



AMERICORPS VISTA

PROGRAM GUIDANCE FOR CURRENT AND POTENTIAL PROJECT SPONSORS

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Corporation for
**NATIONAL &
COMMUNITY
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I. Introduction

The AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance directs the development of new projects and outlines national programming priorities for FY 2016. All new AmeriCorps VISTA projects developed this fiscal year must adhere to this guidance.

Prospective AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors should read the guidance in its entirety. Current sponsors should review this guidance to stay abreast of VISTA's programming priorities.

Overview of AmeriCorps VISTA Program

Founded in 1965, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) is a federal national service program designed to provide needed resources to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to increase their capacity to lift Americans out of poverty. In 1993, VISTA was incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of programs, housed at the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS).

AmeriCorps VISTA supports efforts to alleviate poverty by recruiting Americans 18 years and older from a diverse range of backgrounds to dedicate a year of full-time service with a sponsoring organization ("sponsor") to create or expand programs designed to empower individuals and communities in overcoming poverty.

While strong progress has been made in lifting Americans out of poverty since the inception of VISTA, recent data from the United States Census Bureau identifies more than 45 million Americans still living below the poverty line.

About AmeriCorps VISTA Sponsors

Nonprofit organizations, Native American Tribes, and city, state, and local government agencies are eligible to apply to be AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors. Sponsorship is not limited to those designated by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) specifically as "501(c)(3)"; it may also include nonprofits with other IRS-designated 501(c) statuses that focus on anti-poverty community development. 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 also develop and manage projects with meaningful involvement of the low-income communities to be served.

Organizations interested in becoming a sponsor should begin by visiting NationalService.gov and contacting the [CNCS office in their state](#). Organizations may also review [Is VISTA Right for Your Organization?](#) and [VISTA 101: Understanding VISTA](#) for more in-depth information about becoming a sponsor. After contacting their state office, interested organizations can apply by submitting a concept paper and application through the CNCS eGrants web-based system, under the FY 2016 AmeriCorps VISTA State Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA).

About AmeriCorps VISTA Members

[AmeriCorps VISTA members](#) vary in age and hail from a range of diverse backgrounds and experiences. Each VISTA commits to one year of full-time service on a specific project operated by a sponsor.

The AmeriCorps VISTA [Summer Associate Program](#) allows members to serve through an existing VISTA project for 8–10 weeks through the summer months.

Both VISTAs and 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, VISTAs and Summer Associates may receive 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 [NationalService.gov](#).

In FY 2016, AmeriCorps VISTA plans to support approximately 7,000 full-time VISTAs and Summer Associates who will serve with approximately 800 sponsors. They will leverage human, financial, and material resources to develop sustainable solutions to problems in low-income communities across the country.

II. Framework for VISTA Programming

Core Principles

Projects must be developed in accordance with AmeriCorps VISTA’s core principles: an anti-poverty focus; community empowerment; sustainable solutions; and capacity building.

Anti-Poverty Focus

The statutory purpose of AmeriCorps VISTA is to strengthen and support efforts to eliminate poverty. Each VISTA project should focus on empowering individuals to emerge from poverty, not simply make poverty more tolerable. VISTA projects should focus on long-term solutions rather than short-term services.

Community Empowerment

Prospective and current AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsors must engage low-income community members 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.

Sustainable Solutions

Congress has directed AmeriCorps VISTA to serve as short-term resources that serve to build the long-term sustainability of anti-poverty programs. Projects should be developed with a goal to phase out the need for VISTAs within three years and have the project continue without them.

Capacity Building

VISTAs create systems that remain long after their term of service ends. VISTA projects expand the scale, impact, and resource-leveraging ability of programs and organizations that work to eliminate poverty. Our members strengthen sponsors by building infrastructure, expanding community partnerships, securing long-term resources, coordinating training for participants, and more, as determined by local needs.

VISTAs focus on capacity-building activities. On occasion, they may perform limited direct service activities if such activities are incidental to the activities required under their VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) duties, a part of a term-limited special initiative, or a necessary part of VISTA training activities.

VISTAs are not staff members or employees of the sponsoring organizations to which they are assigned. VISTAs may not engage in activities at sponsoring organizations that would displace or supplant paid staff, contractors, or existing volunteers. These prohibitions against displacement and supplantation include activities related to the application and management of other CNCS grants and programs.

