

# Make Friends with Forms

## How to use mandatory VISTA application documents as screening tools

### Introduction

The Corporation for National and Community Service (i.e., VISTA) requires a stack of documents for a complete VISTA application that may initially seem tedious and cumbersome. However, these are not arbitrary pieces of paper meant to torment overworked supervisors. These documents, when used correctly, can ensure that you find—*and retain*—the best candidate to fit your project. Read on for a list of required components of an AmeriCorps\*VISTA application and how to use them.

### I. VISTA application

This is your starting point. Read the application thoroughly to make sure the applicant has completed the application in its entirety. Look for gaps in employment, time unaccounted for, or anything else that seems out of place. If an applicant is a national recruit, meaning he or she is from another state and does not seem to have any connection to your city, state, or project, consider adding an interview question that addresses this issue.

### II. Two valid references

**(Use AmeriCorps reference form or address all questions on that form)**

It is essential that your applicant provide two good references from people who have supervised him/her in some capacity. Weak or inappropriate references almost always lead to the early termination of a member due to poor performance or unwillingness to do his/her work plan. Acceptable references typically come from former employers, professors, volunteer coordinators, clergy (if the member worked or volunteered for him/her) or coaches. These should be professional references that speak to the applicant's skills, abilities, and successes. Each reference should include concrete examples of your applicant's accomplishments. Be wary of references that speak more to the applicant's likeability or use vague adjectives to describe his/her character. It is important to know that a supervisor thinks your applicant is nice, generous, and courteous, but does he/she show up on time and complete projects in a timely manner?

Another red flag is a reference that does not correspond with the work or volunteer experience listed on the application. If your applicant has listed several work or volunteer experiences that relate to your field and the clients you are serving, then he/she should use one of those supervisors as a reference. If, however, an applicant has an outstanding resume but his/her references come from a manager at Starbucks or a high school job at a movie theater then there is something wrong. References should match the resume, both in content and along the same timeline.

Finally, be sure to check references *before* you offer a position to an applicant. Supervisors often set themselves up for failure by hiring applicants that have well-written applications coupled with outstanding interviews. It is only after they make an offer that they receive mediocre reference forms. At that point supervisors are tempted to “go for it” because the candidate has made such a great impression. Don't. If a previous supervisor has reservations about your candidate then you likely will too in the not-so-distant future.

### **III. Signed certification form**

Complete this at the interview. This states that everything the applicant puts in the application is accurate to the best of his/her knowledge.

### **IV. What to Know Before Beginning Service Form**

When you invite an applicant in for an interview give him/her this form beforehand. This form spells out the terms and conditions of their service, including the living allowance, defining the 24–7 commitment, and other essential information about a member’s year of service. It is best to send him/her this form to read before the interview so that he/she can come prepared to ask questions or clarify your expectations. This will ensure he/she is firmly committed to a year of VISTA. It also may save you time from interviewing candidates only to find out that they didn’t know how little money they would be making and are suddenly not interested in the project.

In addition to giving this form to applicants before the interview, you should also use the Interview Checklist Form to ensure that each candidate understands the terms of service he/she has supposedly read.

### **V. Sponsor Evaluation Form**

This is your endorsement of the candidate you have selected for the position. You should only complete one of these forms per VISTA position.

### **VI. Citizenship documents**

All VISTA members must provide proof of citizenship before they can be considered for national service. Use the Citizenship Form Guide to determine what documents qualify. You or someone from the state office must see the original documents (not copies) and sign the citizenship form to verify. This must be included in the application materials. Note: It may be easier for you to do this with each candidate during the interview process rather than collecting this information later.

### **VII. Pre-Service Orientation (PSO) Registration Form**

This form registers your applicant for the mandatory regional PSO he/she will attend before beginning service at your site.

The supervisor completes the first box. The applicant completes the middle box with the address where he/she will be two weeks prior to the PSO. If the applicant moves to a new address before PSO he/she will not receive important information about his/her plane ticket, hotel accommodation, and itinerary. This will lead to confusion, scrambling, and possibly lead to the applicant’s not attending the PSO and beginning service.

For the third box, consult with your sponsor or the VISTA state office about the preferred method of transportation to the event. Some states prefer to fly their members rather than reimburse for mileage; also there is often a cap on mileage reimbursement that could lead to out-of-pocket expenses for members.

**MAKE FRIENDS WITH FORMS (addendum)**

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**Best practices for interviewing and hiring a VISTA member**

1. The activities listed previously are the bare-minimum standards for a VISTA application. Supervisors are encouraged to gather additional references, ask for resumes, conduct second interviews, or require an applicant to give a presentation or teach a lesson if necessary.
2. As part of the interview process, be sure to define AmeriCorps\*VISTA, national service, and the process for sending members to PSO. Sometimes applicants do not have a full understanding of full-time volunteer work. They also do not understand that if they accept your offer and then one month later decide to get a different job that they will cause you to miss your recruitment window. Supervisors should explain to applicants that by dropping out before PSO they will compromise your project. This generally leads to higher retention and fewer last-minute crises.
3. Use the list of suggested interview questions provided as a foundation for your questions. Be sure to address the financial hardship they will undergo in doing a year of service. Ask if they feel prepared for the sacrifice.
4. Address the health plan by giving them information about Seven Corners insurance. By allowing them to go to the Web site and call about any pre-existing conditions you will hopefully prevent members from terminating early due to inadequate health coverage.
5. Background checks are conducted by CNCS, but supervisors are encouraged to do independent background checks if they feel it is in the best interest of the program. Specifically, projects that have children or other vulnerable populations located where the VISTA will be working are encouraged to absorb this fee prior to hiring a VISTA in order to ensure the candidate is appropriate for the site.