Sponsor Handbook

AmeriCorps VISTA

AmeriCorps

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Overview of the *Sponsor Handbook*

Introduction

The *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 *Member Handbook*, which speaks to member policies, as well as to the 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 AmeriCorps field office. While this *Handbook* covers many topics, AmeriCorps field offices know your project and can offer support and guide you to additional resources.

How to Use the *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 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. 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.

HANDBOOK REVIEW AND MANAGEMENT

The *Handbook* will be updated periodically and 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, Sponsors will be notified in a variety of ways including but not limited to email notification from AmeriCorps headquarters and follow-up communications from AmeriCorps field offices.

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 service as prescribed by AmeriCorps, but who has been not been approved by AmeriCorps to be a candidate.

The ***application for VISTA service*** refers to the materials used by AmeriCorps to capture information on an individual's eligibility and suitability for service. This application captures the individual's personal information, background, education and employment history, skills and interests, references, and more.

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

AmeriCorps, refers to the federal agency established pursuant to section 191 of the National and Community Service Act of 1990, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 12651.

AmeriCorps ***field offices*** are the branches of AmeriCorps that administer the VISTA, State and National, and AmeriCorps Seniors programs. Each AmeriCorps field office is led by a Regional Administrator and a Deputy Regional Administrator. Senior Portfolio Managers and Portfolio Managers are responsible for providing technical assistance to project sponsors.

Cost share refers to the reimbursement from an entity, such as a sponsor, to AmeriCorps for part or all of the expenses associated with the operation of a VISTA project, such as the living allowance costs for one or more members, 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*** is an AmeriCorps member in the VISTA program who serves at a project in a prescribed leadership capacity. A leader may be a former AmeriCorps member or Peace Corps volunteer who demonstrated to AmeriCorps exemplary skills and leadership in community service. Leaders serve different functions depending on the needs of local projects, including recruiting and coordinating members, preparing in-service trainings, identifying new funding sources, and serving as liaisons between the community and AmeriCorps.

A ***Memorandum of Agreement*** is a written agreement between AmeriCorps 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 service, administered by a federal official, and 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 member activities operated and overseen by, and the responsibility of, a sponsor to realize the goals of Title I of the DVSA.

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

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

The ***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 project site means a location where 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*** or ***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 member who is enrolled in the AmeriCorps VISTA program for full-time service for a period of at least eight weeks and a maximum of 10 weeks between May 1 and September 15. A summer associate 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*** 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 members.

The **member** refers to an individual enrolled full-time for service in the AmeriCorps VISTA program, as authorized under Title I of the DVSA.

The ***VISTA program*** is the acronym for the Federal government program named Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) 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 service activities performed by a member while enrolled in the VISTA program.

Sharing Feedback

Suggestions for the *Handbook* 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, email vista@cns.gov and copy your corresponding AmeriCorps field office on the email.

Version Control and Change Log

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

Version	Date Issued	Handbook Section	Description
2021.1	June, 2021	Universal	Editing to reflect agency name change from Corporation for National and Community Service to AmeriCorps and to reflect agency structural changes, including the shift to field (region offices) and associated staff positions and duties. Editing to reflect new branding guidance that refers to members as opposed to VISTAs or VISTA members. Editing to reflect new branding guidance that refers to sponsors and

			supervisors as opposed to VISTA sponsors and VISTA supervisors.
2021.1	June, 2021	Letter from the Director	Removed introductory letter to further streamline.
2021.1	June, 2021	About AmeriCorps – Who's Who in the VISTA Network	Removed the Field Financial Management Center section as this AmeriCorps Unit no longer exists. Portfolio Managers now fill the Grant Officer role. Added Office of Monitoring.
2021.1	June, 2021	Managing a VISTA Project - Reporting	Updated to reflect shift from 4 to 2 Project Progress Reports for newly awarded projects.
2021.1	June, 2021	Managing a VISTA Project – Marketing, Outreach, and Recruitment	Updated to reflect agency wide branding changes.
2021.1	June, 2021	Preparing for New VISTA Members – Recruitment, Virtual Member Orientation	Removed specific references to FBI fingerprint checks and replaced with requirement to submit necessary information for criminal history checks.
2021.1	June, 2021	Preparing for New VISTA Members – Virtual Member Orientation	Updated to reflect new online oath process. Sponsor no longer needs to supply paper oath form to member.
2021.1	June, 2021	Preparing for New VISTA Members – Supervisor Responsibilities	Updated to reflect new processes. Sponsor no longer needs to supply member with fingerprint cards or paper oath form and, instead, needs to ensure member completes on-line oath and submits required criminal history check information.
2021.1	June, 2021	Preparing for New VISTA Members – Planning for On-Site Orientation	Removed references to accredited VISTA online courses as these are no longer offered.

		and Training (OSOT)	
2021.1	June, 2021	Supporting and Supervising VISTA Members – Ongoing Training	Removed references to accredited VISTA online courses as these are no longer offered.
2021.1	June, 2021	Supporting and Supervising VISTA Members – Prohibition on Nepotism	Language updated to reflect new language found in Memorandum of Agreement/new agency structure.
2021.1	June, 2021	Supporting and Supervising VISTA Members - Benefits	Removed references to Affordable Care Act mandate and previous health benefit enrollment deadline.
2021.1	June, 2021	Supporting and Supervising VISTA Members – Outside Employment	Removed requirement for sponsors to send outside employment request forms to AmeriCorps staff. Sponsors are responsible for maintaining documentation.
2021.1	June, 2021	Supporting and Supervising VISTA Members - Teleservice	Updated to reflect policy changes. Members may now begin teleserving after one month of service and may teleserve up to two days per week. Forms no longer need to be submitted to AmeriCorps staff. Sponsors are responsible for maintaining documentation.
2021.1	June, 2021	Supporting and Supervising VISTA Members – Member Policies	Sponsors with program grants should not provide members with fingerprint subsidy as members are no longer required to submit fingerprints.
2021.1	June, 2021	Supporting and Supervising VISTA Members – Member Policies	Teleservice forms no longer need to be submitted to AmeriCorps staff. Sponsors are responsible for maintaining documentation
2021.1	June, 2021	Supporting and Supervising VISTA Members – Member Policies	Updated to direct sponsors/members to contact the VMSU for support with emergency travel and expenses.

2018.1	November, 2018	N/A	First version VISTA Sponsor Handbook (née VISTA Supervisor Manual)

About AmeriCorps

About AmeriCorps

In 1993, AmeriCorps 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. AmeriCorps is the operating name for the Corporation for National and Community Service.

AmeriCorps 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, AmeriCorps achieves its mission of improving lives, strengthening communities and fortifying the civic health of our nation.

At its inception, AmeriCorps 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
- AmeriCorps Seniors, which incorporated the Foster Grandparent, Senior Companion, and RSVP programs
- Learn and Serve America, formerly known as Serve America[1]

AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers 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.

AmeriCorps 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 AmeriCorps, see the National Service Timeline. For a list of acronyms related to national service, see the Acronyms section.

AMERICORPS STRATEGIC PLAN

AmeriCorps' 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.

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

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[2]

AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) (www.americorps.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 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 members have served in all 50 states and U.S. Territories. AmeriCorps members in VISTA 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 members in VISTA 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."*

[2] 45 C.F.R. §2556.1 (2018).

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

In 1994, VISTA became a program of AmeriCorps, founded by President Bill Clinton. In 2009, The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009 was signed and expanded the national service programs administered by AmeriCorps.

The VISTA program has been addressing the needs of impoverished communities for more than 50 years.[3] AmeriCorps VISTA builds the capacity of not only communities but also of the members who serve. It provides the opportunity to bring local and national resources to bear on local issues, making 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 of 1973, as amended, (DVSA), 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 (now known as AmeriCorps), 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 it did codify project sustainability as a key objective of the program.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

AmeriCorps 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, AmeriCorps cannot operate the program in any way that violates these parameters. A current copy of the DVSA is available here.

[3] Click here to review a timeline that celebrates 50 years of VISTA service.

REGULATIONS[4,5]

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 AmeriCorps, 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 the program implements and interprets its statute, the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended[6] (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 the VISTA program 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 the VISTA program issues program guidance to current and potential project sponsors and AmeriCorps field offices. This guidance provides directions about programming priorities and national initiatives. Current program guidance is available here.

ABOUT VISTA PROJECTS

Nonprofit organizations, Native American tribes, and state, city, and local government agencies are eligible to apply to be 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 members, and provide

[4] 45 C.F.R. §2556.3 (2018).
[5] 45 C.F.R. §2556.7 (2018).
[6] The Domestic Volunteer Service Act

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 project must focus on empowering individuals to emerge from poverty, not simply making poverty more tolerable. Projects should focus on long-term solutions to poverty rather than short-term services.

Sustainable Solutions — AmeriCorps members in the VISTA program 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 members and have the project continue without them.

Community Empowerment — Prospective and current 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 —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. 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.

WHO'S WHO IN THE VISTA NETWORK

AT AMERICORPS

AmeriCorps has a headquarters office in Washington, D.C., and eight regional field offices throughout the country. The AmeriCorps field offices administer the AmeriCorps programs, both State and National and VISTA, the AmeriCorps Seniors program, and other AmeriCorps initiatives.