Key Legislation and Regulations

The VISTA program's governing [legislation](#) and applicable [regulations](#) are the:

- Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (as amended)
- Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009 (Public Law 113-13, October 2009)
- Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Parts 1206, 1210-1211, 1216-1220, 1222, 1225, 1226

Assessment of Project Applications

In choosing which project applications to support, the AmeriCorps VISTA program evaluates prospective and current VISTA sponsors on their ability to manage and effectively apply VISTA resources to build long-term, sustainable solutions to poverty in their community. A VISTA project must:

- Involve stakeholders in project development and implementation through the duration of the project
- Address the relevant needs of low-income communities and otherwise comply with the provisions of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (DVSA), as amended (42 U.S.C. 4950 et seq.), applicable to VISTA and all applicable regulations, guidelines, and policies
- Build organizational and/or community capacity to sustain the project beyond the VISTA term of service
- Describe the intended outcomes of the project on the targeted population and community
- Clearly state how VISTAs will be trained, supervised, and supported to ensure mission success, as well as compliance with DVSA program rules and regulations
- Illustrate the relationship between key project elements throughout the application, including: a statement demonstrating the need and intended outcomes; performance measures; and VISTA member assignment description(s)
- Ensure that VISTA and community resources are sufficient to achieve project goals
- Possess sufficient management and technical capability to implement and oversee the project

- Request an appropriate number of VISTAs to achieve the project mission, and select VISTAs with the requisite skills and qualifications to meet established goals and objectives.

III. Overview of CNCS Strategic Plan

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009 directs CNCS to focus national service in areas where it can have a major impact. CNCS is fulfilling congressional instructions by targeting agency resources in the CNCS [Strategic Plan](#).

CNCS has developed four strategic goals that encapsulate key elements needed to measure the agency’s performance as it executes this important mission. The goals outlined below form the foundation of the strategic plan.

To enhance the impact of national service on community needs, Goal I includes six focus areas for concentrated programmatic attention: Disaster Services, Economic Opportunity, Education, Environmental Stewardship, Healthy Futures, and Veterans and Military Families. Each focus area contains objectives and performance measures available on the “[CNCS Performance Measurements](#)” section of the [National Service Knowledge Network](#).

Through Goal II, CNCS supports the national service network in providing experiences offering a combination of professional and educational benefits to service participants.



Goal III aims to strengthen CNCS's capacity, as well as the capacity of the national service network, to measure performance, evaluate program impact, and leverage community assets through public-private partnerships.

Goal IV targets the agency's infrastructure for further enhancement to achieve the objectives of Goals I-III.

IV. VISTA Programming Priorities for FY 2016

This year's priorities are guided by the CNCS Strategic Plan referenced above and AmeriCorps VISTA's statutory mandate to focus on eliminating poverty. CNCS expects that at least 80 percent of AmeriCorps VISTA resources will be invested in building the capacity of anti-poverty programs and organizations operating in these areas:

- Economic Opportunity
- Education
- Healthy Futures
- Veterans and Military Families.

Economic Opportunity

AmeriCorps VISTA's commitment to ending poverty requires focusing on project sponsors that provide opportunities to low-income individuals to get training, education and skills that will meet the needs of employers. In addition, projects that focus on asset building are encouraged to apply.

In FY 2016, VISTA will continue to give priority to projects that support and/or facilitate access to services and resources that contribute to the improved economic well-being and financial security of economically disadvantaged people.

VISTA project activities should focus on the following objectives of Economic Opportunity:

- **Employment:** Improving or creating job skills training programs that lead to increased employment
- **Financial Literacy:** Improving access to services and benefits aimed at contributing to enhanced financial literacy
- **Housing:** Transitioning individuals into or helping them remain in safe, healthy, affordable housing.

Education

AmeriCorps VISTA will give priority to projects that support and/or facilitate access to services and resources that contribute to improved educational outcomes for economically disadvantaged children.

AmeriCorps VISTA will target new project development in communities with Title I schools, particularly those with School Improvement Grants from the U.S. Department of Education.

Projects should focus on the following objectives:

- School readiness for economically disadvantaged young children
- K-12 success in student educational and behavioral outcomes in low-achieving schools
- Post-secondary success.

STEM Education

AmeriCorps VISTA is committed to expanding projects focused on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education programs that will build partnerships between STEM students, faculty/staff, and community partners to develop long-term solutions for bolstering the number of underrepresented students who obtain STEM degrees.

Community Colleges

Projects that partner or work in concert with community colleges are encouraged, given the hub of services and supports that these schools currently provide to low-income populations. Beyond the significant educational benefits imparted through curriculum and class instruction, community colleges provide a strong foundation for workforce development and strengthening local economies.

Healthy Futures

The VISTA program will give priority to projects that meet health needs, including access to food resources and health care, for economically disadvantaged individuals.

