISTA Blend courses accredited by the American Council on Education. The two courses address “Volunteer Mobilization” (10 weeks to complete/three credit hours) and “Resource Development” (13 weeks to complete/three credit hours). The [registration page](#) is located on the VISTA Campus
 - Additional resources are available on the [CNCS Knowledge Network](#)

Supporting and Supervising VISTA Members

Introduction

Invested and well-equipped supervisors are key to any successful project. When supervisors understand the unique requirements for VISTA members as well as their particular needs and interests, they position themselves to effectively support the individual VISTAs and the project as a whole. VISTA members who feel supported and valued are more committed to their projects and more effective in their service. A successful VISTA/supervisor relationship benefits the entire community: the VISTA member, the supervisor, and the population served. When VISTA members are inspired by a supervisor, their service experience and effectiveness (and sometimes life paths) are enhanced.

Supervision

Supervision ensures that every VISTA has the right conditions and requirements to perform their service, including a full understanding of the project’s mission, goals, and vision, as well as a solid understanding of the community they are serving.

Each VISTA member must be assigned a supervisor who provides in-person direct supervision and support on a day-to-day basis. Supervisors are advised to have weekly one-on-one check-in meetings with their VISTAs.

Project directors—who may also have the role of supervisor—orient and train other supervisors, who are then responsible for knowing and consistently applying all VISTA program rules and policies to all VISTA members. This orientation includes leave time, prohibited activities, and VAD adherence.

Core supervisor responsibilities are the following:

- Deliver OSOT
- Consistently apply VISTA policies, project policies, and site policies. Direct any questions about VISTA policies and project policies to the project director, who answers them or escalates them to the CNCS State Office if necessary
- Support the VISTA to the best of their abilities to meet their project and development goals

- Ensure that the VISTA member is supported in adhering to the VAD, including providing relevant training and assistance in working toward goals, as well as ensuring the VISTA is not redirected to unrelated or unallowable activities
- Familiarize key stakeholders, including staff and partners, with the VISTA project
- Facilitate access to administrative support
- Document the facts and measures taken to address a performance or conduct issue

Core project director responsibilities are the following:

- Participate in training delivered by CNCS
- Train supervisors
- Provide training and technical assistance on project policies
- Consistently apply VISTA policies and project policies
- Direct any questions about VISTA policies or procedures to the CNCS State Office

If a conflict arises, the first approach should be, to the extent feasible, to address the issue at the project level. If the conflict cannot be resolved at the project level, the project director should promptly contact the CNCS State Office for further support. See the section on [Challenges with Members](#) for more information.

Distinctions between VISTA Members and Employees

Although the supervisor provides day-to-day direction and guidance to the VISTA members, the VISTA members are not employees of the sponsor or site. One of the challenges of hosting VISTAs is ensuring that everyone who interacts with them understands they are with your organization for a very specific purpose and not as “general help”.

Some ways in which supervising VISTAs is similar to supervising employees are:

- VISTAs are expected to act in a professional manner and conduct themselves in accordance with the workplace norms of your organization
- They are subject to the same or similar working conditions as their colleagues and should be oriented to the organization’s policies and given any standard staff training at the beginning of the service term
- VISTAs should be included in staff meetings for their department and organization
- Supervisors should give VISTAs appropriate feedback on their performance

Some ways in which supervising VISTAs is different from supervising employees are:

- VISTAs are national service members, and they commit themselves to serving for one year in the community and to the goals of the assigned project
- VISTA members are often early in their career and may need extra guidance and support in adjusting to the organization’s workplace norms and establishing professional working habits
- VISTAs serve for limited benefits and are often interested in cultivating an experience that is meaningful both professionally and personally. They may be interested in more coaching, mentoring, and professional development than the average employee. They also may have a deeper appreciation for recognition from your organization and community.
- VISTAs may need extra support integrating into the organization and community quickly and effectively. They need to transition quickly in order to make a difference during their one-year term, and this can be a bigger adjustment for VISTA members who are from outside the community or new to the field in which they are serving.
- Each VISTA has a specific assignment with a capacity-building focus. Other staff in your organization may not recognize the distinct VISTA function, and supervisors play a key role in helping other staff and partners understand both the nature of VISTA service and each VISTA’s specific assignment. This includes supporting VISTA members in setting and maintaining boundaries when others ask the VISTA to help with activities unrelated to the VAD.
- VISTAs may be anxious about finances as well as what their next step will be once their service year ends.
- VISTAs cannot be terminated by the site or sponsor, but the sponsor may request the VISTA member’s removal from the project.
- Some VISTAs may have years of experience in the workplace and see their service opportunity as a way to transition to a new career field or give back after retiring from employment.

VISTAs are also not employees of CNCS, except for very specific purposes.¹¹ In addition, VISTAs are not, for any purpose, employees of the sponsoring organizations or subrecipient organizations where they are assigned; VISTA members have no legal

employment relationship with the sponsoring organization or subrecipient organization. Finally, CNCS retains sole authority for an individual's selection/admission, replacement, removal, and termination.

Strong supervision of a VISTA member includes the following:

- Build familiarity with the VISTA member's VAD
- Assess a VISTA's relevant background and skills and consider them when planning for OSOT
- Learn about the VISTA member's professional development interests and support them in developing and implementing a plan for professional development that builds skills and knowledge
- Schedule dedicated weekly one-on-one check-ins
- Support the VISTA in planning ahead for the end-of-service transition
- Recognize the contributions and impact of the VISTA member
- Provide resources and guidance in working with the community

¹¹ [45 C.F.R. §2556.300 \(2018\)](#).

Changes to VISTA Member Supervision

Any change to the supervision plan for a VISTA member needs to be navigated proactively to avoid potential pitfalls for the project. If the VISTA's supervisor is not available to supervise them full-time—perhaps due to a new position within the organization, a leave of absence, or a departure from the organization—it is critical that the supervisor communicate with the project director about the impending change. The project director should work with the supervisor to identify a new or interim supervisor and train that individual on VISTA and their responsibilities. The project director can also provide extra support to the VISTA members during the transition to ensure they continue to receive effective supervision.

All changes to the project director or supervisor roles should be communicated to the CNCS State Office as early as possible for support through that transition.

Coaching the VISTA Member

Coaching is about performance, action, and strategies that lead to success. Coaching grows from the foundation of good supervision. Some suggested strategies for developing a coaching relationship with VISTA members include:

- Promoting a culture of ongoing learning and growth
- Asking open-ended questions and collaborating in problem-solving with VISTA(s)
- Discussing with your VISTA(s) your conversation style, how you'll give feedback, and other working agreements
- Providing actionable, positive feedback when appropriate
- Being open to hearing VISTA complaints, obstacles, and frustrations without judgment
- Assisting VISTAs in finding their own solutions to problems
- Developing protocols for addressing conflict
- Employing the experiential learning cycle: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation (see David Kolb's work on [learning styles](#) for details).

Retention

Member retention is important not only for the success of accomplishing the VISTA project's goals, but also for the VISTA member's professional development and experience. VISTAs are more likely to serve effectively and complete their service terms when they feel valued at their sites. Some ways that sponsors can ensure their VISTA members feel valued are:

- Ensuring that all staff understand the VISTA program and the VISTA member role
- Delivering a strong OSOT (See [Planning for On-Site Orientation and Training](#))
- Providing regular feedback, direction, and support, including weekly one-on-one check-ins
- Finding out what VISTAs need to succeed and addressing those needs
- Helping make life easier by providing supplemental benefits (See [Supplemental Benefits](#))
- Giving VISTA members ownership of their projects
- Providing ongoing training and support for professional development (See [Ongoing Training](#))
- Thanking VISTA members personally and recognizing them publicly

Administrative Support

In addition to the time and attention dedicated to good supervision, sponsors and sites take responsibility for providing administrative support that is central to project success. This support is often categorized as office space, technology, office supplies, and service-related transportation. CNCS does not provide the equipment or supplies required by VISTAs for their assignments. In addition to the equipment and supplies, sponsors and sites are responsible for reimbursing VISTAs for service-related travel or for providing other means of transportation as needed to accomplish their assignments.

Space, Technology, Office Supplies

VISTA members should have access to all materials that are needed to complete their assignments. Examples of these materials include: the use of a computer, printer, Internet access, e-mail access, consumable supplies, telephone, copier, and fax, just as for any staff member. These supplies should be ready and available for VISTA member use on the first day of service.

VISTA members should not be expected to use personal items, technology or otherwise, to complete VISTA service.

Service-Related Transportation

Sponsors and sites are responsible for reimbursing VISTAs for service-related travel, or for providing other means of transportation as needed to accomplish the assignment. The sponsor may require the VISTA member to comply with the sponsoring organization's rules, in addition to complying with all applicable VISTA requirements, when operating a sponsor's vehicle.

Supporting service-related travel can mean making plans for VISTA members to use organization vehicles, reimbursing them for public transportation, or reimbursing them for use of their personally-owned vehicles. Reimbursement for use of a personally-owned vehicle must be at either the federal mileage rate or the mileage rate established by the site for staff. It is important to keep in mind that VISTAs are normally on tight budgets, and they often appreciate when the site can pay for their transportation directly rather than asking for them to pay it out of pocket and request reimbursement, particularly for pricier trips.

Supporting and reimbursing members for service-related travel applies only to transportation necessary to complete the VISTA's specific assignment, and not to commuting, travel to VISTA-sponsored events, or relocation travel. See [VISTA Member Handbook – Service-Related Transportation](#) for greater detail about the topic.

Accidents While Driving for Service-Related Purposes

If a VISTA member is driving for service-related purposes and is involved in an accident, there are important steps that the VISTA and sponsor must follow as outlined in the [Emergencies](#) section. [Chapter 7 of the VISTA Member Handbook](#) is also a good reference.