VISTA HEADQUARTERS

AmeriCorps Headquarters (HQ), in consultation with the AmeriCorps field offices and other AmeriCorps 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 resources among AmeriCorps Regional Offices
- Sets 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 members, leaders, and sponsors
- Administers support services, such as health care, childcare, 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 members and sponsors
- Develops and monitors the budget

VISTA Member Support Unit

The VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU) is part of AmeriCorps HQ but, due to their special functions that support members serving in the AmeriCorps VISTA program, the VMSU merits additional explanation. The VMSU provides a full array of administrative support to 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 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 members' questions during their year of service
- Processing early terminations, requests for extensions and reenrollments, and close of service
- Assisting members with using the My AmeriCorps portal

Members serving in the AmeriCorps VISTA program 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:

AmeriCorps VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU)
250 E Street SW
Washington, DC 20525

AmeriCorps Field Office

Every state has a designated AmeriCorps field office to help develop and manage VISTA projects. The roles of an AmeriCorps field office include outreach, project development, and technical assistance. Each AmeriCorps field office is led by a Regional Administrator (RA) and a Deputy Regional Administrator (DRA). The office also includes Senior Portfolio Managers (SPMs) and Portfolio Managers (PMs). Major duties of AmeriCorps field staff are to:

- Manage a portfolio of AmeriCorps (VISTA and State and National) and AmeriCorps Seniors 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 applications consistent with AmeriCorps guidance
- Assure portfolio records are well organized and comply with office requirements
- Continually review and evaluate project operations through electronic progress report review and feedback
- Respond to technical assistance requests from potential sponsoring organizations that wish to develop proposals for AmeriCorps 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 applicants for the VISTA program
- Approve or disapprove an organization's concept paper and application
- Arrange for sponsor training opportunities
- Approve or disapprove a sponsor's selection of an applicant to serve in the VISTA program
- Enroll candidates in VISTA Member Orientation (VMO)
- Support members and sponsors during project implementation with in-service training and technical assistance
- Review progress reports
- Close out projects
- Work with elected officials
- Conduct community outreach

Office of Monitoring

Office of Monitoring staff may conduct on site or off-site compliance monitoring reviews of your project. The purpose of the Office of Monitoring is to ensure the compliance of AmeriCorps award recipients, including Sponsors, in order to:

- Increase their impact
- Strengthen their capacity to reduce risks
- Promote a holistic approach to continuous improvement

Office of National Service Trust

Frequently referred to as the Trust, the Office of the National Service Trust within AmeriCorps 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 alumni who successfully completed their service (as well as providing partial Education Awards to those who are approved for a compelling early exit from service)
- Helping alumni use their earned Education Awards and making appropriate payments to schools and loan holders as directed by alumni (after the alumni initiates and submits the Education Award Payment request form in my.americorps.gov)
- Helping currently serving members obtain forbearances on the repayment of their qualified student loans (after the member initiates and submits the Loan Forbearance request form in my.americorps.gov) and making appropriate payments for interest that accrued while the members were serving (after the alumni initiates and submits the Interest Accrual Payment request form in my.americorps.gov)
- Managing the investments of the Trust

Members, alumni, sponsors, and AmeriCorps field offices can contact the Trust via the National Service Hotline.

AMERICORPS HOTLINE

Frequently referred to as the Hotline, this service is operated via an AmeriCorps contract.
The AmeriCorps Hotline is a service that provides general 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. Sponsors may call the Hotline with questions regarding eGrants technical issues, password assistance, and for general assistance. Members may contact the Hotline with questions including, but not limited to, the following topics: My AmeriCorps portal, benefits, living allowance, required forms, and Education Awards.

As stated earlier, members in the AmeriCorps VISTA program 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

- Online web form: https://questions.americorps.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 the VISTA program, the concept of community is meant to designate the residents of a low-income area. The central idea behind the VISTA program 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 service (as appropriate)

SPONSORS[7,8]

A member in the VISTA program 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 member.

The sponsor:

- Develops a project plan that incorporates the members 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

[7] 45 C.F.R. §2556.100 (2018).
[8] 45 C.F.R. §2556.105 (2018).

- Leverages community resources
- Expands the capacity of the community and its own organization to sustain the project when the members finish their terms of service
- Recruits members locally or nationwide
- Prepares a VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) for each member
- Supports the members as they work to expand the organization's capacity to sustain the project
- Supervises, trains, and provides administrative support to the members
- 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 AmeriCorps the 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[9] and 2205[10], 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 AmeriCorps grant funding
- Pay the member living allowance, end-of-service cash stipend (but not the Education Award) and other miscellaneous costs to members 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 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 project. Project directors might also be called 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

[9] 2 C.F.R. Part 200 (2018).
[10] 2 C.F.R. Part 2205 (2018).

Supervisors directly supervise a member and are responsible for the day-to-day oversight of 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 regarding project management. Sponsors are responsible for ensuring all supervisors are trained.

MEMBER

AmeriCorps members, including leaders, serving in the VISTA program vary in age and hail from a range of diverse backgrounds and experiences. Each 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 project's capacity to ensure sustainability once resources are withdrawn.

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

Both members who serve a yearlong term of service and 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, 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 in the VISTA program should apply here.

Each year, the VISTA program supports approximately 8,000 full-time members and summer associates who will serve with approximately 850 sponsors. They leverage human, financial, and material resources to develop sustainable solutions to problems in low-income communities across the country.

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

- 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 service
- Fulfill the VAD activities
- Follow the rules and guidelines in the *Member Handbook*

LEADERS [11]

[11] 45 C.F.R. §§ 2556.300-365 (2018).

Leaders have successfully completed at least one term of full-time AmeriCorps service with VISTA (365 days), NCCC (1,700 hours), or State and National (1,700 hours), 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 AmeriCorps field office. Leaders are assigned to some larger projects or regions to assist sponsors and members in achieving project objectives and developing new project activities and sources of community support. Leaders coordinate, train, and guide members to increase the impact of the project.

SUMMER ASSOCIATES[12,13]

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 of May through August. Unlike members who serve year-round, summer associates are not limited in their ability to perform direct service activities. Full year members may serve as mentors and coordinators for the summer associates but not as supervisors. 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 programming, should result in:

- Furthering one or more of the AmeriCorps 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

[12] 45 C.F.R. §2556.500 (2018).
[13] 45 C.F.R. §2556.505 (2018).

Managing a Project

Introduction

This chapter focuses on sponsor project management responsibilities. Project directors are designated by an organization and are responsible for managing 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 AmeriCorps and its VISTA program.

Overview of Core Sponsor Responsibilities

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

The following list summarizes some core responsibilities of 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 members in the project application
  - In consultation with and involving 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 orientation and training offered by AmeriCorps
- Ensure each member has a direct supervisor and that all supervisors are trained with support from the AmeriCorps field office
- In cases where the sponsor assigns 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)
  - Future Plans Form (FPF) Part B – for members exiting service
  - 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 AmeriCorps for biweekly payments to all cost share members for their living allowances
- Recruit and retain high-quality members for service
- Recognize the impact of members in your community and acknowledge AmeriCorps as a funder

MEMBER EXPERIENCE

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

- Prepare a VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) for each position that aligns with the goals described in the project application and that contains a reasonable amount of activities expected to be accomplished in a one-year term of service
- Recruit, screen, and interview applicants and make candidate recommendations to the AmeriCorps field office in advance of VMOs
- Regularly communicate with the applicant after selecting the applicant for service and prior to the individual's first day of service to keep them engaged and motivated to serve with your project (minimizes risk of dropping out due to poor or lack of communication)
- Provide an in-depth On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT) for all incoming members at the beginning of their service
- Supervise and support all assigned AmeriCorps members on a day-to-day basis and ensure that subrecipient organizations provide day-to-day supervision, guidance, and support
- Inform the assigned AmeriCorps Region Portfolio Manager of any potential member issues (attendance, performance, communication, etc.) so that they may be addressed early to ensure successful service and project completions and so that AmeriCorps can provide support
- Ensure the safety of all assigned members during the performance of their assigned duties, and notify your AmeriCorps field office promptly of any serious injury, harassment, and/or discrimination

EXECUTE AS APPROVED OR AMEND

Your approved project application is available in eGrants for review any time. This document captures the full scope of the project, including sites, member assignments, and performance measures. The sponsor must execute the application as approved and consult the AmeriCorps field office to amend the application.

When it is approved and a project is awarded, the project application becomes part of the agreement between AmeriCorps 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 AmeriCorps field 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 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, Service Opportunity Listings (SOLs), VISTA Assignment Descriptions (VADs), and On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT) plans. These materials are submitted to and approved by the AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps field 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 Members for more information on SOLs, VADs, and OSOT plans.

MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT

A Memorandum of Agreement (MA) between the sponsor and AmeriCorps is electronically "signed" by the Senior Portfolio Manager 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 in eGrants. Sites are subject to the terms of the MA through their Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the sponsor.

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

In cases where the sponsor assigns members to subrecipient organizations, the sponsor enters into a MOU with each subrecipient that is a separate legal entity. In this MOU, the sponsor outlines the roles, responsibilities, and agreement for the subrecipient along with potential procedures for working together with the sponsor.

AmeriCorps Support and Oversight

The AmeriCorps field office helps develop and manage VISTA projects. They support your supervision of members and may intervene in emergencies or difficult situations. Oversight is conducted through reviewing of reports, phone calls, emails, and site visits.

TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

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

- eGrants
- Recruitment
- Access to resources and trainings
- Reporting
- Adjusting project plans, VADs, and OSOT plans

SITE VISITS

Site visits, conducted by the AmeriCorps field 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; providing technical assistance and guidance as needed; and assisting with project promotion.

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

- Sponsors and supervisors and their roles
  - Member recruitment
  - Member assignment
  - OSOT
  - In-Service Training
  - Career development assistance for members
  - Administration, including provision of supervision, transportation, and other support
  - Assessment of need for AmeriCorps 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 member is gone

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND COMPLIANCE MONITORING

As a federal agency, AmeriCorps has a responsibility and a requirement to ensure that federal assistance is properly managed and expended in accordance with federal statutes, regulations, and guidance.

AmeriCorps has an obligation to ensure that taxpayer money is used properly and efficiently.

Your AmeriCorps field 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 project application
- 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

Additionally, the AmeriCorps Office of Monitoring conducts on-site and remote compliance visits. During compliance visits, AmeriCorps staff may interview project staff and members and review project materials and documentation. This may also include a fiscal review 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 AmeriCorps to review applications, award grants, and manage those grants and projects efficiently and effectively.

eGrants is AmeriCorps' 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 member accounts, including FPFs
- Access cost share invoices and statements
- Completion and submission 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 with pop-up blockers 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 projects 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 AmeriCorps field office directly. Additionally, project staff who have left the sponsoring organization or are no longer supporting the project should have their eGrants account deactivated.