Projects should support the following Healthy Futures Objectives:

- **Obesity and Food (Food Resources):** Improving access to nutritious food.
- **Access to Health Care:** Connecting economically disadvantaged individuals to preventative and primary health care services.

Hunger

Building on our existing support of critical U.S. Department of Agriculture programs, such as the Summer Food Service Program, Commodity Supplemental Food Program, school breakfasts, etc., VISTA is committed to projects that further leverage coordination between national service programs and public/private partnerships. Potential focus areas might include projects that expand breakfast in the classroom or address transportation barriers to food access, specifically in rural areas or other venues with hard to reach populations.

Inter-Generational Food Security

AmeriCorps VISTA will give priority to projects that increase access to healthy foods across generational lines (e.g., a VISTA project that develops a one-stop, congregate meal program model where food for parents and their infants and children or seniors could be provided simultaneously). Ideal projects will advance wrap-around services and move individuals and families toward economic self-sufficiency.

Health Care

AmeriCorps VISTA will focus on funding projects that aim to ensure that underserved low-income individuals and families are connected to primary care providers and ongoing preventative health care services. Seamless access will involve developing health care resources that:

- Bring culturally relevant services to underserved groups according to age, geography, and disability
- Create wrap-around support including physical, mental, and social welfare elements
- Assist individuals in accessing health insurance coverage and finding a primary care provider.

Veterans and Military Families

AmeriCorps VISTA will support projects that focus on low-income veterans and military families as beneficiaries or enhance existing projects to better serve those populations in the following areas:

- Economic opportunity – employment, financial literacy, housing
- Education – school readiness, success in K-12 education and beyond
- Healthy futures – food security, access to health care.

Priority Programming for FY 2016

Within the four focus areas described above, AmeriCorps VISTA encourages new project development where appropriate in the following specific programming areas. Projects focused in these three areas will be given the highest consideration for investments of AmeriCorps VISTA resources:

- Opportunity Youth and My Brother's Keeper
- Rural Community Development
- New American/Immigrant and Refugee Integration

Opportunity Youth and My Brother's Keeper

In response to the President's call around the My Brother's Keeper initiative to support boys and men of color and all youth, AmeriCorps VISTA will aim to support its goals through projects focusing on:

- Ensuring all youth out of school are employed
- Ensuring all youth remain safe from violent crime
- Ensuring all children enter school cognitively, physically, socially and emotionally ready
- Ensuring all children read at grade level by 3rd grade
- Ensuring all youth graduate from high school
- Ensuring all youth complete post-secondary education or training.

Rural Community Development

VISTA seeks a balanced portfolio of urban and rural programming. More than 35% of those living in rural counties live in high-poverty areas. VISTA will continue to invest resources to create economic opportunity in rural communities as well as support programming in the other priority areas.

New Americans / Immigrant and Refugee Integration

Poverty acutely impacts immigrant and refugee populations, and AmeriCorps VISTA will prioritize projects that support local government and non-profit efforts to increase the civic, economic, and linguistic integration of new Americans. In addition, we will continue to support efforts that raise awareness of human trafficking and connect those vulnerable groups with comprehensive support services.

V. Additional Considerations for FY 2016

Data Collection and Management for Results

Increasingly, nonprofit organizations are asked to take on important, complex challenges. They are also attempting – and being asked by funders, beneficiaries and other stakeholders – to ensure that they efficiently and effectively use their limited resources.

Performance measurement, performance management, and evaluation are elements that can be used by nonprofit organizations to know whether they are effective in getting results. However, many nonprofit organizations lack the capacity to use these tools.

In FY 2016, AmeriCorps VISTA seeks proposals from organizations with an interest in helping organizations build their capacity – or that of their programs – to more effectively use information to implement programs that address poverty. Depending on the organization’s need and capacity in this area, this initiative would involve placing VISTA members with organizations to address capacity around Performance Measurement, Evaluation, or Performance Management.

Community Resilience

Community resilience – the ability of local communities to mobilize available resources to respond to and recover from adverse conditions – is of critical importance to those served by AmeriCorps VISTA. Appropriate VISTA interventions in this space should address the most appropriate community-based needs that will lead to community resilience, such as food security, access to jobs, and other economic opportunities. The disproportionate effects of climate change and natural disasters on the poor validate the use of VISTA resources to prepare communities to mitigate foreseeable impacts and assist in long-term recovery efforts.

Environmental Stewardship

Priority will be given to projects focused on promoting energy efficiency, clean energy, and projects that make alternative energy technologies available to low-income communities to reduce utility costs and/or provide the necessary skills for “green jobs.” As with all VISTA projects, project applications in the Environmental Stewardship focus area must provide a clear link between the services provided and the communities and individuals in poverty who will be served.