Program Budget

Many VISTA projects and assignments do not require a dedicated budget for VISTA members to advance their projects and achieve the objectives, but some do. If the VISTA will build the capacity of a program that requires a particular budget to make progress possible, the sponsor and site are responsible for ensuring that resources are available and the VISTA member has reasonable access to those resources.

Delivering On-Site Orientation and Training

One of the most important roles of a supervisor is to introduce the VISTA members to their new community and help them begin building their identity with the project. Some VISTA members relocate to serve in VISTA. Settling comfortably into a new community may be one of the most difficult challenges that VISTAs face. This challenge can be addressed by having OSOT that is early and thorough. This is key to a successful year for any VISTA member and project.

See [Planning On-Site Orientation and Training](#) for more information.

Ongoing Training

While VISTA service begins with VMO and OSOT, the training and professional development of VISTA members continues throughout their service term. These opportunities take many forms: formal and informal, group-based and individually-focused, face-to-face, virtual, as well as written.

Ongoing training should address the VISTA members' needs in carrying out their VAD, take place early enough to make a difference during the service year, and address the VISTAs' learning styles. Sponsors are responsible for ensuring VISTAs receive the training necessary to complete their assignments. Many VISTA members approach their year of service as a time for professional and personal growth and are interested in maximizing learning opportunities.

Opportunities through the Sponsor

VISTA members and sponsors are encouraged to pursue opportunities that align with the project's needs and the VISTA's professional development interests.

Each VISTA member's OSOT should include conversations with the supervisor about training and professional development interests and priorities. The supervisor can provide key support for the ongoing training of VISTA members in a number of ways, including:

- Working with VISTAs to assess training needs and develop plans to meet them using [individual development plans](#)
- Recommending organizations that provide relevant courses and training, including professional associations and colleges
- Supporting participation in appropriate opportunities identified by VISTA members
- Securing funds from the sponsor's training and travel budgets to support ongoing training;
- Advocating for reduced or waived training fees on the VISTA member's behalf
- Identifying relevant professional coalitions, groups, and networks for potential membership
- Making connections to other professionals for networking, informational interviews, and mentoring
- Suggesting books and strong written sources related to the project's focus or VISTA member interests
- Setting up opportunities for VISTAs to shadow the senior leaders with the sponsor or in the community
- Ensuring that VISTA members are included in trainings the sponsor provides for its staff;
- Coordinating events tailored to the needs of current VISTAs on the project
- Creating forums for VISTA members to share experiences and train each other on their projects
- Plugging VISTAs into national service networks that offer training open to members
- Connecting VISTA members to VISTA alums to learn about their areas of expertise

Opportunities through VISTA

VISTA provides a variety of opportunities for VISTAs throughout their service terms. The opportunities vary in intensity, ranging from short virtual sessions to multi-day in-person events. Many of these items, and more, are available via the [VISTA Campus](#).

VISTA In-Service Training (IST)

In-Service Training (IST) is a multi-day, in-person training offering sessions on a range of topics relevant for VISTA members across projects and locations. IST is designed for VISTA members in their first few months of service who have a clear understanding of their VISTA assignment and have identified areas for their own professional development.

IST provides VISTA members with concrete information on topics relevant and important to their service, further building the capacity of VISTAs to effectively execute their VADs and successfully complete their service terms. IST addresses common training needs among VISTA members, provides an environment for VISTA members to discuss their projects, and ask questions in person. IST also offers a forum for VISTA members to connect with their peers. The CNCS State Office can provide current information on IST opportunities for VISTAs.

VISTA Webinars

Webinars are offered each month on a variety of topics, and are also recorded and made available on-demand. Topics include volunteer engagement, resource development, outreach and communications, poverty, and tools for VISTA service. Webinars are also available on VISTA benefits, serving effectively, and life after VISTA. For more information, see the [VISTA Campus](#).

VISTA Member Handbook

[The VISTA Member Handbook](#) is the program's primary resource for VISTA members. Its 15 chapters cover a wide range of topics that are central to a successful service term. Sponsors are responsible for familiarizing themselves with the content. When VISTA members have questions, the *VISTA Member Handbook* is often the best place to check for information before directing them to the VISTA Member Support Unit.

Civil Rights and Responsibilities

In accordance with federal law and CNCS policies, VISTA members must serve in service environments that are free of discrimination and harassment. CNCS has a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination or harassment in all national service environments based on any of the following groups: race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. VISTA members should not experience discrimination or harassment as a result of contact with sponsor and subrecipient staff, supervisors, other VISTAs, clients, and volunteers. All sponsoring organizations and subrecipient sites are responsible for ensuring that all VISTA members assigned to them are not subject to discrimination or harassment during their terms of service.

Discrimination

Discrimination is treating people differently because of who they are, where they come from, or the groups they belong to. Discrimination in a VISTA service setting is illegal when it targets a person or group based on such non-merit factors as race, gender, or religion, also known as protected classes. The Corporation for National and Community Service defines protected classes as the following:

- Race, color, or national origin
- Sex/gender
- Disability (physical or mental)
- Age
- Religion
- Political affiliation
- Gender identity and expression
- Sexual orientation

Illegal discrimination targets a person or group because of a difference and singles them out for different treatment. It can happen to anyone and may be a one-time occurrence or part of an ongoing pattern.

Harassment

Illegal harassment is severe and/or pervasive verbal or non-verbal communication relating to an individual's gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, or any other non-merit factor that interferes with a VISTA's performance and/or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive service environment. Harassment can consist of spoken or written words, images, or actions and can happen to anyone. It includes but is not limited to:

- Explicit or implicit demands for sexual favors
- Pressure for one's company
- Unwelcome, persistent letters, phone calls, emails, or other media
- Distribution or display of offensive material
- Offensive looks or gestures, physical encroachment, or threatening behavior

Sexual harassment creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive service environment and prevents a VISTA from serving effectively.

Sexual harassment can include, but is not limited to:

- Spoken words or unspoken actions
- Annoying or uncomfortable behavior
- Activity that happens over a period of time

Complaint Procedures

VISTA members who believe they may be subject to discrimination or harassment as described above are advised to first bring it to the attention of their sponsoring organization, if feasible. If, because of the circumstances, it is not feasible to do so, the VISTA member should contact the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) at CNCS Headquarters in Washington, DC. EOP is the CNCS program dedicated to and charged with reviewing and investigating claims of discrimination and harassment made by service members, including VISTA members. Claims not brought to the attention of EOP within 45 days of their occurrence may not be accepted in a formal complaint of discrimination. No one can be required to use a program, project, or sponsor dispute resolution procedure before contacting EOP, and if another procedure is used, it does not affect the 45-day time limit. EOP may be reached at (202) 606-7503 (voice), (301) 577-7134 (TTY), or eo@cns.gov.

Safety

Supervisors and their organizations are responsible for structuring assignments so that the VISTA's health and safety are not jeopardized. Supervisors must not require VISTA to perform duties that would cause them to sustain injuries.

Member Terms and Conditions

Some activities are prohibited while VISTA members are on duty or perceived to be on duty, while others are limited entirely during a VISTA member's term of service. It is important for supervisors to not only be knowledgeable about these terms and conditions but also to communicate that information to the VISTA members.

If a supervisor or sponsor learns about their VISTA member(s) participating in any prohibited activities, they are expected to let the VISTA know that their particular actions are prohibited and that continuing to participate in these activities can result in the VISTA's removal from the service position. If the activity/behavior persists, the sponsor should contact the CNCS State Office.

See the section on [Challenges with Members](#) for more information on addressing prohibited activities.

For more information on VISTA terms and conditions, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations](#).

Religious Organizations or Activities

CNCS acknowledges that religious activities play a positive role in healthy communities, that religion is a defining characteristic of many community organizations (faith-based and secular), and that religious-based belief and action are central to many VISTA members' lives.

It is important, however, that VISTA projects and their VISTA members do not endorse or promote, or appear to endorse or promote, religion or a specific religious belief. Consequently, CNCS imposes a number of limitations on activities that VISTA projects can support and in which VISTAs can engage while serving, or when otherwise representing VISTA. VISTA members are free to pursue these activities on their own initiative on non-VISTA time, and using non-VISTA funds or resources.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations](#).

Limitation on Political Activities ^{III}

VISTA members, as well as VISTA programs and projects, are subject to certain restrictions related to their engagement in political activities. Such political activities are classified as 1) engaging in electoral activities, 2) engaging in lobbying, or 3) participating in demonstrations.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations](#).

Limitation on Displacement of Employed Workers and Impairment of Contracts for Service

VISTA members are prohibited from performing activities or duties that would otherwise be carried out by employed workers or would supplant the hiring of or result in the displacement of employed workers, or would impair existing contracts for service.

CNCS regulations on non-displacement of employed workers and non-impairment of contracts for service are contained in [45 CFR Part 2556.150](#).

Limitation on Receiving Any Compensation or Other Benefits for Service of AmeriCorps VISTA Members

Agencies or organizations to which VISTA members are assigned, or which operate or supervise a VISTA project, are prohibited from requesting or receiving any compensation from VISTA members, or from those who benefit from the services that members provide (42 U.S.C. § 5044). In addition, it is the policy of the VISTA program that VISTA members not accept any benefit from the sponsoring organization or the community served through their VISTA assignments, unless otherwise permitted by CNCS policy (such as housing, transportation, bus passes, and training materials and tools). See the section on [Supplemental Benefits](#) for details.

Cash or in-kind contributions to an VISTA project, provided under the terms of a MOU between the primary VISTA-sponsoring organization and another participating agency, is not considered compensation for VISTA member services. CNCS must, however, review and concur in all such MOUs prior to implementation.

Limitation on Labor or Anti-labor Activity

CNCS funds must not be used, directly or indirectly, to finance labor or anti-labor organizations or related activities (42 U.S.C. § 5044). Consequently, a VISTA member must not be assigned to activities or duties that assist, directly or indirectly, any labor or anti-labor organizing activity or related activity.