LEADERS & EGRANTS ACCOUNTS

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 leader is able to edit SOLs, search for and contact applicants, 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, 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 AmeriCorps Hotline. You may contact your AmeriCorps field office for questions regarding content that is entered in eGrants.

My AmeriCorps Portal

My AmeriCorps Portal is an online system, accessed through eGrants by sponsors, designed to help manage the AmeriCorps experience online and in one place. Applicants, candidates, and members access it through my.americorps.gov, and sponsors access it through eGrants. 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 for service (pending review by the AmeriCorps field office)

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 the project is on track to achieve its goals. Reporting is one-way AmeriCorps monitors VISTA projects.

SPONSOR VERIFICATION FORM (SVF)

Biweekly verification of actively serving 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 members 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 members remained active during the previous pay period and which members left service during the previous pay period. (This reporting requirement does not replace the requirement of the Sponsor to notify their AmeriCorps field office immediately regarding the departure [e.g., early removal or termination, AWOL] of any of its members.) The sponsor must certify the SVF even if no members left during the pay period covered by the form. Regular submission of this form by supervisors is critical to avoid overpayments to members who have terminated service early or have already completed their term of service. A sponsor who fails to timely notify AmeriCorps that a member has ended service may be responsible for any overpayments made to that member as a result. If the sponsor who is responsible for submitting the SVF will be out of the office and unable to submit, they must designate this responsibility to another staff member (not a volunteer, not a member, not a leader).

Instructions and a schedule for the SVFs can be accessed in the sponsor resources section of the AmeriCorps website.

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 members, and technical assistance needs. AmeriCorps staff use the PPR to assess progress and to determine what feedback, technical assistance or other interventions are needed.

The PPR helps sponsors and AmeriCorps staff 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 AmeriCorps departments, such as the Office of Government Relations and the Office of External Affairs.

TIMING

Sponsors are required to submit PPRs semiannually, unless otherwise specified by the AmeriCorps field office.

Generally, reports are due 30 days after the end of a reporting period. Sponsors will complete PPRs regardless of whether a member was serving during that reporting period. Reports are submitted and reviewed in eGrants, and the reporting periods and due dates for each report are viewable there.

DATA COLLECTION

To support the submission of quality data, all sponsors should create 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 AmeriCorps National Performance Measure are available here.

Multi-site and intermediary projects are especially affected by the need to set up an information collection process to collect data from sites. The Working with Sub-Sites learning path on the VISTA Campus provides technical assistance resources to assist multi-site projects with reporting.

Throughout project implementation, sponsors use their own processes to collect data that will be reported on in 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 members, community members and project staff.

FEEDBACK

The AmeriCorps field office reviews the submitted report and then provides 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, as well as a timeframe for completion of outstanding items.

INSTRUCTIONS

Instructions for the PPR can be accessed in the sponsor resources section of the AmeriCorps website.

Members may inform the completion of the report by providing data to their supervisor and the sponsoring organization. They may also review the completed report. However, they should not be required to complete or submit the actual report. This is the responsibility of a staff member at the project sponsoring organization.

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 AmeriCorps fiscal year, regardless of the individual program year. Through the VPRS, sponsors submit specific performance data elements used by AmeriCorps.

All sponsors are required to submit the VPRS once per year by the deadline provided by the AmeriCorps field office. 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 asked, directed, or required to complete or submit the actual report. This is the responsibility of a staff member at the project sponsoring organization.

Instructions for the VPRS can be accessed in the sponsor resources section of the AmeriCorps website.

Informal Communication

Your AmeriCorps field office wants to hear regularly about the accomplishments of your members and the work of your project in the community.

SHARING ACTIVITIES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

While the AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps field office any time to share breaking news about major events, high profile visits, new initiatives, grants and donations, key collaborations, and significant benchmarks.

HOW AMERICORPS FIELD OFFICES SHARE INFORMATION

The AmeriCorps field offices share information highlighting projects in the state and region with other AmeriCorps offices and will include accomplishment information you provide in the reports. AmeriCorps 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 projects are generally ready for a successful transition away from VISTA support after about three to five years. 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 AmeriCorps for VISTA support to continue into subsequent years.

The process for a sponsor to attain continuation begins four months (120 days) prior to the end of the current project year. At this time the AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps field office reviews the application for adherence to project guidelines and that field office’s annual plan for project development.

CRITERIA FOR APPROVAL

The AmeriCorps field 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 members to ensure the project is making substantial progress in meeting goals and objectives
- Level of recruitment and retention of members
- Ability to meet cost-share commitments

The AmeriCorps field office uses the following criteria in initial application approval and 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 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 members 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 members to achieve the project mission, and has an acceptable process in place to recommend to AmeriCorps the selection of members who have the requisite skills and qualifications to meet established goals and objectives
- Assess whether, from the application, the 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 AmeriCorps office sign a new MA via eGrants for the new project period.

INSTRUCTIONS AND DOCUMENTS

Click here to review the project application materials and instructions. Please pay special attention to the Documents section because there are some documents you will need to submit every year 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 AMERICORPS FIELD OFFICE

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

- For intermediary projects, the intermediary sponsor agrees to cost-share a significant portion of the members
- 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 project, and more time is needed to expand anti-poverty capacity
- The extension would not create or increase a dependency on 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 member activities. In this case, contact your AmeriCorps field office to discuss the proposed changes. Once the AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps field 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 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 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 AmeriCorps field 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 sponsors is available in the Member Recruitment learning path for sponsors on the VISTA Campus. Materials include print and digital resources from posters and fact sheets to impact graphics. Customizable flyers are available, as well as free recruitment gear such as pens, bumper stickers, and buttons for outreach purposes.

The AmeriCorps Newsroom provides brand assets including logos, photos, and video PSAs. Additional resources include fact sheets and marketing and social media materials.

The AmeriCorps Brand Guidelines provides the requirements for using the AmeriCorps brand. Sponsors are responsible for securing permission from their members to use their photos, images, words, voice, or other likeness for marketing or outreach purposes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF VISTA AND AMERICORPS

Community members and legislators are interested in the impact of federal dollars in their areas, and sponsors are responsible for acknowledging AmeriCorps VISTA and AmeriCorps as financial supporters of their organizations. When recognizing the good work of members, it is critical to identify them as such and acknowledge AmeriCorps as a funder. This includes referencing AmeriCorps on the sponsor's website, on business cards for 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. 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 branding:

- Prominently display the standard AmeriCorps 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 members
- Display branded signs or posters at all sites where members are serving, especially those which elected officials or private-sector partners visit
- Include the AmeriCorps logo on gear that you create for your organization’s members, such as business cards and email signatures

SHARING THE MEMBER STORIES

We encourage you and your organization to share stories about your members’ experiences. The best way to promote the member experience is through the words and narratives of our members and alums. There are many ways you can support 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 members and alums:

- Share what led you to become a 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 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 an 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 is fundamental, basic, essential, and required. Sponsors are required to verify that all digital properties, media materials, and other relevant items reflect their association with AmeriCorps. 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

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

REASONS TO BRAND AMERICORPS

There are many reasons to brand AmeriCorps:

- Sustainability: Affiliating with AmeriCorps 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 positions in VISTA requires continual promotion of opportunities
- Lifelong Service: Building a successful alumni movement will not be possible unless members understand how they are part of the AmeriCorps national service family

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

AmeriCorps branding resources are available to all AmeriCorps grantees on our website. Camera-ready AmeriCorps logos and other branded materials are downloadable here.

Go to the AmeriCorps Ordering System to order national service materials. Send an email to VISTAOutreach@cns.gov with any questions. Sponsors are responsible for securing permission from their 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

The AmeriCorps website has the AmeriCorps logo that you must 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 AmeriCorps.

Website Reference

Prominently display your organization's connection to AmeriCorps on your website. Use the AmeriCorps logo, link to our 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 members. All press releases should directly reference AmeriCorps. 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 members receive a branded polo and lapel pins. Site signs and additional materials are available at no cost through the AmeriCorps publications site. You can also order a variety of branded shirts 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, @AmeriCorps
- Facebook: Facebook.com/AmeriCorpsVISTA, Facebook.com/AmeriCorps
- Instagram: @AmeriCorps
- YouTube: youtube.com/nationalservice
- Snapchat: nationalservice

More social media resources are available in the Newsroom.

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 members and leaders serving in their official blue-branded polo shirts. Sponsors are responsible for securing permission from their members to use their photos, images, words, voice, or other likeness for marketing or outreach purposes.

