

AMERICORPS VISTA PROGRAM GUIDANCE FOR CURRENT AND POTENTIAL PROJECT SPONSORS

Fiscal Year 2018
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I. INTRODUCTION

The AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance directs the development of new projects and outlines national programming priorities for FY 2018. 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 anti-poverty program designed to provide needed resources to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to increase their capacity to lift communities out of poverty. In 1993, VISTA was incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of national service programs, housed at the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS).

AmeriCorps VISTA supports efforts to alleviate poverty by providing opportunities for 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 U.S. Census Bureau identifies nearly 41 million people still living below the poverty line in the United States.

About AmeriCorps VISTA Sponsors

Nonprofit organizations, Native American Tribes, and state, city, 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 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 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 web-based system, under the FY 2018 AmeriCorps VISTA State Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA).

About AmeriCorps VISTA Members

[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. The AmeriCorps VISTA [Summer Associate Program](#) allows members to serve through an existing VISTA project for 8, 9, or 10 weeks through the summer months. Summer Associates may perform direct service activities in addition to capacity-building activities.

Both VISTA members 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, VISTA members 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 <https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameri-corps/ameri-corpsvista/start-your-application>.

In FY 2018, AmeriCorps VISTA plans to support approximately 7,500 full-time VISTA members, Leaders 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 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.**

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.

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.

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 that work to eliminate poverty. VISTA members strengthen sponsors by building infrastructure, expanding community partnerships, securing long-term resources, and more, as determined by local needs, with all activities focused on creating pathways out of poverty for low-income communities.

VISTAs focus on capacity-building activities. On occasion, they may perform limited direct service activities which are deemed a necessary component to completion of the VISTA's overall capacity-building assignment; these activities may be written into the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) if known at the beginning of the VISTA's term of service but is not a requirement. VISTAs may also participate in direct service activities as part of term-limited special initiatives such as National Days of Service.

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 \(as amended\)](#)
- [National and Community Service Act of 1990 \(as amended\)](#)
- Code of Federal Regulations, [Title 45, Chapter 25 Part 2556](#)

III. VISTA PROGRAMMING PRIORITIES FOR FY 2018

VISTA is seeking project applications for programming in any of the following four CNCS Focus Areas in FY 2018:

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

VISTA also welcomes applications for programming in Disaster Services for *long-term* disaster recovery, particularly projects that focus on providing housing, promoting restoration, and supporting initiatives that address the long-term needs of affected, low-income populations.

VISTA's work with Environmental Stewardship is limited to those projects that target the specific anti-poverty goals of VISTA. For traditional programming in these Focus Areas, other CNCS programs and grant opportunities may be more appropriate. Please visit the [CNCS website](#) for information on our other programs.

Priority consideration will be given to project applications that fall under the specific programming areas below. These priorities are established annually based on instructions from the Administration, input received from staff, project research, and a review of the existing portfolio of AmeriCorps VISTA projects nationwide.

Economic Opportunity

AmeriCorps VISTA's commitment to ending poverty requires focusing on project sponsors that provide opportunities to low-income individuals to get workforce training, education and skills that will meet the needs of employers. In addition, projects that focus on asset building (i.e., supporting low-income individuals and families to increase financial and tangible assets, such as savings, a home, and businesses) are encouraged to apply.

In FY 2018, 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 and communities.

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

- **Employment/Workforce Development:** Improving or creating job skills training programs that lead to increased employment, including vocational education and apprenticeship programs.
- **Financial Literacy:** Improving access to services and benefits to enhance financial literacy for both adults and young students.
- **Housing:** Transitioning individuals into or helping them remain in safe, healthy, affordable housing, with a special focus on veterans.

Healthy Futures

The VISTA program will give priority to projects that meet health needs for economically disadvantaged individuals.

Projects should support the following Healthy Futures Objectives:

- **Access to Health Care:** Connecting economically disadvantaged individuals, particularly youth, to preventative education and treatment/recovery services in regards to the opioid crisis.
- **Food Security:** Alleviating hunger and increasing access to nutritious food.