Prohibition on Nepotism

To avoid actual or apparent favoritism in the operation of a VISTA project, the VISTA program prohibits certain VISTA member placement and assignment arrangements.

A VISTA member cannot be placed or assigned to a VISTA project site if the VISTA is:

- In the immediate family (e.g., spouse, domestic partner, parent or guardian whether by blood or adoption, child whether by blood or adoption) of a project site staff member or a project site's board of directors
- A close relative, whether by blood or adoption (e.g., grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, first cousin) of a project site staff member or a project site's board of directors

A project site employee is prohibited from holding a VISTA project supervisory position if she/he is:

- In the immediate family (e.g., spouse, domestic partner, parent or guardian whether by blood or adoption, child whether by blood or adoption) of any CNCS program official responsible for the VISTA project or any project site employee who holds supervisory authority over him/her
- A close relative, whether by blood or adoption (e.g., grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, first cousin) of any CNCS program official responsible for the AmeriCorps VISTA project or any project site employee who holds supervisory authority over him/her

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations](#).

Limitation on AmeriCorps VISTA Fraternization

Relationships between AmeriCorps VISTA members and staff members (including volunteers and contracted personnel) of CNCS, sponsors, and sites that are exploitive or otherwise inappropriate, or that have the appearance of partiality, preferential treatment, or the improper use of position for personal gain, are prejudicial to the morale of VISTA members and will not be tolerated.

Inappropriate relationships between VISTA members and the aforementioned staff members are prohibited. Inappropriate relationships are those that compromise, or appear to compromise, supervisory authority, impede the ability for VISTA members to perform their duties, or could result in preferential treatment. Relationships are prohibited if they appear to involve the improper use of rank or position for personal gain.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations](#).

Limitation on Americorps VISTA Members Considered as Federal Employees^[2]

AmeriCorps VISTA members are regarded as federal employees only for certain purposes under 42 U.S.C. § 5055, including the Hatch Act, the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (worker's compensation), the Federal Tort Claims Act, the IRS Code, and Title II of the Social Security Act. Members are not regarded as federal employees for purposes of unemployment compensation, and allowances received from CNCS are not regarded as wages, except for income tax and Social Security purposes.

Moreover, AmeriCorps VISTA members are not employees of sponsoring organizations. Because members serve under the authority of federal statute, their limited employment relationship is with the federal government (discussed above), not the sponsoring organization, and is governed by federal law, not state law. The AmeriCorps VISTA sponsoring organization is not authorized to make contributions to any state unemployment compensation fund on behalf of AmeriCorps VISTA members assigned to the organization.

^[1]45 C.F.R. §2556(H)

^[2]42 C.F.R. §2556.300 (2018)

Member Benefits

Strong support requires a basic understanding of the benefits available to VISTA members. Building this knowledge equips supervisors to understand the overall member experience as well as support VISTAs in accessing benefits.

Supervisors are expected to access VISTA member benefits information in the same way members do, via the [VISTA Benefits](#) page as well as in the [VISTA Member Handbook](#). This section highlights particular points to be aware of when supervising VISTA members.

Living Allowance

The VISTA program provides a living allowance that enables each VISTA member to live very frugally, like members of the communities they are serving. The allowance is based on poverty rates for a single individual in that county. Current living allowance rates by county are listed [here](#).

The living allowance is paid biweekly and deposited directly into each VISTA member's bank account. Sponsors should encourage new VISTAs to double-check the account number and routing number they submitted for direct deposit since incorrect information can lead to significant delays in receipt of a living allowance payment.

Federal income tax deductions, if applicable, are withheld from the living allowance. No state, county, or city tax deductions are withheld. VISTA members are responsible for paying the appropriate taxes.

For individuals who are receiving public assistance before starting service, the VISTA living allowance is normally not counted toward their income. See [Other Public Benefits](#) for more information.

Leave

All VISTA members are entitled to up to 10 days of personal leave and up to 10 days of medical leave during the course of their yearlong term of service. Supervisors should ensure that VISTAs understand the site and sponsor's policies and processes for requesting leave and providing notice for unplanned absences. The VISTA must request and receive approval in advance from the sponsor/supervisor for all personal leave, specifying dates of leave requested in accordance with sponsor policy. Leave should not interfere with a VISTA settling-in and becoming oriented to the site, or with closing service and transitioning from the sponsor. In some circumstances, VISTA members are eligible for additional leave. See [Emergencies](#) for more information.

VISTAs enjoy the national holidays that are recognized by the sponsor and are given as time off to the sponsor's personnel. A VISTA must serve on holidays that are not recognized by the VISTA's sponsoring organization. For example, if the sponsor denotes Veterans Day as a workday for its staff, a VISTA is expected to serve on that day unless the VISTA has requested and received approval to use one day of personal or medical leave.

If a VISTA member's assigned site is closed due to a weather event, or if the site provides its staff with additional "floating holidays," "spring breaks," "summer recesses," etc., the VISTA member is expected to continue to serve unless authorized to take the time off as part of personal leave or medical leave. In cases where a VISTA member prefers to not use personal leave and instead continue to serve while their assigned site is closed, VISTAs may serve from an alternative service site for a limited duration. The supervisor should seek approval from the CNCS State Office if the VISTA supervisor recommends approval of the VISTA member's request to serve at an alternative service site.

Details regarding all leave types—i.e., medical, personal, national holiday, benefits during an extension of service, extended medical leave benefits, emergency, military reserve, jury duty, parental—are reviewed in [Chapter 9: Leave Benefits](#) of the *VISTA Member Handbook*.

Relocation Assistance

Individuals who are moving more than 50 miles from their home of record to their service sites are eligible for relocation assistance, including a relocation travel allowance and a settling-in allowance.

The relocation travel allowance is based on the direct mileage between the home of records and the site, up to \$1,000, regardless of the mode of transportation used. This allowance should, but may not, cover all expenses incurred. Candidates are notified of the amount in advance by the VMSU and should not book any travel until they get that notice by email. The relocation travel allowance is paid by direct deposit six to eight weeks after the VISTA member begins service and submits their relocation voucher. VISTAs receive the relocation travel allowance a second time when they complete service, for travel back to their home of record.

The settling-in allowance is a one-time payment of \$550 intended to cover initial costs such as utility deposits and rental application fees. It is automatically included in the first living allowance payment. Federal taxes are withheld but state and local taxes are not.

When talking with potential candidates, supervisors should ensure they understand that while relocation assistance is provided, the funds will not be deposited until after a new VISTA member has traveled to the site and moved into their new community.

Healthcare Benefits

The AmeriCorps VISTA program offers two healthcare benefits options to members, one for VISTA members who already have health coverage and the other for those who do not. VISTA members are eligible for special enrollment periods of 60 days from their service start and end dates to sign up for health insurance through the Health Insurance Marketplace.

VISTA members who maintain health coverage during their service term may enroll in the AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance. This allowance is a reimbursement program that covers out-of-pocket costs associated with healthcare up to a maximum amount. Out-of-pocket expenses may include the annual deductible, coinsurance, copayments, and other charges for qualified medical expenses and limited dental and vision services. The Healthcare Allowance does not cover costs associated with purchasing insurance, costs for non-essential health expenses, or charges associated with dependents or other individuals covered under the health insurance.

VISTA members who do not have healthcare coverage during their term of service are eligible to enroll in the VISTA Health Benefit Plan. The Plan is available to eligible VISTA members at no cost and covers eligible expenses for medical office visits, most lab and x-ray services, limited preventive care (e.g., an annual ob-gyn visit for women), limited dental and vision, medical emergencies, surgical and hospitalization expenses, and certain prescription drug costs. It does not cover pre-existing conditions or care for dependents, including spouses.

In addition to enrolling in one of the health benefit options described above, many VISTA members can access telehealth, sometimes referred to as virtual care, at no cost. Telehealth allows VISTAs to consult with board certified physicians, psychologists, social workers, and professional counselors via phone or video chat, at no cost to the member. Telehealth coverage and availability may vary by state.

Each new VISTA member receives an email inviting them to complete a Member Enrollment Form to select a benefit option. The enrollment deadline is 60 days from the start of VISTA service.

Sponsor may provide supplemental health benefits to VISTAs, but there are some conditions and limits. See [Supplemental Benefits](#) for more information.

Childcare Benefits

VISTA members who have children under the age of 13 may qualify for the VISTA program's [childcare benefit](#). Eligibility is based on total household income and the state income limit. The approved benefit rates will be the child care provider's rates or the maximum allowable rate in the state in which the child care is being provided (whichever is lesser).

Anyone receiving VISTA child care subsidies cannot receive child care benefits from any other source. Candidates should compare the available state child care benefits to the VISTA child care benefits to determine which program best supports their family before making a decision about child care.

The [Benefits Hub on the VISTA Campus](#) contains information about this benefit.

Emergencies

In some circumstances, VISTA members are eligible for additional financial support, including emergency travel and emergency expense allowance. Please see [Managing Member Emergencies](#) for specific guidance.

OTHER LEGAL COVERAGES

Sponsors should also be aware that VISTAs have liability coverage under the Federal Tort Claims Act and the Federal Employee's Compensation Act, also known as the Federal Worker's Compensation Act. Under the Federal Tort Claims Act, the federal government assumes liability for any damage to property or injury to persons caused by a member that arises only out of their official duties and for which the member would be liable under local law. Under the Federal Employee's Compensation Act, members who are injured or suffer occupational disease in the course of their VISTA service may claim and be eligible to receive benefits to cover medical expenses. Forms and processing requirements are covered in [Chapter 7 of the VISTA Member Handbook](#).

See [Managing Member Emergencies](#) for more information.