Co-Branding

Your organization does great work! AmeriCorps 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 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 Members

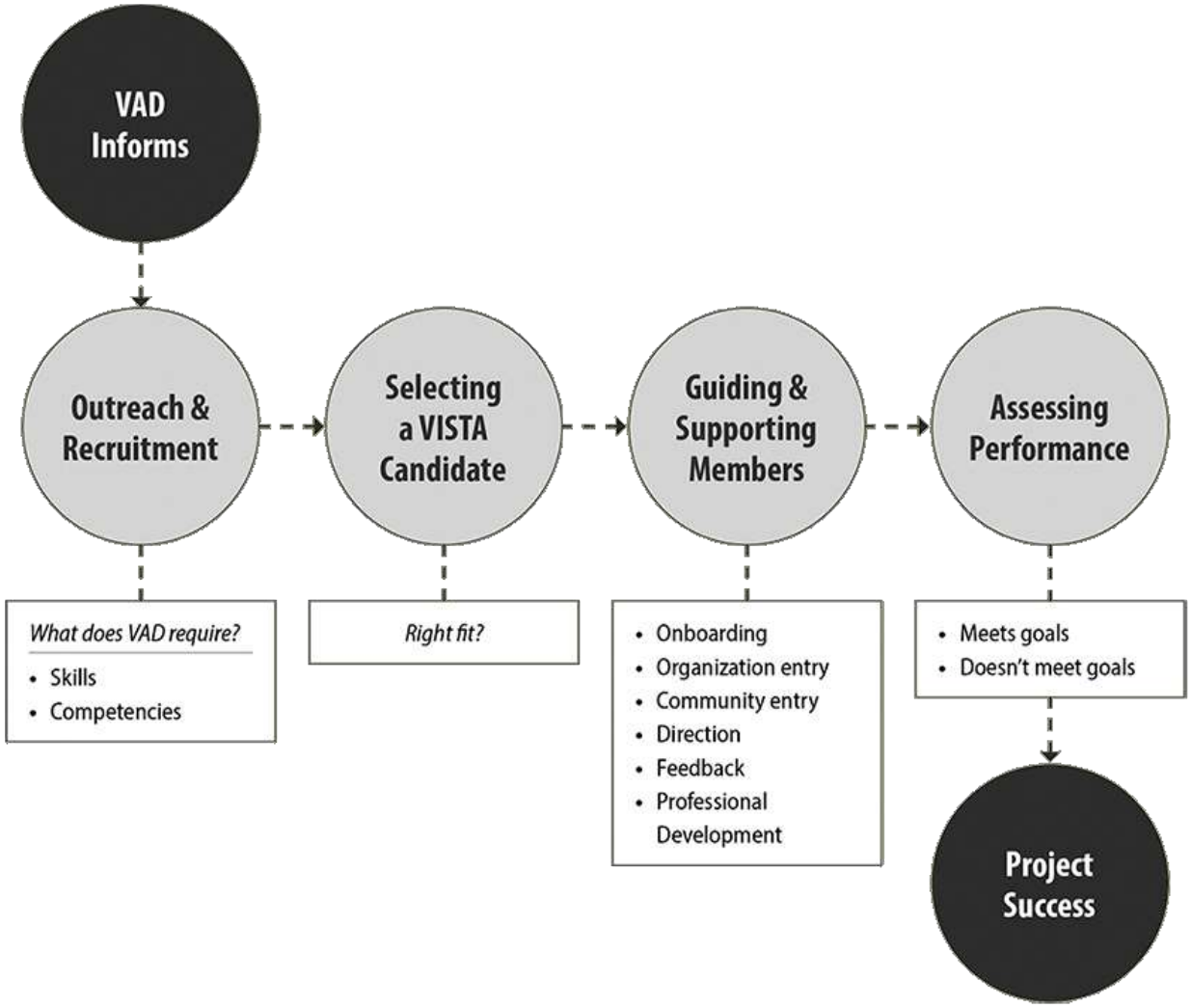
Introduction

Once an organization's project application is approved, the AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps field office. A sponsor's inability to recruit and place members 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)

Sponsors are required to fill out a VAD form for each member who serves on a VISTA project. A VAD explains a project position and role assigned to a member and includes goals, objectives, and activities a member is expected to complete in order to satisfy project needs. Essentially, it is the 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 AmeriCorps field office. All members must have their own individual VAD.

VADs are used during the recruitment process, to guide and support your members 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 member become apparent. Significant changes should be discussed with, and approved by, your contact at the AmeriCorps field office.



FUNCTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS/PURPOSE

The VAD provides a broad outline of what a member will work on during their year of service. Similar to a position description, it is valuable in recruiting members and as the basis of a detailed work plan by breaking down objectives identified in the 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 members serving with your project.

The VAD will also be used to orient the member to the project, organization, and community. The VAD can also be used to identify areas for skill development and to assess how well the member 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 "AmeriCorps VISTA" included) 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 member, leader, or summer associate. Having a specific, descriptive title is key to ensuring the correct VAD is assigned to each member and uploaded to each member's Portal account.

PROJECT DETAILS

Each VAD contains the sponsor name, project name, site name, and focus area(s). When a VAD is created, the dates of the current MA are used as the project period; when a 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 member position). This is a good jumping-off point in describing the assignment to the member. The statement provides context for how the project addresses poverty and how the member activities will build capacity. The project goal must:

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

OBJECTIVES

Articulate what the member will achieve throughout the assignment in order to reach the project's goal. Include multiple objectives that link the overall project goal and the member's activities. Use active verbs. Include a performance period (what month of service you want the 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 members 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 member 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 member.

REVISING VADS

Sometimes during a member's term of service, it becomes apparent that a VAD needs to be revised. This may be because a member'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 member and AmeriCorps field office, to make official changes in eGrants. After submitting a revised VAD in eGrants, the AmeriCorps field 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

AmeriCorps VISTA is committed to recruiting diverse members. It is our goal to ensure AmeriCorps members serving in VISTA represent the diversity of America and no American misses out on their opportunity to transform their life through service. We are looking to sponsors to model Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion best practices when recruiting members for their projects.

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

STAGES OF 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 AmeriCorps field office, the appropriate VISTA Member Orientation (VMO), which will inform the member's start date and term of service
2. **Market** – Advertise and publicize the open position(s)
3. **Screen** – Review member 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 AmeriCorps field office for approval through the Sponsor Recommendation/Rejection tab in the applicant's eGrants application

6. **Engage** – Stay in contact with your candidate to help build their excitement for service until they arrive

GETTING READY FOR RECRUITMENT

It can take a lot of time and energy to find the right candidate for your member position, so it is important to start recruitment planning early and to partner with your AmeriCorps field office throughout the process to determine when the recruitment process should start. After you have coordinated with your AmeriCorps field 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. Refer to the Member Recruitment learning path on the VISTA Campus for planning tips and tools.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Project directors, and sometimes supervisors, are responsible for recruiting qualified and committed members and/or leaders to fill the position(s) at their projects. Supervisors should check with their project director for specifics about how recruitment of members and/or 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 AmeriCorps field office for assistance.

The AmeriCorps field 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 member. Final approval and selection authorities remain with the AmeriCorps field office.

ELEMENTS OF A RECRUITMENT PLAN

PLAN

The first steps for recruitment are to:

1) Identify which vacant positions you will recruit for
2) Work with your AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps 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 member will take on, the benefits being offered, who to contact with questions, and the application deadline. Once you have crafted your SOL, the AmeriCorps field office will review and either approve the listing or make recommendations for edits. The listing will go live (become visible and accessible to the public on my.americorps.gov) only after the AmeriCorps field 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 member, it is a best practice to tailor your marketing plan 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.

To reach a wide range of candidates, consider advertising with higher education institutions and professional and social organizations representing diverse and underrepresented populations.

Use the resources in the Member Recruitment learning path for sponsors on the Campus for developing your marketing plan. It may also be helpful to utilize your organization's marketing or human resources team for additional ideas and support.

When marketing your positions, 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 AmeriCorps, your sponsor should have additional screening standards specific to the position. You should review applications for a complete motivational statement, related job and community service experience, skills and education related or transferable to

the position, and two completed professional references recommending the applicant for service. Refer to the Member Recruitment learning path on the VISTA Campus for a good resource on selecting members.

Screen for Eligibility

Applicants must meet the following minimum standards of eligibility.

- Be at least 18 years old upon entering service. 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 undergo a criminal history check.
- Be in a position to offer full-time service for one year (365 days) 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

AmeriCorps 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 AmeriCorps field office of a potential applicant's disclosed criminal history early. The AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps field 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 member 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 a 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 an AmeriCorps member. Additionally, AmeriCorps separately assesses other criminal history-related factors in determining whether the 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 video, 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.

Sponsors should have a list of interview questions established beforehand so that you can adequately assess an applicant's fit for the position and ensure that all candidates are being asked the same questions. Sample questions are available 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, capacity-building service
- They are receiving a living allowance instead of a salary
- The amount of their living allowance
- That AmeriCorps 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 AmeriCorps field 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 service, and the individual who is chosen for the position will undergo a National Sex Offender Public Website check prior to approval and a criminal history 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 AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps field office as soon as the information is disclosed.

RECOMMENDING SELECTION

Once you have conducted all your interviews and reference checks, you will hopefully have identified an applicant you would like to recommend that AmeriCorps select for service. After you have verbally advised the applicant that you are recommending them to AmeriCorps for selection, let the applicant know the AmeriCorps field office needs to provide final approval, and after 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 the VISTA program.

The AmeriCorps field office then reviews the candidate's application. The AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps field 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 the VISTA program and

the project. Some AmeriCorps field offices may conduct additional interviews with a candidate, especially those applying to a leader position.

Finally, the AmeriCorps field office will make sure the applicant's Social Security Number (SSN) 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 an AmeriCorps field office has made the determination to approve the applicant selection, they will officially approve the applicant as a candidate for service, enroll them in VMO, and set their service term start and end dates.

ENGAGE

From the interview and selection until the service start date can be a few weeks or months. It is important to keep your candidates engaged in the time between selection and service, so they don't lose interest or think that you have lost interest.

Here are a few ideas to stay connected to your candidate(s); there may be many more depending on your community and project:

- Invite them to meet the staff they will be serving with, either in person or in a video meeting.
- Invite them to attend organizational events, meetings, or gatherings if they live in the area.
- Send a weekly email communication about different aspects of your organization –background reading, news articles, or stories about the VISTA project.
- Connect them with currently serving members or recent alumni who live in the area.
- Encourage them to join your social media sites.
- Check in on a weekly basis via email or over the phone, making sure that onboarding forms and pre-service coursework are completed on time.

For those who are relocating to serve:

- Assist them with finding housing and other services in your community.
- Invite them to join a meeting by phone so they can get familiar with the team and its norms. Send a fun group photo of the staff ahead of the meeting so that your member can place names with faces.
- Send an email outlining useful information about your city or town, like info on various neighborhoods, transportation options, how to register a car, and other practical matters.

