

AMERICORPS VISTA ANNUAL PROGRAM GUIDANCE FOR CURRENT AND POTENTIAL PROJECT SPONSORS

Fiscal Year 2019
October 1, 2018 – September 30, 2019



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I. MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

First, I would like to thank our existing AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsors and members for being key partners in the fight against poverty. 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. I would also like to welcome potential project sponsors to VISTA. This year's Program Guidance should help you determine if VISTA resources are a good fit for your organization's anti-poverty programs.

We know there is much work to be done in the fight against poverty. While progress has been made, recent data from the U.S. Census shows nearly 40 million Americans were living in poverty in 2017. We are looking for partners at local, regional, and national levels to increase access to housing and workforce development programs; create and expand opioid prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts; improve educational outcomes for youth; and serve more veterans and military families.

VISTA will continue to address the locally-identified needs of low-income communities. Working with VISTA project sponsors in communities around the country, we will help drive local solutions forward to lift people out of poverty. Together, we can – and do – make a difference.

In service,
Eileen Conoboy, Acting Director
AmeriCorps VISTA

II. INTRODUCTION

The AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance directs the development of new projects and outlines national programming priorities for FY 2019. All new AmeriCorps VISTA projects developed this fiscal year must adhere to this guidance. We anticipate awarding 850 new and continuation applications for an estimated 8,000 full-time VISTA members and Summer Associates.

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. There is not an expectation for current projects to change course to address changes in priorities.

Overview of the 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.

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 reviewing [Is VISTA Right for Your Organization](#) and [VISTA 101: Understanding VISTA](#) for more in-depth information about becoming a sponsor. Interested organizations can then apply by submitting a concept paper and application through the CNCS web-based system, under the FY 2019 AmeriCorps VISTA New Projects Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO).

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. 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 8, 9, or 10 weeks through the summer months. Summer Associates generally perform direct service activities but can be assigned to short-term capacity-building activities as well.

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 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 <https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameriCorps/ameriCorpsvista/start-your-application>.

In FY 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.

III. 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 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.

While VISTAs focus on capacity-building activities, they may, on occasion, perform limited direct service activities when deemed necessary to complete the VISTA's overall capacity-building assignment. These incidental activities may be written into the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) if known at the beginning of the VISTA's term of service. 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 as follows:

- [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](#)

IV. VISTA PROGRAMMING PRIORITIES FOR FY 2019

VISTA is seeking project applications for programming in any of the following four CNCS Focus Areas in FY 2019:

- Economic Opportunity

- Healthy Futures
- Veterans and Military Families
- Education

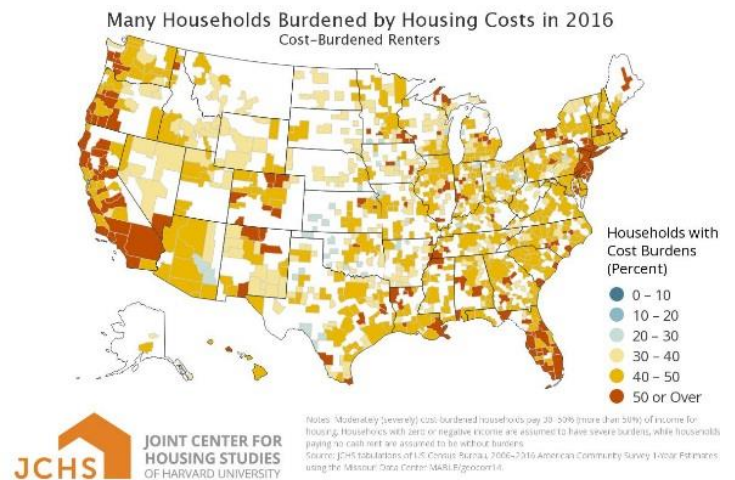
Priority consideration will be given to project applications that fall under the specific programming areas below. These priorities are established annually based on Administration guidance, input received from staff, sector research, and a review of the existing portfolio of AmeriCorps VISTA projects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

Priority areas include:

- **Employment/Workforce Development:** Improving or creating job skills training programs that lead to increased employment, particularly vocational education and apprenticeship programs.
- **Housing:** Transitioning individuals into or helping them remain in safe, affordable housing, with a special focus on veterans. Organizations focused on eviction prevention are encouraged to apply.