End-of-Service Benefits

Upon successful completion of a year of service, a VISTA member is eligible to receive either the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award (education award) or the VISTA end-of-service cash stipend. Each candidate must make a selection in My AmeriCorps before beginning service. (Persons legally residing in a state, but who are not US citizens, US nationals, or lawful permanent resident aliens, are only eligible to receive an end-of-service stipend.) They can switch from the education award to the cash stipend before the end of the tenth month of service, but they cannot switch from the cash stipend to the education award.

The [Benefits Hub on the VISTA Campus](#) contains information about these benefits.

Post-Service Federal Benefits

Upon successfully completing service, alums receive one year of non-competitive eligibility for employment in the federal government. This special hiring status enables them to apply for federal jobs with the advantage of not having to go through the standard public competitive selection process. That means that they can be appointed to federal positions that may or may not be available to the general public, and their applications could be processed faster than others.

If a VISTA alum is hired into the federal civil service, their time as a VISTA member will be credited toward a pension in the Federal Employees Retirement System as long as they pay a portion of their retirement contribution. AmeriCorps VISTA service will apply toward purposes of determining seniority, reduction in force and layoff rights, leave entitlement, and other rights and privileges based on length of service under laws establishing terms and conditions of service of federal civilian employees.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations](#).

Member Policies

Beyond VISTA terms and conditions, there are several other VISTA member policies that sponsors must be familiar with. Supervisors play active roles in approving and overseeing activities in these areas.

Outside Employment

To make VISTA service accessible to the widest possible range of candidates regardless of economic status, the VISTA program allows outside employment that is unrelated to a VISTA member's assigned project and VAD. (Prior restrictions were lifted with a 2015 policy change.)

Commitment to one's assigned project is the paramount focus of all VISTA members, regardless of whether a VISTA member is working outside of their VISTA service assignment. Any outside employment must not conflict with the VISTA member's training, service, or service hours as assigned by CNCS or the sponsor. To the maximum extent practicable, VISTA members must remain available for service without regard to regular working hours. The VISTA project's needs supersede any requirements of outside employment.

While in VISTA service, the VISTA may only accept outside employment for positions that are:

- Legal
- Part-time
- Do not conflict at all with the VISTA's service or service hours
- Do not violate any applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations and
- Do not conflict with any AmeriCorps VISTA program requirements or policies

Before accepting such outside employment, the VISTA must speak with and obtain the written approval of their supervisor to do so. To approve outside employment, their supervisor must ensure there is no conflict between the employment and the VISTA's service or service hours.

Sponsors must document their approval or disapproval, as appropriate, of all requests for VISTAs to accept or continue outside employment by maintaining each completed Outside Employment Request on file and sending a copy to both their CNCS State Office and to vistaoutsideemploymentrequest@cns.gov.

See the [VISTA Campus](#) for the full Outside Employment Policy and the Outside Employment Request Form.

Teleservice

A fundamental assumption of VISTA service is that VISTA members serve in a low-income community at the sponsor's location and project site. Under limited circumstances, the CNCS State Office may approve a VISTA member's request to perform service with a project under a teleservice agreement where they can, on an episodic basis, perform project-related duties from home.

Teleservice, which is not to exceed two days per pay period, may be considered after a VISTA member has been serving satisfactorily at the project site at least three months.

The VISTA member's supervisor must approve a VISTA member's completed Teleservice Checklist (obtained from the CNCS State Office) before it is submitted to the CNCS State Office for final approval. These checklists must be maintained by the sponsor.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Terms & Conditions of Service](#).

Educational Courses

VISTA members and Leaders may participate in online or in-person classes, regardless of subject matter, during their service year. However, the VISTA program is a full immersion experience that requires its VISTA members to be able to attend community meetings and dedicate themselves to understanding and serving the community to which they are assigned.

Service to the sponsoring organization and community takes precedence over coursework. Enrollment in courses requires the approval of the supervisor. If a VISTA member or Leader is unable to complete assigned tasks or responsibilities due to coursework, the sponsor should contact the CNCS State Office.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Terms & Conditions of Service](#).

Supplemental Benefits from Sponsor and Site

Financial support for VISTA members may be provided by the sponsor and/or site under the following conditions:

- Support is offered and available equally to all VISTA members at a site
- Cash or checks (unless for reimbursable expenses) are not given directly to the VISTA member
- Support offered does not violate VISTA's legislation that mandates VISTAs must, to the maximum extent practicable, make a commitment to live among and at the economic level of the people they are serving

Below is a list of support that a sponsor may provide to VISTA members. The list is not intended to be exhaustive, nor is a sponsor required to provide any such support.

Housing

A sponsor may, at its discretion, provide support for housing for VISTA members. While there is no maximum threshold set for the amount of assistance, it should be consistent with the VISTA member's commitment to live among and at the economic level of the people served.

A sponsor's support for housing must be offered equally to all VISTA members serving at the site. Sponsors, at their discretion, can offer housing support to Leaders without offering the same benefit to VISTA members at the site, provided the housing support is offered to all Leaders serving with the sponsor.

Support for housing can be provided in the form of a one-time security deposit or as monthly rent, mortgage payments, or help with utility bills. All housing support must be paid directly to the landlord, leasing agent, or mortgage holder. A sponsor or others may not offer money directly to a VISTA to supplement the VISTA's living allowance, or to pay rent, utilities, or other costs. Nor may VISTAs accept third-party payments for utilities or other housing costs other than for rent.

Please be aware that CNCS has no involvement in, or legal responsibilities related to, any housing-related arrangements that are entered into between a VISTA or Leader and a sponsor. CNCS is not a party to any such matters if any issues arise.

Accepting free or reduced-cost housing could possibly increase the VISTA's reportable income for tax purposes. For more information see the Member Housing section in [VISTA Member Handbook – Terms & Conditions of Service](#).

Relocation Assistance

- Additional relocation travel assistance – Sponsors may arrange and pay for or reimburse VISTA members for the travel and/or shipping costs that exceed the support provided by CNCS without regard to the number of miles the VISTA member moved. Sponsors must purchase the travel or reimburse the VISTA member for such costs based on receipts provided by the VISTA.
- Match settling-in allowance – Sponsors may provide an additional settling-in allowance up to the settling-in allowance set by CNCS without regard to the number of miles the VISTA member moved. This support can help cover costs associated with settling into a new city that often exceed CNCS's settling-in allowance (i.e., rental or

lease application fees, credit check fees, security deposit, first and last month's rent, deposits to turn on gas and utilities, etc.). Sponsors must pay the funds directly to the landlord or leasing agent, utility company, etc., or reimburse the VISTA member for such costs based on receipts provided by the VISTA.

- Donated furniture, appliances, equipment – Sponsors may give donated or used items to VISTAs in order to furnish their homes.

Transportation

In addition to reimbursing VISTA members for all service-related transportation, VISTAs are eligible to receive the following benefits:

- Parking permits/passes – Sponsors may pay parking permit or pass fees associated with a service site without regard to whether the same support is provided to all staff.
- Public transit pass – Sponsors may provide VISTAs with transit passes to offset the costs of commuting. If public transit is required for service-related transportation or travel, sponsors may provide a monthly or annual public transit pass in lieu of reimbursing the VISTA member for actual transit costs.
- Mileage and gas gift cards for use of privately owned vehicle – Sponsors may provide VISTAs with gas gift cards to offset the costs of commuting.

Food

- Meal plans associated with housing or free access to the sponsor's cafeteria – Sponsors may provide meal plans associated with housing or free access to their cafeteria.
- Grocery card – Sponsors may provide gift cards to grocery stores to VISTA members without regard to whether they are provided to all staff.

Support Services

- Client support services – Sponsors may allow VISTA members access to support programs that their organization administers and that are available to the public. VISTA members must follow the same objective criteria, qualification guidelines, and other processes that members of the public follow, without exception. VISTAs must not be involved in the administration or processing of any of these programs. In reviewing a VISTA's application for such assistance or services, the sponsoring organization must adhere to its policies and processes for awarding such services. The VISTA member's involvement must not present concerns where a reasonable person would perceive favoritism or a conflict of interest on behalf of the parties involved. For example, if a VISTA wants to apply to receive food from the food bank where they serve, they are subject to the same eligibility criteria and processes (application review, wait times, level of food distribution) as the public. CNCS is never involved in a VISTA's receipt or denial of such assistance or services.
- Employee benefit programs (health, dental, employee assistance program) – Sponsors may provide VISTA members access to employee benefit programs and/or provide VISTAs with a healthcare subsidy to offset the costs of purchasing a qualifying health plan, but certain restrictions apply:
 - The sponsor must not define the VISTA member as an employee for the purpose of enrolling the VISTA member in such benefit programs.
 - The sponsor must offer the benefit equally to all VISTA members serving at a site.
 - The sponsor must manage, respond to, and resolve any issues raised by VISTA members or others related to any subsidy the organization chooses to provide. CNCS will not be involved in any such issues that may arise.
 - The subsidy must be in the form of a reimbursement. VISTA members must provide proof of coverage and cost in order to receive the reimbursement.
 - The sponsor must inform the VISTA members that the subsidy the organization provides is considered taxable income and they must report it as such.
 - The sponsor is required to develop and document the organization's policy and process for implementation.
 - The sponsor may not reimburse a VISTA member for a penalty associated with not having ACA-compliant coverage. All Americans are subject to the provisions of the ACA. It is the responsibility of each VISTA member to review their individual circumstances and determine if the ACA requires them to have compliant coverage and to pay a penalty, if assessed one.
- Emergency Assistance – Sponsors may assist VISTAs members who experience emergency situations that fall outside the VISTA program's Emergency Expense Allowance (see the section on [Managing Member Emergencies](#)). This assistance is allowable when it does not present concerns that a reasonable person would perceive favoritism or a conflict of interest on behalf of the parties involved.