- Send a welcome package via mail or email from the local chamber of commerce or visitors bureau. Consider including information on attractions, restaurants, shops in the surrounding area.

The candidate will be required to complete tasks prior to starting service, and it will be important to maintain communication to provide support to the candidates and ensure the tasks are completed on time. Here are some of those tasks to be completed once the AmeriCorps Regional Office approves his or her selection:

- Complete onboarding forms (such as direct deposit) in My AmeriCorps.
- Create a VISTA Campus login and complete the online Pre-Service Coursework there.
- Certify acceptance of the VISTA Terms and Conditions and Civil Rights and Responsibilities.

VISTA Member Orientation (VMO)

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

To facilitate effective communication about the VMO requirements and expectations with sponsors and supervisors, the AmeriCorps field office will forward details to supervisors about each VMO in which they have candidates enrolled.

MEMBER EXPERIENCE

THE CURRICULUM

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

REQUIREMENTS FOR SUCCESS

In order to participate successfully, a person (candidate or member) must have reliable access to the internet and audio (VOIP, landline telephone, 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 fully participating in

webinars. The syllabus requires a space where a participant can have a reliable and uninterrupted network connection, follow on screen, easily hear the audio and respond to activities, and ask questions. Thus, each VMO attendee should have access to an individual laptop or computer workstation with reliable internet access and speakers and a microphone (or a phone) in a quiet area.

TRAINING OBJECTIVES

The VISTA Training Unit, the AmeriCorps field offices, project directors, and supervisors work together to implement the following syllabus, which is accessible here:

1) Pre-Service Coursework: Terms and Conditions; Civil Rights and Responsibilities; Benefits; Mission and Program Goals; and Test Your Knowledge Quiz
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) Early-Service Coursework: Tutorials on poverty, getting to know the community, the VAD, and preparing for OSOT
6) OSOT and VAD review with supervisors

MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES

MANDATORY ATTENDANCE OF CANDIDATES/MEMBERS

AmeriCorps expects all candidates and 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 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 AmeriCorps field office enrolls a candidate in VMO, the candidate will receive an email directing them to the VISTA Member Orientation learning path in the VISTA Campus.

This page links the candidate to the My AmeriCorps Portal, where the candidate logs into their account to complete the online onboarding forms:

- Direct Deposit
- W-4 (Federal Tax Withholding)
- Unpaid Compensation (Designation of Beneficiary)
- End of Service Benefit (Education Award or Cash Stipend).

The email also links them to the required pre-service coursework on the VISTA Campus.

Approximately two weeks prior to the VMO, the member will also receive an email with information on how to complete their required criminal history background check.

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 member from starting service as planned.

MANDATORY ONLINE COURSEWORK PRIOR TO VMO

The VISTA Training Unit (VTU) will direct candidates to the VISTA Member Orientation on the Campus, where they will be required to complete a number of online, self-directed tutorials.

Candidates are required to create a VISTA Campus account and 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 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 AmeriCorps field office and/or VISTA Training Unit as soon as possible. Certain impairments may prevent the candidate from fully and successfully 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 AmeriCorps field office and the VISTA Training Unit must be alerted as these may prevent the candidate or member from fully and successfully participating in the VMO.

REQUIREMENT TO TAKE THE OATH OR AFFIRMATION OF SERVICE

As a condition of entry into service, 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.

An AmeriCorps representative, most often the VISTA Training Specialist, administers the oath or affirmation of service during the "Launching Your VISTA Service" webinar. The VISTA Training Specialist will provide specific instructions on how to correctly complete and submit the online oath of service. During or immediately after this webinar, the oath form will be unlocked on the member's My AmeriCorps Portal homepage, and the candidate will receive an email letting them know that the oath form is unlocked and that the candidate must log into their My AmeriCorps Portal to complete and submit the oath form.

Alternate Oath for Legal Residents (Non-Citizens)

A 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 alternate oath of service, as set forth in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended. The alternative oath for non-citizens can be found in My AmeriCorps.

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 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 alternate 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 alternative oath for religious reasons can be found in My AmeriCorps.

SUPERVISOR RESPONSIBILITIES

The VISTA Training Unit (VTU), VMSU, and AmeriCorps field office rely on the sponsor and/or direct 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 them by:

- Ensuring the candidate meets the requirements to successfully participate in a VMO
- Furnishing a workstation (individual access to a computer and phone beginning on the first day of service)
- Aligning the candidate's service schedule so they can fully participate in the required VMO webinar on their first day of service
- Ensuring the candidate submits their oath form in the My AmeriCorps portal on the first day of service

- Ensuring the candidate/member submits their information to complete the criminal history background check
- Obtaining emergency contact information for the member
- Supporting the candidate's/member's full participation in VMO
- Implementing an OSOT
- Reviewing the VAD with the candidate/member to clarify activities, answer questions, and ensure the candidate understands the goals

Supervisors are encouraged to attend the induction webinar with their candidates to be present for the induction and witness the oath of service to know what information is provided to candidates during the webinar and to provide support and answer questions. If the supervisor is unavailable, someone else should be present to witness the candidate's oath and assist the candidate as needed.

Planning for On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT)

A member's orientation begins with 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 member's start date. During OSOT the member is formally oriented to the assignment, sponsoring organization, and community by the project sponsor/supervisor. OSOT differs from VMO in several important aspects:

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

PURPOSE

OSOT is the second step in the member's training continuum. Its primary purpose is to build on concepts introduced through the VMO. OSOT introduces the member to the sponsor, the community, and the goals and operation of the VISTA project, and provides 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 member with the immediate information and skills needed to begin their service, yet flexible enough to allow 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 AmeriCorps field office 30 days prior to the member's start date
- Involve the member in an ongoing evaluation of activities of OSOT and adjust plans, as necessary, to meet individual member'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 members to orient them to the sponsor, the larger project, and relevant policies and procedures to the project. Additionally, sponsors should be collecting and reviewing OSOT plans from each site 30 days prior to the member's start date. The site OSOT plans should be on file with the sponsor and available for review by AmeriCorps.

OSOT TRAINING OBJECTIVES

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

- Understand common expectations and agreements for a working relationship between the member and supervisor:
  - Supervisor's other roles and responsibilities
  - Supervisor's management style
  - Scheduled meetings and interactions between member and supervisor
  - Clarification of the lines of communication between member and supervisor
  - Delineation of the support provided to the member
  - Mutual understanding of the terms and conditions of 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 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 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 member

Depending on the project, the supervisor may deem it necessary for the 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 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 development. The member's actual needs depend on the requirements of the project and the experience, skills, and educational background the 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 member, or among the supervisor, 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 member review the project proposal the sponsor submitted to AmeriCorps, the MA between AmeriCorps and the sponsor, the VAD, and other pertinent organization position papers
- Field trips and strategically assigned tasks the member needs to complete
- Shadowing others who are performing similar service
- 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 (can be incorporated into the orientation process)
    - The VISTA monthly webinar series (accessed on the Campus calendar)

Supporting and Supervising Members

Introduction

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

Supervision

Supervision ensures that every member 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 member must be assigned a supervisor who provides direct supervision and support on a day-to-day basis. Supervisors are advised to have weekly one-on-one check-in meetings with their members.

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 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 AmeriCorps field office if necessary
- Support the member to the best of their abilities to meet their project and development goals
- Ensure that the member is supported in adhering to the VAD, including providing relevant training and assistance in working toward goals, as well as ensuring the member 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 AmeriCorps
- 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 AmeriCorps field 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 AmeriCorps field office for further support.

Distinctions between Members and Employees

Although the supervisor provides day-to-day direction and guidance to the members, the members are not employees of the sponsor or site. One of the challenges of hosting members 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 members is similar to supervising employees include:

- Members are expected to act in a professional manner and to conduct themselves in accordance with the workplace norms of your organization
- Members 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 members appropriate feedback on their performance

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

- Members in the VISTA program are enrolled in national service, and they commit to serving for one year in the community focused on the goals of the assigned project.
- 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.
- As part of service, members have access to 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.

- Members 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 members who are from outside the community or new to the field in which they are serving.
- Each member has a specific assignment with a capacity-building focus. Other staff in your organization may not recognize the distinct member function, and supervisors play a key role in helping other staff and partners understand both the nature of VISTA service and each member's specific assignment. This includes supporting members in setting and maintaining boundaries when others ask the member to help with activities unrelated to the VAD.
- Members may be anxious about finances as well as what their next step will be once their service year ends.
- Members cannot be terminated by the site or sponsor, but the sponsor may request the member's removal from the project by providing documentation and details to the AmeriCorps field office.
- Some members 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.

Members are also not employees of AmeriCorps, except for very specific purposes.[14] In addition, members are not, for any purpose, employees of the sponsoring organizations or subrecipient organizations where they are assigned; members have no legal employment relationship with the sponsoring organization or subrecipient organization. Finally, AmeriCorps retains sole authority for an individual's selection/admission, replacement, removal, and termination.

Strong supervision of a member includes the following:

- Build familiarity with the member's VAD
- Assess a member's relevant background and skills and consider them when planning for OSOT
- Learn about the 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 member in planning ahead for the end-of-service transition
- Recognize the contributions and impact of the member
- Provide resources and guidance in working with the community

[14] 45 C.F.R §2556.300 (2018).

Changes to Member Supervision

Any change to the supervision plan for a member needs to be navigated proactively to avoid potential pitfalls for the project. If the member'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 the VISTA program and their responsibilities. The project director can also provide extra support to the 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 AmeriCorps field office as early as possible for support through that transition.