Opioid Addiction Prevention and Recovery

Our nation is in the midst of an unprecedented opioid epidemic. More than 2.4 million Americans currently struggle with opioid addiction. Since 1999, the rate of overdose deaths involving opioids – including prescription pain relievers and heroin – has nearly quadrupled. This growing crisis is causing devastating effects, placing burdens on workplaces, the health care system, families, states, and communities. Fortunately, there is growing awareness of this public health challenge and a robust set of interventions to prevent, treat, and reduce opioid abuse and help people lead healthy and substance-free lives.

VISTA Opioid Programming focuses on addressing the opioid crisis in the United States by placing VISTA members with organizations that are creating or expanding opioid prevention and recovery projects targeting low-income communities. The programming treats opioid addiction and recovery as a health issue and fits into the Corporation for National and Community Service's Healthy Futures focus area; however, other focus areas such as Education may be impacted. The programming emphasizes prevention, intervention, and recovery.

Education

The VISTA program 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 large concentrations of low-income students (e.g., Title I schools).

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 Programming

AmeriCorps VISTA remains committed to expanding projects focused on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education programs that will build partnerships among STEM students, faculty/staff, and community

partners to develop long-term solutions for bolstering the number of underrepresented students who obtain STEM degrees.

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 particularly in the following areas:

- Economic opportunity – employment and veterans’ homelessness prevention/reduction;
- Education – school readiness, success in K-12 education and college success; or
- Healthy futures – opioid prevention and treatment.

FY 2018 Summer Associate Programming

In FY 2018, VISTA Summer Associate projects should focus primarily on the following issue areas:

- Programming to expand the reach of opioid prevention projects, particularly with youth.
- Programming to add or support meal sites that serve youth and elders (e.g., intergenerational congregate meal sites), including USDA Summer Food Service Programs and senior meal programs.
- Programming to prevent summer learning loss for students, particularly in STEM education.

Only current sponsors are eligible to participate in the Summer Associates program, pending the availability of resources to fund summer programming. A Memorandum of Agreement with any new organization must be in place by March 31, 2018 for the organization to be considered a current sponsor. AmeriCorps VISTA strongly encourages 2018 Summer Associate projects from current sponsors that are tribal organizations and current sponsors serving or planning to serve tribal communities.

In 2017, through Communities in Schools of Florida, 44 AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associates supported and assisted in education and prevention of opioid and substance abuse during camp sessions. The summer camps – many of which were located in high poverty communities/Title 1 school districts – were primarily designed to prevent summer learning loss. As part of their summer youth programming, they included an education and prevention component aimed at opioid and substance abuse during the camp sessions.

In addition to the three programming areas above, there may be additional initiatives created by the Administration which will be outlined in the FY 2018 VISTA Summer Associate Guidance.

IV. PRIORITY POPULATIONS AND REGIONS FOR FY 2018

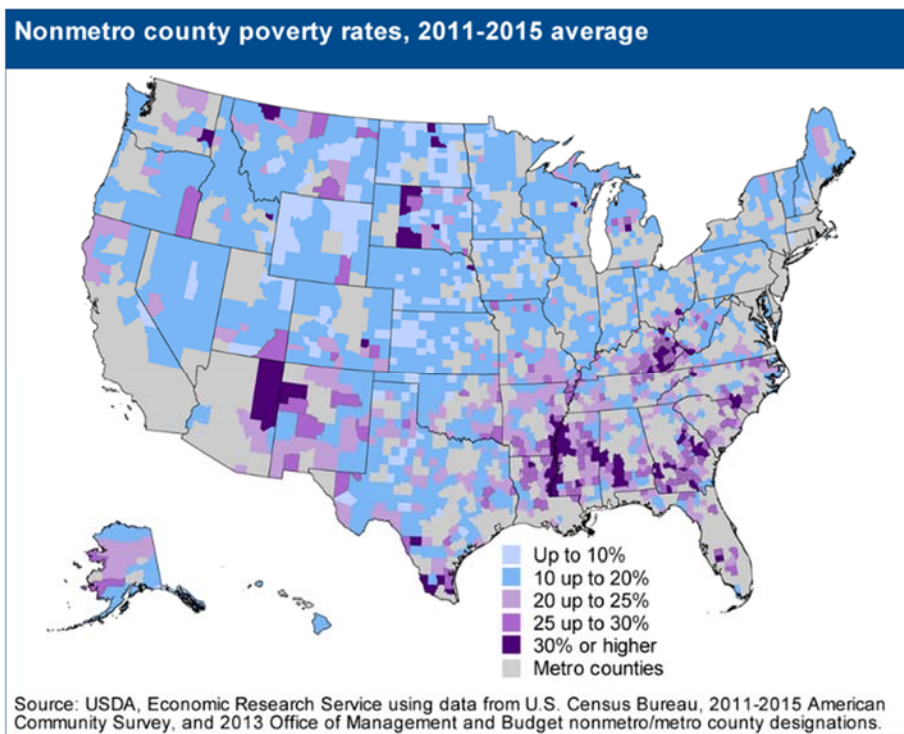
Within the four focus areas described above, AmeriCorps VISTA encourages new project development where appropriate in the following specific populations and geographic areas. Projects focused on serving these populations and communities will be given the highest consideration for investments of AmeriCorps VISTA resources.