Other

- Access to sponsor managed facilities – Sponsors may allow VISTA members to access their gymnasium, recreational facilities, library, or computer labs without regard to whether all staff is granted the same privileges. Sponsors may also assist VISTAs with accessing local centers that provide similar services.
- Birthday, holiday, and other special occasion gifts – Sponsors may provide gifts provided they do not exceed existing employee or community volunteer appreciation gifts.
- Career and education support – In keeping with the VISTA program’s commitment to provide educational and professional development, sponsors may provide support with regard to attending professional conferences and classes, such as the payment of conference fees, travel, lodging and meals, or per diem that applies to standard employees. A VISTA’s participation in such conferences and classes must not interfere with VISTA service hours or performing of VISTA service. Discounting or paying educational costs are also allowable when a mechanism is in place to pay the cost directly to schools or lenders, or receipts exist to ensure that such payments are made on behalf of the VISTA. For full details regarding VISTAs taking educational courses during their service year, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Terms & Conditions of Service](#).
- Fingerprinting costs – Sponsors may reimburse VISTA members for fingerprinting costs incurred beyond the \$25 subsidy. See the section on [Preparing for New VISTA Members](#) for more information on member fingerprinting.

Other Public Benefits

Some public benefits, not administered by the VISTA program, are of particular interest to VISTA members as their service may impact their eligibility to receive them.

Protection of Public Assistance Benefits While Serving in AmeriCorps VISTA

VISTA members who are eligible to receive assistance or services (i.e., benefits) under any governmental program (e.g., Temporary Aid to Needy Families [TANF], Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income) prior to enrollment as a member or who are receiving such assistance or services during VISTA service shall not be denied such benefits or given a decreased benefit because of the member's failure or refusal to register for, seek, or accept employment or training during the period of service. This protection of benefits, provided at 42 U.S.C. § 5044, applies to any governmental program, including federal, state, and local programs.

VISTA members may use the service letters provided via their My AmeriCorps account related to public benefits. (See [Service Letters](#) for more information.)

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations](#).

College Cost Reduction and Access Act

This federal regulation includes two programs that can significantly reduce, or even eliminate student debt, Public Service Loan Forgiveness and Income-Based Loan Repayment.

For more information, see [Benefits of Service – Reduction of Education Costs](#) and the College Cost Reduction & Access Act [FAQ sheet for AmeriCorps](#).

Service Letters

During and after their service, VISTA members (and alums) may access service letters through their My AmeriCorps portal that may support them in confirming their status for a variety of purposes.

Currently Serving Certification

This letter includes the dates of service and certifies that the VISTA member is currently serving.

Public Benefits Income Disregard

In accordance with federal law, payments received by a VISTA through the VISTA program (e.g., living allowance payments) do not reduce or eliminate the level of, or eligibility for, assistance or services that a VISTA may be receiving or is eligible to receive under any federal, state, or local government assistance program. This statutory provision is known as the “income disregard” provision; the provision designed to ensure that persons receiving assistance before joining VISTA do not lose public benefits or have them reduced as a result of their receipt of VISTA payments during service.

Social Security Income Disregard

If the Social Security Administration needs proof of the income you received during your term of service as a VISTA, it is recommended that you print out an income disregard letter to help explain your situation to the benefits officer.

Verification of Service

Once VISTAs have completed service, they can access a Verification of Service letter in their My AmeriCorps account. This letter includes the dates of service and serves as proof of service. This letter documents noncompetitive eligibility.

Member Recordkeeping

Records are essential for running a VISTA project with integrity. They support the project's operations and demonstrate compliance.

While sponsors have the flexibility to create and maintain records in the ways that work best for them, they must ensure that they are meeting the minimum recordkeeping requirements for their VISTA projects.

Leave Hours/Days

Sponsors are responsible for monitoring their VISTA's attendance at their service site as well as approving or declining use of leave. They must track the number of leave hours/days used by each VISTA, creating a record of specific leave dates and making sure leave use does not exceed the maximum number of days for each type of leave.

All VISTA members are eligible for up to 10 days of personal leave and up to 10 days of medical leave over the course of their yearlong service term. See the section on [Managing Member Emergencies](#) for details regarding eligibility for leave types that may apply to VISTA members in emergency situations.

Performance or Conduct Issues

Sponsors are responsible for documenting any challenges that develop with VISTA members, including issues with performance or conduct, as well as actions taken to address those challenges, such as performance improvement plans or corrective action plans.

See the section on [Challenges with Members](#) for more information on documenting and responding to these situations as they arise.

Outside Employment

Sponsors must document their approval or disapproval, as appropriate, of all requests for VISTAs to accept or continue outside employment by maintaining copies of completed Outside Employment Request Forms. See the section on [Outside Employment](#) for more information.

Teleservice

The VISTA member's supervisor must approve a member's Teleservice Checklist before it is submitted to the CNCS State Office for final approval. These checklists must be maintained by the sponsor.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Terms & Conditions of Service](#).

Managing Member Emergencies (On- and Off-Duty)

While in service, a VISTA member or a Leader may face an emergency. In some instances, CNCS can help with the emergency. Those instances are described in this section. VISTAs are often unfamiliar with emergency-related benefits, and the sponsor can play a crucial role in leading them to available support when relevant.

Sponsors must report any change in the status of a VISTA, as a result of an emergency, to the CNCS State Office within 24 hours. This includes leaving the project early, absence without notification of leave, hospitalization, arrest, and other extended absences. Sponsors should make sure to reflect a VISTA member's absence from the project on the SVF to ensure accurate living allowance payments.

Emergency Contact Information

Each sponsor is responsible for collecting and maintaining emergency contact information for their VISTA members at the beginning of the member's service term.

Emergency Leave

Beyond the standard leave benefits, VISTAs are sometimes eligible for additional emergency leave.

Emergency leave is rare. The sponsor may allow up to five service days of emergency leave under only two circumstances: 1) if an immediate family member (spouse, parent, sibling, child, grandparent, mother in-law, brother in-law, sister in-law, father in-law, or guardian) becomes critically ill or dies; or 2) if a natural disaster requires that the VISTA leave the site. (See the section on [Natural Disasters](#) for more information.) Any additional time away from the project requires the approval from the CNCS State Office. Emergency leave does not count against a VISTA's personal leave time. Emergency leave should not be used in the event of a member illness.

If circumstances require a VISTA member to take emergency leave, the VISTA member must notify the sponsor at once and, and if requested, provide the sponsor with evidence of the emergency. The sponsor must inform the CNCS State Office immediately, if the sponsor determines an emergency exists.

Emergency Travel

When circumstances require a VISTA to take emergency leave that requires travel, CNCS will pay for the fastest, regularly-scheduled means of transportation to and from the project site to the emergency, or to the home of record, within the United States or a U.S. Territory in the form of a prepaid travel ticket. The sponsor should contact the CNCS State Office to start the process of requesting emergency travel support.

In the rare event that CNCS cannot provide a prepaid ticket in advance of the approved emergency travel and the VISTA member cannot purchase their own travel, the sponsor furnishes the needed travel assistance. This assistance includes advancing up to \$500 from the sponsor's own funds to the VISTA member, as agreed upon in the MA between the sponsor and CNCS. The funds will be reimbursed to the VISTA member by CNCS, who will reimburse the sponsor. It is suggested that the sponsor establishes a policy on how this \$500 advancement and pay back will be handled.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Leave Benefits](#).

Emergency Expense Allowance

The VISTA program may authorize a one-time expense allowance to cover extraordinary costs, such as reimbursement for theft, fire loss, or special clothing necessitated by severe climate. This allowance is not intended to supplement the living expenses of VISTA members. The sponsoring organization can assist VISTAs in requesting an Emergency Expense Allowance from the CNCS State Office.

VISTA members, Leaders, and candidates are responsible for safeguarding their personal property. Neither CNCS nor the VISTA program is an insurer of personal property or cash and does not replace or reimburse for the loss of personal property or cash. Emergency funds are also not appropriate to use for costs associated with car accidents, routine car maintenance or repair. Expense allowances are paid directly to the VISTA member by CNCS.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Financial Support](#).

Jury Duty

A VISTA member may be summoned for jury duty. The VISTA member should provide a copy of the summons to the sponsor. A sponsor must give a VISTA member the necessary time away from project duties to comply with jury duty requirements, and this time is not counted against the VISTA member's personal leave. All regular benefits continue to accrue during the period of jury duty.

The sponsor should notify the CNCS State Office immediately if it appears that a VISTA may not be able to resume project duties within two weeks of starting jury duty.

If the VISTA is subpoenaed on a non-project-related matter, the VISTA is required to use personal leave.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Leave Benefits](#).

Military Leave

If an individual enters VISTA service before completing a military reserve obligation, the VISTA must change the location of their reserve unit if necessary. VISTA members should try to minimize the disruption in VISTA service as a result of discharging responsibilities related to their reservist duties. If allowed to choose when to fulfill the annual two weeks of active duty requirement, VISTA members should choose a period that does not disrupt their VISTA service.

A VISTA member is granted military reserve leave to attend the monthly reserve training sessions and the two weeks of active duty training. Such leave does not count against a VISTA member's personal leave, and benefits continue to accrue. VISTA members should notify the sponsor before taking military reserve leave and upon returning from such leave.

The sponsor should notify the CNCS State Office immediately if a VISTA member's military reserve duties will last beyond two weeks, with the exact dates of military reserve leave. A copy of the military leave orders may be requested.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Leave Benefits](#).

Parental Leave

A VISTA is entitled to use a combination of their allotted medical leave (up to 10 service days) and personal leave (up to 10 service days) for the birth or adoption of a child. If the VISTA exhausts all 20 days of personal and medical leave, the CNCS State Office may approve up to an additional 10 service days of parental leave. No additional leave beyond 30 service days may be granted. To receive additional parental leave, the sponsor must provide evidence of medical and personal leave remaining and a request for additional leave for the VISTA member to the CNCS State Office.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Leave Benefits](#).