Coaching the 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 members include:

- Promoting a culture of ongoing learning and growth
- Asking open-ended questions and collaborating in problem-solving with member(s)
- Discussing with your member(s) your conversation style, how you'll give feedback, and other working agreements
- Providing actionable, positive feedback when appropriate
- Being open to hearing member complaints, obstacles, and frustrations without judgment
- Assisting members 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 project's goals, but also for the member's professional development and experience. Members 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 members feel valued are:

- Ensuring that all staff understand the VISTA program and the 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 members need to succeed and addressing those needs
- Helping make life easier by providing supplemental benefits (See Supplemental Benefits)
- Giving members ownership of their projects while also helping them understand sustainability and the transfer of knowledge, products, and relationships
- Providing ongoing training and support for professional development (See Ongoing Training)
- Thanking 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. AmeriCorps does not provide the equipment or supplies required by members for their assignments. In addition to the equipment and supplies, sponsors and sites are responsible for reimbursing members for service-related travel or for providing other means of transportation as needed to accomplish their assignments.

SPACE, TECHNOLOGY, OFFICE SUPPLIES

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 members use on the first day of service.

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

SERVICE-RELATED TRANSPORTATION

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

Supporting service-related travel can mean making plans for 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 members 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 member's specific assignment, and not to commuting, travel to events sponsored by AmeriCorps headquarters, or relocation travel. See *Member Handbook – Service-Related Transportation* for greater detail about the topic.

ACCIDENTS WHILE DRIVING FOR APPROVED SERVICE-RELATED PURPOSES

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

PROGRAM BUDGET

Many VISTA projects and assignments do not require a dedicated budget for members to advance their projects and achieve the objectives, but some do. If the member 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 that the 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 members to their new community and help them begin building their identity with the project. Some members relocate to serve in the VISTA program. Settling comfortably into a new community may be one of the most difficult challenges that members face. This challenge can be addressed by having OSOT that is early and thorough. This is key to a successful year for any member and project.

See Planning On-Site Orientation and Training for more information.

Ongoing Training

While a member's service begins with VMO and OSOT, the training and professional development of 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 members' needs in carrying out their VAD, take place early enough for the member to make use of and act on the information during the service year, and address the members' learning styles. Sponsors are responsible for ensuring members receive the training necessary to complete their assignments. Many 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

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

Each 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 members in a number of ways, including:

- Working with members to assess training needs and develop plans to meet them using individual development plans
- Recommending organizations that provide relevant in-person and online courses and training, including professional associations and colleges
- Supporting participation in appropriate opportunities identified by members
- Securing funds from the sponsor's training and travel budgets to support ongoing training;
- Advocating for reduced or waived training fees on the 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 member interests
- Setting up opportunities for members to shadow the senior leaders with the sponsor or in the community
- Ensuring that members are included in trainings the sponsor provides for its staff;
- Coordinating events tailored to the needs of current members on the project
- Creating forums for members to share experiences and train each other on their projects
- Plugging members into national service networks that offer training open to members
- Connecting VISTA members to alums to learn about their areas of expertise

OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH AMERICORPS VISTA

AmeriCorps VISTA provides a variety of opportunities for members 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.

IN-SERVICE TRAINING (IST)

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

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

TRAINING 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 service. Webinars are also available on the benefits, serving effectively, and life after VISTA. For more information, see the training catalogue on the VISTA Campus.

Member Handbook

The *VISTA Member Handbook* is the program's primary resource for members. Its cover a wide range of topics that are central to a successful service term. Sponsors are responsible for familiarizing themselves with the content. When members have questions, the *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 AmeriCorps policies, members must serve in service environments that are free of discrimination and harassment. AmeriCorps 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. Members should not experience discrimination or harassment as a result of contact with sponsor and subrecipient staff, supervisors, other members, clients, and volunteers. All sponsoring organizations and subrecipient sites are responsible for ensuring that all 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. AmeriCorps 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 member'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 or companionship
- 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 member 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

Members who believe they may be subject to discrimination or harassment as described above are advised to first talk directly to the person they suspect of engaging in harassing or discriminating behavior. If that does not work or if the member does not feel safe and comfortable doing so, they should bring it to the attention of their direct supervisor and sponsoring organization, if feasible. If, because of the circumstances, it is not feasible to do so or they do and the matter is not resolved to the

member's satisfaction, the member should contact the attention of the AmeriCorps field office. The member should also contact the Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) at AmeriCorps Headquarters in Washington, DC. EOP is the AmeriCorps program dedicated to and charged with reviewing and investigating claims of discrimination and harassment made by service members, including 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 member's health and safety are not jeopardized. Supervisors must not require members to perform duties that would cause them to sustain injuries.

Member Terms and Conditions

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

If a supervisor or sponsor learns about their member(s) participating in any prohibited activities, they are expected to let the member know that their particular actions are prohibited and that continuing to participate in these activities can result in the member's removal from the service position. If the activity/behavior persists, the sponsor should contact the AmeriCorps field 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 *Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations*.

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS OR ACTIVITIES

AmeriCorps 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 members' lives.

It is important, however, that VISTA projects and their members do not endorse or promote, or appear to endorse or promote, religion or a specific religious belief. Consequently, AmeriCorps imposes a number of limitations on activities that VISTA projects can support and in which members can engage while serving, or when otherwise representing AmeriCorps VISTA. Members are free to pursue many of

these activities on their own initiative on non-AmeriCorps time and using non-AmeriCorps funds or resources.

For more information, see the *Member Handbook* – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations.

LIMITATION ON POLITICAL ACTIVITIES[15]

Members, as well as 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 *Member Handbook* – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations.

LIMITATION ON DISPLACEMENT OF EMPLOYED WORKERS AND IMPAIRMENT OF CONTRACTS FOR SERVICE

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.

AmeriCorps 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 MEMBERS

Agencies or organizations to which members are assigned, or which operate or supervise a project, are prohibited from requesting or receiving any compensation from 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 members not accept any benefit from the sponsoring organization or the community served through their service assignments, unless otherwise permitted by AmeriCorps 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 a project, provided under the terms of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the primary VISTA-sponsoring organization and another participating agency, is not considered compensation for member services. AmeriCorps must, however, review and concur in all such MOUs prior to implementation.

LIMITATION ON LABOR OR ANTI-LABOR ACTIVITY

[15] 45 C.F.R. §2556(H) (2018).

AmeriCorps 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 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 project, AmeriCorps VISTA prohibits certain service placement and assignment arrangements, as follows. This following language is taken from the Memorandum of Agreement which a legally binding document.

Prohibition on Nepotism. To avoid actual or apparent nepotism in the operation of an AmeriCorps VISTA project, the AmeriCorps VISTA program prohibits certain assignment arrangements, as follows:

a. **Members.** An AmeriCorps member cannot be assigned to an AmeriCorps VISTA project or project site[16] if s/he is:

   i. 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 staff member involved in the management or operation of the project or project site, or of an AmeriCorps staff member in the applicable Regional Office who makes decisions or takes actions regarding the project or the site;

   ii. a close relative, whether by blood or adoption, (e.g., grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, first cousin), of a staff member involved in the management or operation of the project or project site, or of an AmeriCorps staff member in the applicable Regional Office who makes decisions or takes actions regarding the project or the site;

   iii. 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 member of the board of directors of the specific AmeriCorps VISTA project or project site where the member is assigned or reports for service; or

   iv. a close relative, whether by blood or adoption, (e.g., grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, first cousin), of a member of the board of directors of the specific AmeriCorps VISTA project or project site where the member is assigned or reports for service.

b. **Project Supervisory Employees.** A project and/or site employee is prohibited from holding a project supervisory position if s/he:

[16] A VISTA sponsoring organization may operate a VISTA project out of a single project site, or multiple sites. When a "project site" is referenced, the prohibited arrangement is limited to that particular site, rather than the project as a whole.

i. 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 AmeriCorps official responsible for the management and/or oversight of the AmeriCorps VISTA project;

ii. is a close relative, whether by blood or adoption, (e.g., grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, first cousin), of any AmeriCorps official responsible for the management and/or oversight of the AmeriCorps VISTA project;

iii. 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 project and/or site employee who holds supervisory authority over him/her; or

iv. is a close relative, whether by blood or adoption, (e.g., grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, first cousin), of any project and/or site employee who holds supervisory authority over him/her.

For more information, see the *Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations*.

LIMITATION ON AMERICORPS FRATERNIZATION

Relationships between members and staff members (including volunteers and contracted personnel) of AmeriCorps, 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 members and will not be tolerated.

Inappropriate relationships between members and the aforementioned staff members are prohibited. Inappropriate relationships are those that compromise, or appear to compromise, supervisory authority, impede the ability for 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 *Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations*.

LIMITATION ON AMERICORPS MEMBERS SERVING IN VISTA CONSIDERED AS FEDERAL EMPLOYEES[17]

AmeriCorps members in the VISTA program 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

[17] 42 C.F.R. §2556.300 (2018).

allowances received from AmeriCorps are not regarded as wages, except for income tax and Social Security purposes.

Moreover, 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 sponsoring organization is not authorized to make contributions to any state unemployment compensation fund on behalf of members assigned to the organization.

Member Benefits

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

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

LIVING ALLOWANCE

The VISTA program provides a living allowance that enables each 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 member's bank account. Sponsors should encourage new members 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. Members are responsible for paying the appropriate taxes.

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

LEAVE

All members are entitled to up to 10 days of personal leave and up to 10 days of medical leave during their yearlong term of service. Supervisors should ensure that members understand the site and sponsor's policies and processes for requesting leave and providing notice for unplanned absences. The member 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 member settling-in and becoming oriented to the site, or with closing service and transitioning from the sponsor. In some circumstances, members are eligible for additional leave. See Emergencies for more information.

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

If a 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 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 member prefers to not use personal leave and instead continue to serve while their assigned site is closed, members may serve from an alternative service site for a limited duration. The supervisor should seek approval from the AmeriCorps field office if the member supervisor recommends approval of the 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 located in Chapter 9: Leave Benefits of the *Member Handbook*.

RELOCATION ASSISTANCE

Individuals who are moving more than 50 miles from their home of record to their service site 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 member begins service and submits their relocation voucher in accordance with the directions provided by the VMSU. Members who received the relocation travel allowance at the start of their service will receive a second relocation travel allowance when they complete service for travel back to their home of record.