Healthy Futures

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

Priority areas include:

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

Opioid Addiction Prevention and Recovery

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. These communities often suffer from a lack of resources and may be disproportionately impacted by the opioid crisis as a result. VISTA programming supports prevention, intervention/treatment, and recovery efforts under the Corporation for National and Community Service's Healthy Futures focus area.

Education

The VISTA program will support projects that enhance 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).

Priority areas include:

- **School readiness** for economically disadvantaged children.
- **K-12 success** in student educational and behavioral outcomes in low-achieving schools.
- **College access** for low-income students.
- **STEM** (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) programs as pathways for underrepresented students.

Veterans and Military Families

AmeriCorps VISTA will support projects that focus on low-income veterans and military families as beneficiaries.

Priority areas include:

- Economic opportunity – employment and veterans' homelessness prevention/reduction.
- Education – school readiness, success in K-12 education and post-secondary employment success.
- Healthy futures – opioid prevention, intervention, and recovery.

FY 2019 Summer Associate Programming

In FY 2019, VISTA Summer Associate programming priorities include:

- Programming to expand the reach of opioid prevention projects, particularly with youth.
- Programming to prevent summer learning loss for students.
- Programming to combat hunger and food insecurity, including USDA Summer Food Service Programs and senior meal programs.

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, 2019 for the organization to be considered a current sponsor. AmeriCorps VISTA strongly encourages 2019 Summer Associate projects from current sponsors that are serving or planning to serve tribal communities.

In addition to the three priority areas above, additional priorities may be identified by the current Administration.

In 2017, through Communities in Schools of Florida, 44 AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associates supported opioid and substance abuse prevention and education during summer camp sessions in high-poverty communities. While the camps were primarily designed to prevent summer learning loss, they were able to incorporate an opioid/substance abuse education and prevention component into the summer youth programming.

V. PRIORITY POPULATIONS AND REGIONS FOR FY 2019

Within the focus areas described in Section IV, AmeriCorps VISTA encourages new project development 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.

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.

Indian Country

In FY 2019, programming in Indian Country remains a priority. 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.

Potential VISTA sponsors can be tribal nations, tribal nonprofit organizations, or nonprofit organizations that are proposing projects specifically targeting Indian Country. Outreach to tribal colleges is encouraged. Potential nonprofit sponsors should ensure that their proposed project has the support of the local tribal government.

Areas of Concentrated Poverty

Additionally, 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. Special 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. To assist in targeting these areas, USDA has developed a [concentrated poverty mapping tool](#) that provides a way to identify them easily.

Poverty should guide conversations between CNCS State Offices and existing sponsors when determining additional sites or potential expansion.

VI. 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 comply with the DVSA, VISTA regulations and VISTA program policies.
- 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.

Current sponsors will also be evaluated on their member recruitment, placement and retention rates, as well as timeliness in complying with reporting deadlines for Progress Reports, Sponsor Verification Reports, and Federal Financial Reports, as applicable. Additional factors will be cost share repayment status, if applicable, and demonstrated achievement of project goals leading towards self-sufficiency.

VII. AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBER RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Once an organization's project application is approved, the CNCS State Office will work with the organization to determine when the project director will participate in the Virtual Supervisor Orientation. Next, the CNCS State Office will discuss recruitment timing with the project director. It is critical that project sponsors be able and ready to recruit AmeriCorps VISTA members to set up a successful VISTA Project.

All new AmeriCorps VISTA member candidates must complete Virtual Member Orientation (VMO) at the start of service. In FY 2019, VISTA will also begin offering In-Service Training opportunities for VISTA members.

For additional assistance, please contact your [State Office](#) or visit the [AmeriCorps VISTA](#) website.