Family and Medical Leave Act

Very few VISTA members are eligible for Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) leave. Sponsors should consult with the CNCS State Office if they think a VISTA may be eligible for and interested in FMLA leave. To be eligible, a VISTA member must be at least in the second year of VISTA service with the same sponsor, and meet other baseline requirements for eligibility.

For more information, and a list of requirements, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Leave Benefits](#).

Natural Disasters

When an emergency situation arises that poses a potential or actual threat to life or property, a VISTA is expected to:

- Follow the orders or recommendations of the state or local authorities regarding the need to evacuate an area, and
- Seek shelter and contact their supervisor and CNCS State Office to notify them of the VISTA's location

If the CNCS State Office cannot be reached, contact the National Service Hotline at 1-800-942-2677.

VISTA members are eligible for emergency leave if a natural disaster requires them to leave their sites. (See the section on [Emergency Leave](#) for more information.)

If a VISTA member needs to travel from the disaster area to their home of record or another safe location, the CNCS State Office can approve emergency travel support. (See the section on [Emergency Travel](#) above for more details.) The sponsor may also provide a loan for up to \$500 for emergency expenses. The sponsor should determine, with the VISTA member, the terms of repayment.

The CNCS State Office will advise the VISTA member on options as the situation evolves, including Administrative Hold (an excused absence status, usually with pay, that CNCS accords to a VISTA while they are enrolled in the VISTA program but is not reporting to a VISTA project site), the opportunity to seek reassignment in another area, and/or ending service early for a compelling reason.

VISTA members sometimes feel moved to respond themselves when disaster strikes; however, the commitment and responsibility of VISTAs is to their local low-income community, in particular the local project and its beneficiaries. CNCS does not consider requests from VISTAs serving outside of impacted areas who wish to temporarily relocate to engage in disaster response activities. VISTA members who wish to participate in disaster response activities on a short-term basis may do so using personal leave.

Driving Accidents

If a VISTA member is involved in an accident while driving for service-related purposes, the VISTA's liability for injuries or property damage sustained by third parties is covered under the Federal Tort Claims Act. Neither CNCS nor the VISTA program is responsible for any damage to the VISTA's own vehicle.

The VISTA should immediately notify local law enforcement and comply with local requirements. The sponsor should notify the CNCS State Office within 24 hours. The CNCS State Office will provide guidance on the V-81 and other forms need to be completed. Please review the [Service-Related Transportation section of Chapter 7](#) in the *VISTA Member Handbook*.

The VISTA and the sponsor are prohibited from making any representation concerning the ultimate liability of the federal government on a particular claim to other parties to an accident. CNCS's Office of General Counsel and, where applicable, the Department of Justice, makes the final determination on whether an accident occurred within the scope of the VISTA's project-related activities and the extent of the government's liability.

The sponsor must advise the CNCS State Office if civil action is brought against either the VISTA member or the sponsor as a result of the accident, or if the VISTA is asked or ordered to testify or to be deposed. Neither CNCS nor the VISTA program is responsible for any indemnification or contribution to the sponsor for any damages sustained by the sponsoring organization.

For more information and the process for reporting such accidents, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Travel & Transportation Support](#).

Liability Coverage (Federal Tort Claims Act)

VISTA members have liability coverage under the Federal Tort Claims Act. Under the Federal Tort Claims Act, the federal government assumes liability for any damage to property or injury to persons caused by a VISTA that arises only out of their official duties and for which the VISTA member would be liable under local law.

If a VISTA is involved in an accident and is at fault while driving a privately owned vehicle and undertaking VISTA duties, the VISTA's liability for injuries or property damage sustained by third parties is covered under the Federal Tort Claims Act. CNCS or the VISTA program is not responsible for any damage to the VISTA's own vehicle.

In cases of potential liability on the part of the AmeriCorps VISTA member for damage to property or injury to persons, other than motor vehicle accidents, the sponsoring organization or supervisor must immediately inform the CNCS State Office, which after consultation with CNCS's Office of General Counsel, will advise the sponsoring organization on what steps to take.

For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations](#).

Worker's Comp (Federal Employees' Compensation Act)

VISTA members are considered federal employees for the purpose of coverage under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA), also known as the Federal Worker's Compensation Act. Under FECA, VISTA members who are injured or suffer occupational disease in the course of their VISTA service may claim and be eligible to receive benefits to cover medical expenses.

VISTAs who are injured or experience an emergency illness related to their VISTA assignment must immediately notify the sponsor and the CNCS State Office. The CNCS State Office can then provide additional information regarding forms and how to file a claim. For more information, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations](#).

Member Hospitalization

If a VISTA member is absent from their site due to hospitalization, the sponsor must notify the CNCS State Office as early as is practicable. The VISTA must utilize remaining medical and personal leave for the duration of the hospitalization. If additional leave is needed for a critical illness, the sponsoring organization may approve up to five days of emergency leave.

Member Arrest

If a VISTA member is arrested during a service term, the VISTA is required to report the arrest to the sponsor and CNCS State Office within three calendar days of the arrest.

Death in Service

If a VISTA dies during their service term, the sponsor must notify the CNCS State Office as early as is practicable. The CNCS State Office coordinates with the next of kin to ship personal effects and transportation of the body, if necessary.

Challenges with Members

Managing VISTA member performance and conduct can be complex and challenging, especially because of the VISTA program's unique requirements. Sponsors should engage the CNCS State Office early for guidance on setting clear expectations for VISTA members and utilizing performance improvement plans and corrective action plans.

There are times when, for a variety of reasons, the match between the VISTA member, the sponsor, and the VISTA program does not work out. While each VISTA member commits to a one-year term of service, some VISTA members choose to leave their site and/or end their service term early. Additionally, some sponsors decide it's not in the best interest of the community and organization for a member to finish their term of service at the assigned site.

In many cases, it's feasible for the sponsor, the VISTA member, and the VISTA program to work toward a resolution that enables the VISTA member to continue service at the assigned site. Such an outcome is optimal. However, the CNCS State Office should be engaged early when challenges arise as they can provide critical support in assessing the circumstances and guiding the sponsor and VISTA member toward a positive outcome.

In some cases, separation of the VISTA member from the site and sponsor is the most appropriate path, and it's essential that the sponsor engage the CNCS State Office as soon as possible so they can lead all parties or take action to effect the VISTA member's separation from the project. Separation can happen via a member's resignation or CNCS's removal of the VISTA member from the sponsor or site by the CNCS State Office.

The sole authority for removing a VISTA member from a sponsor, terminating a VISTA member, or offering a VISTA member the opportunity for reassignment rests with CNCS.^[1] While the request for a VISTA member's removal from a sponsor may originate from a sponsor's request, neither the sponsoring organization nor the site to which a member is assigned shall remove a VISTA from service.^[2] Additionally, CNCS has the authority to remove a VISTA member from a sponsor without the request or consent of the sponsor.^[3]

When a VISTA member's departure creates a vacancy, it is up to the CNCS State Office to determine whether filling the position again is appropriate and possible. The CNCS State Office typically considers a number of factors, including the reason for the vacancy, overall project performance, and available resources before determining whether a sponsor will be approved to fill a vacancy at a future date.

Member Resignation or Member-Initiated Reassignment

If a VISTA member expresses interest in leaving the VISTA project early, the supervisor should first have a conversation with the VISTA member to understand the root of their interest in leaving and see if continued service at the project may be a possibility. The CNCS State Office should be consulted as soon as possible, and may, depending on the circumstances, be able to approve additional VISTA member benefits (for example, emergency leave) or offer support (such as coaching on reasonable accommodation) to facilitate continued service. The CNCS State Office can also consult on whether a VISTA member's situation may qualify as a compelling personal circumstance that would qualify the VISTA member for a pro-rated end-of-service benefit upon exit from the VISTA program.

A VISTA member can only effect a resignation from the VISTA program as a whole; a VISTA member cannot resign from a particular VISTA project. If a VISTA member has made a final decision to resign from the VISTA program as a whole, the VISTA member should send immediate written notification to the sponsor and CNCS State Office of this fact. The supervisor must also promptly report this to the project director, who is required to notify the CNCS State Office within 24 hours of the VISTA member's notification to the sponsor. This initial notification should be by email and is critical to ensure that the VISTA member is exited from the program promptly as to avoid overpayment of living allowance and other benefits. The sponsor must send the CNCS State Office a copy of the VISTA member's dated resignation letter, which should specify the effective date of the resignation, the reason for the resignation, and that the VISTA member is resigning from the VISTA program as a whole, not just from the VISTA sponsor. The CNCS State Office will unlock the member's FPF. The sponsor is responsible for ensuring that the VISTA member submits Part A of the FPF and the sponsor submits Part B of the FPF. (For more information on submitting FPF, see the section on [Future Plans Form](#).)

If a VISTA member expresses a need to leave their site but has serious interest in continuing to serve as a VISTA elsewhere, the project director, supervisor, or member should notify the CNCS State Office of the desire to seek reassignment to another project. The CNCS State Office will collect information from the VISTA member, the supervisor, and the project director in order to assess the possibility of continued service with the VISTA program and provide guidance to the sponsor and member involved. If the VISTA is removed from the sponsor, the sponsor plays no further active role in the individual's status in the VISTA program, though they may be contacted for information giving rise to their removal from the sponsor and/or for references if the VISTA member continues with the VISTA program and is under consideration by other sponsors.

Performance and Conduct

Sponsors should promptly notify the CNCS State Office of any acute or developing challenges related to VISTA member performance or conduct.