The settling-in allowance is a one-time payment of $750 intended to cover initial costs such as security or 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 member has traveled to the site and moved into their new community.

HEALTHCARE BENEFITS

Members who maintain health insurance 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 member's own health insurance.

Members without healthcare coverage or insurance during their term of service are eligible to enroll in the VISTA Health Benefit Plan. The plan is available to eligible 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 an elected health benefit, members can access telehealth, i.e., virtual care, at no cost. Telehealth allows members to promptly consult with board certified physicians, psychologists, social workers, and professional counselors 24/7/365 via phone or video chat, at no cost to the member.

Each new member receives an email inviting them to complete a Member Enrollment Form to select a benefit option. For more details, visit the VISTA program's health care provider website.

Sponsors may provide supplemental health benefits to members, but there are some conditions and limits. See Supplemental Benefits for more information.

The VISTA Benefits page on americorps.gov contains information about this benefit.

CHILD CARE BENEFITS

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

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

The VISTA Benefits page on americorps.gov contains information about this benefit.

EMERGENCIES

In some circumstances, members are eligible for additional financial support, including emergency travel and an emergency expense allowance. Please see Managing Member Emergencies for specific guidance.

OTHER LEGAL COVERAGES

Sponsors should also be aware that members 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 member service may claim and be eligible to receive benefits to cover medical expenses. Forms and processing requirements are covered in *Chapter 7 of the Member Handbook*.

See Managing Member Emergencies for more information.

END-OF-SERVICE BENEFITS

Upon successful completion of a year of service, a member is eligible to receive either the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award (education award) or the 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 cash stipend.) Members 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 at any time while in service.

The VISTA Benefits page on americorps.gov contains information about these benefits.

POST-SERVICE FEDERAL BENEFITS

Upon successfully completing service, alums receive one year of non-competitive eligibility (NCE) for employment in the federal government. This special hiring status does not guarantee them a job, but it 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.

As an alum, they will have access to a service letter in their my.americorps.gov account titled VISTA Verification of Service which provides more information about NCE that they can provide a federal employer. If interested in federal employment, they would go to www.usajobs.gov and select the Peace Corps & AmeriCorps VISTA section that indicates non-competitive eligibility, and continue from there to apply for a position. Please note that alumni do not receive NCE or their verification of service letter

until they successfully complete their year of service, so if they want to apply for a federal job prior to the end of service, they could only tell a prospective employer the date on which they are scheduled to end service and receive NCE.

Also, if an alum is hired into federal civil service, their time as a 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 *Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations*.

Member Policies

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

OUTSIDE EMPLOYMENT

To make service accessible to the widest possible range of candidates regardless of economic status, the VISTA program allows outside employment that is not part of a 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 members, regardless of whether a member is working outside of their service assignment. Any outside employment must not conflict with the member's training, service, or service hours as assigned by AmeriCorps or the sponsor. To the maximum extent practicable, members must remain available for service without regard to regular working hours. The VISTA project's needs supersede any requirements of outside employment.

If a member pursues outside employment while in service, the member is not, under any circumstances, permitted to be an employee of or contractor for the sponsor, sub-recipient, or other project-related organization to which the member is assigned to serve.

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

- Legal
- Part-time
- Not (now or in the future) in conflict at all with the member's service or service hours
- Not (now or in the future) in violation of any applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations and
- Not (now or in the future) in conflict with any AmeriCorps VISTA program requirements or policies

Before accepting such outside employment, the member 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 member's service or service hours.

Sponsors must document their approval or disapproval, as appropriate, of all requests for members to accept or continue outside employment by maintaining each completed Outside Employment Request on file.

See Sponsor Resources for the Outside Employment Request Form.

TELESERVICE

A fundamental assumption of service is that members serve in a low-income community at the sponsor's location and project site. Under limited circumstances, the sponsoring organization may approve a member's request to perform service 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 week, may be considered after a member has been serving satisfactorily at the project site at least one month.

Additionally, the member's VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) must lend itself to teleservice in that the tasks can be completed from home.

The member's supervisor must approve and maintain a member's completed Teleservice Request Form (located on the Sponsor Resources page of americorps.gov).

For more information, see the *Member Handbook –Terms & Conditions of Service*.

EDUCATIONAL COURSES

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 members to dedicate themselves to understanding and serving the community to which they are assigned and be able and available to support the project as needed (e.g., attending community meetings).

Service to the sponsoring organization and community takes precedence over coursework. Enrollment in courses requires the approval of the supervisor. If a member or leader is unable to complete assigned tasks or responsibilities due to coursework, the sponsor should contact the AmeriCorps field office.

For more information, see the *Member Handbook –Terms & Conditions of Service*.

SUPPLEMENTAL BENEFITS FROM SPONSOR AND SITE

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

- Support is offered and available equally to all members at a site
- Cash or checks (unless for reimbursable expenses) are not given directly to the member. Gift cards may only be given in occasional situations and should not be a regular occurrence in an attempt to supplement the living allowance.
- Support offered does not violate VISTA's legislation that mandates members 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 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 members. While there is no maximum threshold set for the amount of assistance, it should be consistent with the 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 members serving at the site. Sponsors, at their discretion, can offer housing support to leaders without offering the same benefit to 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 member to supplement the member's living allowance, or to pay rent, utilities, or other costs. Nor may members accept third-party payments for utilities or other housing costs.

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

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

RELOCATION ASSISTANCE

- Additional relocation travel assistance – Sponsors may arrange and pay for or reimburse members for the travel and/or shipping costs that exceed the support provided by AmeriCorps without regard to the number of miles the member moved. Sponsors must purchase the travel or reimburse the member for such costs based on receipts provided by the member.

- Match settling-in allowance – Sponsors may provide an additional settling-in allowance up to the settling-in allowance set by AmeriCorps without regard to the number of miles the member moved. This support can help cover costs associated with settling into a new city that often exceed AmeriCorps' settling-in allowance (e.g., rental or lease application fees, credit check fees, security deposit, first and last month's rent, deposits to turn on utilities, etc.). Sponsors must pay the funds directly to the landlord or leasing agent, utility company, etc., or reimburse the member for such costs based on receipts provided by the member.
- Donated furniture, appliances, equipment – Sponsors may give donated or used items to members in order to furnish their residences or living quarters.

TRANSPORTATION

In addition to reimbursing members for all approved service-related transportation, members 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 members 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 member for actual transit costs.
- Mileage and gas gift cards for use of privately owned vehicle – Sponsors may provide members 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 members without regard to whether they are provided to all staff.

SUPPORT SERVICES

- Client support services – Sponsors may allow members access to support programs that their organization administers and that are available to the public. Members must follow the same objective criteria, qualification guidelines, and other processes that members of the public follow, without exception. Members must not be involved in the administration or processing of any of these programs. In reviewing a member's application for such assistance or services, the sponsoring organization must adhere to its policies and processes for awarding such services. The 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 member 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. AmeriCorps is never involved in a member's receipt or denial of such assistance or services.

- Employee benefit programs (health, dental, employee assistance program) – Sponsors may provide members access to employee benefit programs and/or provide members with a healthcare subsidy to offset the costs of purchasing a health plan, but certain restrictions apply:
    - The sponsor must not define the member as an employee for the purpose of enrolling the member in such benefit programs.
    - The sponsor must offer the benefit equally to all members serving at a site.
    - The sponsor must manage, respond to, and resolve any issues raised by members or others related to any subsidy the organization chooses to provide. AmeriCorps will not be involved in any such issues that may arise.
    - The subsidy must be in the form of a reimbursement. Members must provide proof of coverage and cost in order to receive the reimbursement.
    - The sponsor must inform the members that the subsidy the organization provides is considered taxable income and they must report it as such. The sponsor must also inform the members that this specific benefit is from the sponsoring organization and not from AmeriCorps.
    - The sponsor is required to develop and document the organization's policy and process for implementation.

- Emergency Assistance – Sponsors may assist 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 members to access their gymnasium, recreational facilities, library, or computer labs without regard to whether the same privileges are granted to all staff. Sponsors may also assist members 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, trainings, and classes, such as the payment of conference fees, travel, lodging, and meals, or per diem that applies to standard employees.

A member's participation in such conferences and classes must not interfere with service hours or performing of 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 member. For full details regarding members taking educational courses during their service year, see the *Member Handbook – Terms & Conditions of Service*.

Service Letters

During and after their service, 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 member is currently serving.

PUBLIC BENEFITS INCOME DISREGARD

In accordance with federal law, payments received by a member 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 member 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. The sole exception to this provision is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly called food stamps. If the member enrolls in SNAP at any time during their year of service, their living allowance and other AmeriCorps VISTA payments will be counted as income in calculating their eligibility and benefit level. If they were already receiving SNAP prior to enrolling in the AmeriCorps VISTA program, their benefit should remain unchanged.

SOCIAL SECURITY INCOME DISREGARD

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

VERIFICATION OF SERVICE

Once members 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.

Other Public Benefits

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

PROTECTION OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE BENEFITS WHILE SERVING IN AMERICORPS 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 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.

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 *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.

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 projects.

LEAVE HOURS/DAYS

Sponsors are responsible for monitoring their member'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

member, 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 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 members in emergency situations.

PERFORMANCE OR CONDUCT ISSUES

Sponsors are responsible for documenting any challenges that develop with 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 members 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 member's supervisor must approve a member's Teleservice Checklist before a member may begin teleserving. These checklists must be maintained by the sponsor.

For more information, see the *Member Handbook –Terms & Conditions of Service*.

Managing Member Emergencies (On- and Off-Duty)

While in service, a member or a leader may face an emergency. In some instances, AmeriCorps can help with the emergency. Those instances are described in this section. Members 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 member, as a result of an emergency, to the AmeriCorps field 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 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 members at the beginning of the member's service term.