Vulnerable Youth

At-risk youth from low-income communities deserve the opportunity to succeed and providing them with mentors can place them on a pathway to success. Mentoring is a proven method to help vulnerable youth stay in school, enroll in college, abstain from drugs and alcohol, and pursue leadership positions. AmeriCorps VISTA encourages projects that leverage community volunteers as mentors, build the capacity of mentoring organizations, and replicate successful mentoring models.

Rural Communities

VISTA seeks a balanced portfolio of urban and rural programming. More than 35% of those living in rural counties live in high-poverty areas, and 85% of persistent poverty counties are in rural America. VISTA will continue to invest resources to create economic opportunity in rural communities. VISTA is particularly interested in receiving concept papers from organizations focused on workforce training and apprenticeship programs in rural communities. Projects that support programming in the other priority areas of education and health are also encouraged to apply.



Indian Country

In FY 2018, VISTA aims to increase its footprint in Indian Country. According to the Census Bureau, Native Americans have the highest poverty rates in the country, and reservations are some of the poorest locations in the United States.

Types of VISTA projects in Indian Country that are encouraged in FY 2018 include projects that fall under the Focus Areas of Economic Opportunity, Health, and Education.

Potential VISTA sponsors can be tribal nations, tribal non-profit organizations, or non-profit organizations that are proposing projects specifically targeting Indian Country. Outreach to tribal colleges is encouraged. CNCS State offices should ensure that any sponsor working with a tribe has the support of that tribal government.

Geographic Targets

Additional priority will be given to projects that serve areas of concentrated poverty. This is defined as Census tracts or counties with poverty rates at or above 20 percent. These can be rural or urban areas and the projects can be located in or serve the high-poverty areas. Further consideration should be given to persistent poverty areas – those that have had a poverty level of 20 percent or higher for 30 years or more. Given the generational nature of poverty, every effort should be made to target AmeriCorps VISTA resources to these areas. To assist in targeting these areas, USDA has developed a concentrated [poverty mapping tool](http://rdgdwe.sc.egov.usda.gov/rdpoverty/index.html) (<http://rdgdwe.sc.egov.usda.gov/rdpoverty/index.html>) that provides a way to identify them easily.

This should also guide conversations between CNCS State Offices and existing sponsors about approving additional sites or potential expansion.

V. ASSESSMENT OF PROJECT APPLICATIONS

In choosing which project applications to support, CNCS 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.), 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
- Clearly outline how the VISTA project will establish a recruitment schedule and onboarding process.

VI. CONSIDERATIONS FOR AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBER PLACEMENTS

Pre-Service Orientation

Once an organization's project application is approved, the CNCS State Office will discuss recruitment and training windows with the project director. All AmeriCorps VISTA member candidates, and certain Leader candidates, must attend a Pre-

Service Orientation (PSO). In FY 2018, PSO will be offered in two formats. Some PSOs will be conducted in-person, while others will be offered as virtual trainings.

It is critical that project sponsors meet the recruitment, selection and training deadlines provided by the State Office, regardless of whether the member is trained at a virtual or in-person PSO. A project's inability to recruit and place VISTAs is an important factor in future funding decisions. If you need assistance, contact your State Office and visit the VISTA Campus for technical assistance materials.