Examples of performance challenges include:

- Failure, refusal, or inability to perform assigned project duties
- Involvement in activities that substantially interfere with the performance of assigned project duties
- Unsatisfactory performance of assigned project duties

Examples of conduct challenges include:

- Any conduct on the VISTA's part that substantially diminishes their effectiveness as a VISTA including: excessive absences, excessive lateness, absences without leave (AWOLs), engagement in disruptive or unprofessional behaviors at the service site
- Behaviors that undermine the operations of the site where they are assigned
- Behaviors that are counterproductive or impair the morale of the staff and/or other VISTAs at the site

To the extent possible, the VISTA member's supervisor should provide timely and clear written feedback to the VISTA member about any concerns that arise and expectations going forward. If the challenges in performance or conduct are of such a nature and degree that the sponsor does not deem it appropriate to provide feedback to a VISTA member, supervisors should immediately contact the CNCS State Office and seek guidance. Supervisors should always promptly document for themselves and for the CNCS State Office challenges with VISTA members. Documentation should focus on facts (e.g., dates of absences, tardiness, missed deadlines) rather than generalizations (e.g., lack of communication, poor performance) and include actions taken by the sponsor to correct any problems (e.g., meetings, performance improvement plans).

Sponsor-Initiated Removal

As challenges develop, to the extent practicable, sponsors should work with VISTA members directly to address any problems. A key step is ensuring that expectations are clear. If expectations for performance and conduct were not established at the beginning of service via a thorough OSOT, the supervisor should ensure the VISTA member is educated on what is expected of them. If clear expectations have been set and the VISTA is still not meeting them, depending on the nature and degree of the performance or conduct issues, the sponsor may consider putting a written performance improvement plan or corrective action plan as an appropriate next step.

If the sponsor has worked directly with the VISTA member to address problems without success, or the problem is new but severe, the sponsor can request the removal of a VISTA member from their project. Sponsors cannot remove a VISTA member from the VISTA program; only CNCS can remove a VISTA member, and such removal is at the discretion of CNCS.

If a supervisor wants a VISTA member removed from the project before the VISTA's term of service is scheduled to end, the supervisor should engage the project director, who should contact the CNCS State Office prior to taking any action. A request for removal must be in writing (email) and describe all reasons behind the request. The CNCS State Office will request documentation for both 1) facts related to the problem and 2) the sponsor's attempts to address the problem with the VISTA member.

If the CNCS State Office grants the sponsor's request for removal, the sponsor will be notified promptly, and the VISTA member will be removed from assignment at the project and advised to cease reporting to the site. Once the VISTA member has been removed from the project, the sponsor plays no further active role in the individual's status in the VISTA program, though they may be contacted for information related to the sponsor's request for removal, or for references if the VISTA member continues with the VISTA program and is under consideration by other sponsors.

CNCS will use the documentation submitted by the sponsor to assist CNCS in determining whether to initiate termination for cause proceedings against the VISTA member, or, alternatively, to offer them the opportunity for reassignment to another project. If the CNCS State Office removes the VISTA member from the project while the next step is determined, the member may be placed on Administrative Hold. Administrative Hold is an excused absence status (usually with pay) that CNCS accords to a VISTA member while enrolled in the VISTA program but not reporting to a VISTA project site. It is a status that can only be imposed by CNCS, and is imposed at CNCS's discretion. While in Administrative Hold status, the VISTA member should not, and is directed not to, report to any VISTA site for service.

In all cases, a VISTA member has the opportunity to voluntarily resign from the VISTA program at any time prior to their termination from the VISTA program.

For more information on this topic, see [VISTA Member Handbook – Separation from Service](#).

CNCS-Initiated Removals and Terminations for Policy Violations

CNCS has responsibility and authority for terminating VISTA members who violate VISTA terms, conditions, or policies. Supervisors and project directors have responsibility for promptly reporting to the CNCS State Office any knowledge of violations, even when they are satisfied with their VISTA members and wish for them to continue service.

Examples of violations include, but are not limited to:

- Exhaustion of leave days or absence without leave (AWOL)
- Outside employment that violates the outside employment policy (for example, illegal employment or full-time employment)
- Engaging in activities prohibited on duty, such as religious proselytizing
- Engaging in activities prohibited at all times, such as fundraising for partisan political candidates
- Conviction of any criminal offense under federal, state, or local statute or ordinance
- Intentional false statement, misrepresentation, omission, fraud, or deception in seeking to obtain selection as a VISTA in the VISTA program

If the CNCS State Office learns of any activity that requires a VISTA member to be removed from the site and/or sponsor, they will notify the sponsor promptly.

The CNCS State Office directly monitors VISTA member compliance with certain VISTA program policies, regulations, and instructions, the violation of which can also lead to CNCS-initiated terminations.

Examples of such violations include:

- Noncompliance with VMO requirements
- Failure to submit FBI fingerprint cards on time
- Engaging in prohibited political activity (e.g., Hatch Act violation)
- Undisclosed criminal history revealed on FBI background check results

The CNCS State Office may also remove a VISTA member from a project through no fault of the member – e.g. if the sponsor cannot continue to operate all or a part of its VISTA project. VISTAs who are removed due to site, project, or sponsor closure are given the opportunity to seek reassignment at another sponsor.

In all cases, a VISTA member has the opportunity to voluntarily resign from the VISTA program at any time.

For more information on this topic, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Separation from Service](#).

^[1] [§2556.405](#)

^[2] [§2556.405](#)

^[3] [§2556.415](#)

Transition Out of Service

VISTA members serve for a limited time, so planning for their departure is important for them, the project, and the community.

This section provides a number of resources to use before, during, and after a VISTA member's transition to support them and to ensure the capacity they have built is sustained.

Project Planning

The departure of a VISTA member represents a critical juncture for the project, as the assignment will either transition to a new VISTA member or draw to a close. Work with your CNCS State Office on how to plan for project transition and sustainability.

Member Planning

The best supervisors and project directors act as mentors and advocates as their VISTA members approach the ends of their service terms and plan their next steps.

Sponsors can support a successful transition out of service for VISTAs by:

- Asking VISTA members about their goals for after their service term and how the supervisor can support them
- Encouraging VISTAs to start planning three months before their end dates, if they haven't already
- Showing flexibility as members take leave time to plan for their next steps, including interviewing or visiting schools
- Promoting resources for VISTA members, such as the [Life after VISTA Guide](#), VISTA Campus Job Board, non-competitive eligibility for federal employment, AmeriCorps Alums, USA Jobs AmeriCorps VISTA Search Track, and Employers of National Service
- Asking VISTA members to reflect on their experiences as VISTA members, as well as how the sponsor can support strong service experiences in the future
- Recognizing them and thank them for dedicating their term to the community, privately and/or publicly

See [VISTA Campus – Transitioning](#) for resources on this topic.

Exiting Members from Service via the Future Plans Form

The FPF in the Portal is a critical administrative requirement at the end of the service term. It is the mechanism by which VISTA members select their end-of-service action (regular exit, extension, reenrollment, or early exit). The sponsor plays an active role in ensuring each VISTA member submits a FPF at least 45 days prior to the end of the VISTA member's service, and the sponsor also submits a performance evaluation and action recommendation.

The available end-of-service actions and description are provided below.

Regular Exit

The majority of VISTA members end their service as scheduled, following a full year of service. This is a regular exit.

Reenrollment

A reenrollment occurs when a VISTA member will continue with the VISTA program for another one-year term without a break in service. Reenrollments are contingent on a sponsor's recommendation to CNCS that the VISTA member serve on a project, whether the same project or a different project, and CNCS State Office approval. Sponsors are encouraged to ensure VISTA member performance is thoroughly documented in project materials, including both PPRs and FPF, to facilitate CNCS State Office approval. VISTA members who have attended a VISTA Orientation (i.e., VMO or previously Pre-Service Orientation) within the last five years are not required to attend again. VISTA members are only able to serve a total of five full-year service terms. If the VISTA reenrolls with the same project without a break in service, they are entitled to unused personal leave and medical leave earned in the prior year of service.

Extension

An extension to a VISTA member's one-year term supports the project's capacity development. It can provide additional time to transfer a project or function successfully, or to complete a project that would be inappropriate or impractical to turn over to another VISTA member. Extensions can last from two weeks to six months and are subject to approval by the CNCS State Office. During an extension, the VISTA member carries over the same health benefit from the original term of service. They receive a pro-rated cash stipend as an additional end-of-service benefit for their extension and may take up to one day of personal leave and one day of medical leave per 30 additional days of service. If the VISTA extends service with the same project without a break in service, they are entitled to unused personal leave earned in the original term of service. For any VISTA member who extends their service, two FPFs will need to be completed, one leading up to the scheduled end date and a second leading up to the extension end date.

Early Termination

Early terminations are time-sensitive and handled on a case-by-case basis. See the section on [Challenges with Members](#) for information on the circumstances that can lead to an early exit and how to proceed.

Deferral

Deferral of service is exceptionally rare and handled on a case-by-case basis for military reserve leave or jury duty leave lasting more than 30 days. Deferred VISTAs may be reinstated within six months without resubmitting an application and attending VISTA Orientation. For more information on deferral, see the [VISTA Member Handbook – Administrative Policies](#).

Future Plans Form (FPF) Submission

Timely submission of Future Plans Form (FPF) is essential for ensuring that VISTA members get access to their end-of-service benefits, including education awards, service verification letters, and travel reimbursements. It also ensures that living allowances are accurately paid.

This is the standard timeline for most exits:

- Each VISTA member receives an automated email 90 days from their scheduled end date asking them to complete their section of their FPF, Part A. They are expected to submit this at least 60 days before their scheduled end date.
- After the VISTA member submits Part A, the sponsor must submit Part B, the performance evaluation and action recommendation. They are expected to submit this at least 45 days before the scheduled end date.
- After the sponsor has completed and certified the FPF, the VISTA member will have the opportunity to review their evaluation and recommendation, and enter a comment on it if they wish.
- After the sponsor submits Part B and the VISTA member reviews it, the CNCS State Office completes Part C to approve the VISTA member and sponsor selections. They do this at least 14 days before the scheduled end date.
- After the CNCS State Office submits Part C, the VISTA Member Support Unit processes the end of service action. This happens on or shortly after the VISTA member's approved end date and opens access to the VISTA member's end-of-service benefits.
- If five days have passed since the VISTA member's end date and they do not have access to their end-of-service benefits yet, they should contact the VMSU.

Advancing National Service

Introduction

By engaging with the public, elected officials, and the broader national service network, VISTA sponsors build awareness of and support for their projects, AmeriCorps VISTA, and CNCS. Publicizing the VISTA project is a means of building support and increasing the likelihood of success. Taking the time to communicate with the public helps attract resources from the community—including volunteers, supporters, and funding—and helps educate people about the project.

See the section on [Marketing, Outreach, and Recruitment](#) for additional information.

Media

Traditional media, including print, television, and radio are effective ways to increase awareness of your VISTA project. Traditional media is a useful method to recruit volunteers, VISTA members, or request specific support of your project needs.

Our resources include answers to many frequently asked questions and offer tips and ideas for people new to public relations and those interested in learning new ideas for broadcasting their message. Find our resources here: [Sharing Your National Service Story: A Guide to Working with the Media](#) and [CNCS's Communications Guide](#).

Social Media

On social media, sponsors can use #AmeriCorpsVISTA and #IamVISTA, and tag @AmeriCorpsVISTA, @AmeriCorps, and @NationalService in posts related to projects where VISTA members are present. Sponsors are also encouraged to like and re-tweet national service-related posts and to follow VISTA and CNCS on social media platforms. In addition, many CNCS State Offices and State Commissions have accounts that sponsors can follow. Check the Social Media Hub to find your CNCS State Office or Commission.

VISTA has a presence on Facebook ([@AmeriCorpsVISTA](#)) and YouTube ([CNCS](#)).

The Corporation for National and Community Service has a presence on a number of social media sites. The [Social Media Hub](#) has links to all CNCS accounts.

Outreach to Elected Officials

VISTA sponsors are encouraged to reach out to their local elected officials on an ongoing basis to educate them about the impact of local VISTA projects. However, as set forth in Section 403 of the DVSA, sponsors are legally prohibited from using VISTA resources (VISTA members or grant funds) to lobby. Contact with elected officials, depending on the facts, may step over the line to prohibited lobbying activities on the part of the sponsor.

National Service Recognition Day

On National Service Recognition Day, thousands of local leaders across the country honor AmeriCorps members and Senior Corps volunteers by participating in recognition events, issuing official proclamations, and taking to social media in a nationwide show of appreciation. This annual initiative takes place the first Tuesday in April, and is led by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), the National League of Cities, the National Association of Counties, and Cities of Service.

In coordination with other local national service sponsors, VISTA sponsors can play important roles in conducting outreach to mayors and city leaders, county officials, and tribal leaders; organizing and supporting events; and hosting site visits.

More information is available on the [National Service Recognition Day](#) page.

Partnering with Other National Service Programs

VISTA sponsors and sites are encouraged to connect with other national service programs in their geographic areas. The CNCS State Office can make introductions between sponsors that may not otherwise be connected. Reports on national service sponsors by state are also available to the public at [Service by State](#).

Days of Service

Sponsors play an important role in supporting Days of Service by actively encouraging VISTA members to host or participate in Days of Service events. In some cases, VISTA members may be involved in organizing Day of Service events that engage other volunteers. In others, they may serve as volunteers alongside community members at events that are organized by other groups or in roles distinct from their VISTA projects.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service

The MLK, Jr. Day of Service is a federal holiday dedicated to Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in honor of his legacy and passion for service.

We encourage our National Service participants and partners to make MLK, Jr. Day a “Day On, Not a Day Off” and serve the community to bring Dr. King’s vision closer to reality. VISTA members can participate in community events or can coordinate events of their own.

More information, including event registration, promotional materials, and other resources are available [here](#).

September 11th Day of Service and Remembrance

The September 11th National Day of Service and Remembrance is the culmination of efforts, originally launched in 2002, that promote community service on 9/11 as an annual and forward-looking tribute to the 9/11 victims, survivors, and those who rose up in service in response to the attacks.

More information, including event registration and toolkits, is available [here](#).

AmeriCorps Week

AmeriCorps Week is a celebration of all things AmeriCorps – from the programs and organizations that make this national service program possible in thousands of locations across the country, to the members who have committed to "Get Things Done" since the program’s inception in 1994.

AmeriCorps Week takes place every March. More information and resources are available on the [AmeriCorps Week Resources](#) page.

Further Resources and Communication

Introduction

If you have questions that are not answered in this manual, this section can point you in the right direction of who to contact or where to look for additional information.

CNCS State Office

Each state has a designated CNCS State Office to help develop, manage, and monitor VISTA programs in their state and sometimes in other states (for national projects). The role of a [CNCS State Office](#) is outreach, project development, technical

assistance, monitoring and evaluation, and VISTA member support. Each CNCS State Office is led by a State Program Director (SPD) and may also include one or more Program Officers (PO). Major duties of CNCS State Office staff are:

- Manages a portfolio of AmeriCorps VISTA and Senior Corps projects
- Provides technical assistance to project sponsors and monitors project/grants data indicators to affirm compliance with performance measurement requirements
- Assists current and potential sponsors in planning, designing, and submitting grant applications consistent with CNCS guidance
- Assures portfolio records are well organized and comply with office requirements
- Continually reviews and evaluates project operations through on-site compliance monitoring and electronic progress report review and feedback
- Responds to technical assistance requests from potential sponsoring organizations that wish to develop proposals for VISTA projects
- Assists potential sponsors in refining project goals and objectives, in determining if the project is in accordance with the VISTA mission, and in ensuring that self-sustaining activity will be achieved within the low-income community
- Approves or disapproves an organization's concept paper and application
- Arranges for sponsor training opportunities
- Approves or disapproves a sponsor's selection of a VISTA applicant
- Arranges for VISTA candidates to enroll in Virtual Member Orientation (VMO)
- Supports VISTAs and sponsors during project implementation with in-service training and technical assistance
- Monitors project activities
- Reviews progress reports
- Closes out VISTA projects
- Works with elected officials
- Conducts community outreach

National Service Hotline and VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU)

The [National Service Hotline](#) is a service that provides general CNCS and VISTA program information as well as eGrants and myAmeriCorps portal technical help. Support can be requested by web form, via live chat, or by phone at 1-800-942-2677.

The VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU), contacted through the National Service Hotline, manages VISTA members' service benefits and monitors form completion. A sponsor may contact the VMSU in support of a VISTA, but mainly, VISTA members should contact the VMSU directly if they need support with member benefits.

Nationalservice.gov

This is the [official website for CNCS](#), where you can find information for every stream of service, CNCS focus areas, special initiatives, legislation, press releases, blog posts, and more. Be sure to visit the [VISTA Sponsor section of nationalservice.gov](#) for additional sponsor resources including application guidance, marketing materials and more.

Knowledge Network

The [Knowledge Network](#) is a section on the National Service website that provides on-demand training on a multitude of topics including, but not limited to capacity building, disability inclusion, VISTA member and volunteer development, performance measurement, and recruitment. These trainings include online courses, webinar series, and readings.

Social Media Hub

One of the easiest ways to stay connected with everything National Service-related is to follow its many social media presences on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube. All of these accounts can be accessed through the [Social Media Hub](#). For additional information, see the section on [Marketing, Outreach, and Recruitment](#).

National Service Gear

Branding your VISTA members with both National Service and your organization's gear is a great way to raise awareness for what your VISTA members are doing in your community. VISTA members are provided an AmeriCorps VISTA logo polo when they start service, but you can also buy additional items on the [National Service Gear webstore](#). Available items include apparel, backpacks, banners, pins, and desk accessories. For additional information, see the section on [Marketing, Outreach, and Recruitment](#).

Acronyms

Acronyms may be used when discussing the VISTA program, so it is important to have a working knowledge of what these acronyms mean.

| Acronym | Description |
|----------------|---|
| CFR | Code of Federal Regulations |
| CNCS | Corporation for National and Community Service |
| COS | Close of Service |
| CSO | CNCS State Office |
| DVSA | Domestic Volunteer Service Act |
| EOS | End of Service |
| FFMC | Field Financial Management Center |
| FFR | Federal Financial Report |
| FPF | Future Plans Form |
| GO | Grants Officer |
| HHS/PMS | Health and Human Services/Payment Management System |
| HOR | Home of Record |
| IST | In-Service Training |
| MLK Day | Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service |
| MA/MOA | Memorandum of Agreement |
| MOR | Marketing, Outreach, and Recruitment |
| MOU | Memorandum of Understanding |

| | |
|----------|------------------------------------|
| NCSA | National and Community Service Act |
| NGA | Notice of Grant Award |
| NOFA | Notice of Funding Availability |
| NOFO | Notice of Funding Opportunity |
| NSH | National Service Hotline |
| OGC/GC | Office of General Counsel |
| OIG/IG | Office of Inspector General |
| OSOT | On-Site Orientation and Training |
| PMS | Payment Management System |
| PO | Program Officer |
| PPR | Project Progress Report |
| PRS/VPRS | VISTA Progress Report Supplement |
| RFCP | Request for Concept Papers |
| RFP | Request for Proposals |
| SOL | Service Opportunity Listing |
| SPD | State Program Director |
| T/TA | Training and Technical Assistance |
| TCB | Terms, Conditions, and Benefits |
| VAD | VISTA Assignment Description |
| | |

| | |
|------|-------------------------------------|
| VLAD | VISTA Leader Assignment Description |
| VMO | Virtual Member Orientation |
| VMSU | VISTA Member Support Unit |
| VTU | VISTA Training Unit |