EMERGENCY LEAVE

Beyond the standard leave benefits, members 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/partner, 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 member leave the site. (See the section on Natural Disasters for more information.) Any additional time away from the project requires the approval from the AmeriCorps field office. Emergency leave does not count against a member's personal leave time. Emergency leave should not be used in the event of a member illness.

If circumstances require a member to take emergency leave, the member must notify the sponsor immediately and, and if requested, provide the sponsor with evidence of the emergency. The sponsor must inform the AmeriCorps field office immediately, if the sponsor determines an emergency exists.

EMERGENCY TRAVEL

When circumstances require a member to take emergency leave that requires travel, AmeriCorps 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 VMSU to start the process of requesting emergency travel support.

In the rare event that AmeriCorps cannot provide a prepaid ticket in advance of the approved emergency travel and the 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 member, as agreed upon in the MA between the sponsor and AmeriCorps. The funds will be reimbursed to the member by AmeriCorps, 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 *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 members. The sponsoring organization can assist members in requesting an Emergency Expense Allowance from the VMSU.

Members, leaders, and candidates are responsible for safeguarding their personal property. Neither AmeriCorps 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 or routine car maintenance or repair. Expense allowances are paid directly to the member by AmeriCorps.

For more information, see the *Member Handbook – Financial Support*.

JURY DUTY

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

The sponsor should notify the AmeriCorps field office immediately if it appears that a member may not be able to resume project duties within two weeks of starting jury duty.

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

For more information, see the *Member Handbook – Leave Benefits*.

MILITARY LEAVE

If an individual enters service before completing a military reserve obligation, the member must change the location of their reserve unit if necessary. Members should try to minimize the disruption in 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, members should choose a period that does not disrupt their service.

A 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 member's personal leave, and benefits continue to accrue. Members should notify the sponsor before taking military reserve leave and upon returning from such leave.

The sponsor should notify the AmeriCorps field office immediately if a 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 *Member Handbook – Leave Benefits*.

PARENTAL LEAVE

A member 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 member exhausts all 20 days of personal and medical leave, the AmeriCorps field 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 member to the AmeriCorps field office.

For more information, see the *Member Handbook – Leave Benefits*.

FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE ACT

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

For more information, and a list of requirements, see the *Member Handbook – Leave Benefits*.

NATURAL DISASTERS

When an emergency situation arises that poses a potential or actual threat to life or property, a member 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 AmeriCorps field office to notify them of the member's location

If the AmeriCorps field office cannot be reached, contact the National Service Hotline at 1-800-942-2677.

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 member needs to travel from the disaster area to their home of record or another safe location, the VMSU 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 member, the terms of repayment.

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

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

DRIVING ACCIDENTS

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

The member should immediately notify local law enforcement and comply with local requirements. The sponsor should notify the AmeriCorps field office within 24 hours. The AmeriCorps field office will provide guidance on the V-81 and other forms that need to be completed. Please review the Service-Related Transportation section of Chapter 7 in the *Member Handbook*.

The member 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. AmeriCorps' 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 member's project-related activities and the extent of the government's liability.

The sponsor must advise the AmeriCorps field office if civil action is brought against either the member or the sponsor as a result of the accident, or if the member is asked or ordered to testify or to be deposed. Neither AmeriCorps 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 *Member Handbook – Travel & Transportation Support*.

LIABILITY COVERAGE (FEDERAL TORT CLAIMS ACT)

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 member that arises only out of their official duties and for which the member would be liable under local law.

If a member is involved in an accident and is at fault while driving a privately owned vehicle and undertaking service duties, the member's liability for injuries or property damage sustained by third parties is covered under the Federal Tort Claims Act. Neither AmeriCorps nor the VISTA program is responsible for any damage to the member's own vehicle.

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

For more information, see the *Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations*.

WORKER'S COMP (FEDERAL EMPLOYEES' COMPENSATION ACT)

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, members who are injured or suffer occupational disease during of their service may claim and be eligible to receive benefits to cover medical expenses.

Members who are injured or experience an emergency illness related to their service assignment must immediately notify the sponsor and the AmeriCorps field office. The AmeriCorps field office can then provide additional information regarding forms and how to file a claim. For more information, see the *Member Handbook – Basic Laws & Federal Regulations*.

MEMBER HOSPITALIZATION

If a member is absent from their site due to hospitalization, the sponsor must notify the AmeriCorps field office as early as is practicable. The member 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 member is arrested during a service term, the member is required to report the arrest to the sponsor and AmeriCorps field office within three calendar days of the arrest. If the sponsor is aware of a member arrest and the member remains detained and unable to contact AmeriCorps staff, the sponsor should notify the AmeriCorps field office of the situation.

DEATH IN SERVICE

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

Challenges with Members

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

There are times when, for a variety of reasons, the match between the member, the sponsor, and the VISTA program does not work out. While each member commits to a one-year term of service, some 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 member, and the VISTA program to work toward a resolution that enables the member to continue service at the assigned site. Such an outcome is optimal. However, the AmeriCorps field office should be engaged early when challenges arise as they can provide critical support in assessing the circumstances and guiding the sponsor and member toward a positive outcome.

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

The sole authority for removing a member from a sponsor, terminating a member, or offering a member the opportunity for reassignment rests with AmeriCorps.[18] While the request for a 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 member from service.[19] Additionally, AmeriCorps has the authority to remove a member from a sponsor without the request or consent of the sponsor.[20]

When a member's departure creates a vacancy, it is up to the AmeriCorps field office to determine whether filling the position again is appropriate and possible. The AmeriCorps field 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 member expresses interest in leaving the VISTA project early, the supervisor should first have a conversation with the member to understand the root of their interest in leaving and to see if continued service at the project may be possible. The AmeriCorps field office should be consulted as soon as

[18] 45 C.F.R. §2556.405 (2018).
[19] 45 C.F.R. §2556.405(c) (2018).
[20] 45 C.F.R. §2556.415 (2018).

possible, and may, depending on the circumstances, be able to approve additional member benefits (for example, emergency leave) or offer support (such as coaching on reasonable accommodation) to facilitate continued service. The AmeriCorps field office can also consult on whether a member's situation may qualify as a compelling personal circumstance that would qualify the member for a pro-rated end-of-service benefit upon exit from the VISTA program.

A member can request a resignation from the VISTA program as a whole; a member cannot resign from a particular VISTA project. If a member has made a final decision to resign from the VISTA program as a whole, the member should send immediate written notification to the sponsor and AmeriCorps field office of this fact. The supervisor must also promptly report this to the project director, who is required to notify the AmeriCorps field office within 24 hours of the member's notification to the sponsor. This initial notification should be by email and is critical to ensure that the member is exited from the program promptly as to avoid overpayment of living allowance and other benefits. The sponsor must send the AmeriCorps field office a copy of the member's dated resignation letter, which should specify the effective date of the resignation, the reason for the resignation, and that the member is resigning from the VISTA program as a whole, not just from the sponsor. The AmeriCorps field office will unlock the member's FPF. The sponsor is responsible for ensuring that the 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 member expresses a need to leave their site but has serious interest in continuing to serve as a member elsewhere, the project director, supervisor, or member should notify the AmeriCorps field office of the desire to seek reassignment to another project. AmeriCorps will collect information from the 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 member 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 member continues with the VISTA program and is under consideration by other sponsors.

PERFORMANCE AND CONDUCT

Sponsors should promptly notify the AmeriCorps field office of any acute or developing challenges related to 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 member's part that substantially diminishes their effectiveness as a member, including excessive absences, excessive lateness, absences without leave (AWOLs), and/or 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 members at the site

To the extent possible, the member's supervisor should provide timely and clear written feedback to the 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 member, supervisors should immediately contact the AmeriCorps field office and seek guidance. Supervisors should always promptly document challenges with members for themselves and for AmeriCorps. 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 specific 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 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 member is educated on what is expected of them. If clear expectations have been set and the member 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 in place as an appropriate next step.

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

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

If AmeriCorps grants the sponsor's request for removal, the sponsor will be notified promptly, and the member will be removed from assignment at the project and advised to cease reporting to the site.

Once the 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 member continues with the VISTA program and is under consideration by other sponsors.

AmeriCorps will use the documentation submitted by the sponsor to assist AmeriCorps in determining whether to initiate termination for cause proceedings against the member, or, alternatively, to offer them the opportunity for reassignment to another project. If AmeriCorps removes the 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 AmeriCorps assigns to a 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 AmeriCorps and is imposed at AmeriCorps' discretion. While in Administrative Hold status, the member should not, and is directed not to, report to any service site.

In all cases, a 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 *Member Handbook – Separation from Service*.

AMERICORPS-INITIATED REMOVALS AND TERMINATIONS FOR POLICY VIOLATIONS

AmeriCorps has responsibility and authority for terminating members who violate VISTA terms, conditions, or policies. Supervisors and project directors have responsibility for promptly reporting to the AmeriCorps field office any knowledge of violations, even when they are satisfied with their 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 prohibited activities 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 member in the VISTA program

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

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

Examples of such violations include:

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

AmeriCorps may also remove a 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. Members who are removed due to site, project, or sponsor closure are given the opportunity to seek reassignment at another sponsor.

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

For more information on this topic, see the *Member Handbook – Separation from Service*.

Transition Out of Service

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

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

PROJECT PLANNING

The departure of a member represents a critical juncture for the project, as the assignment will either transition to a new member or draw to a close. Work with your AmeriCorps field 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 members approach the ends of their service terms and plan their next steps.

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

- Asking members about their goals for after their service term and how the supervisor can support them
- Encouraging members 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 members, such as the *Life after AmeriCorps Guide*, non-competitive eligibility for federal employment, AmeriCorps Alums, USA Jobs AmeriCorps VISTA Search Track, and Employers of National Service
- Asking members to reflect on their experiences as 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 sponsor trainings on the VISTA Campus 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 members select their end-of-service action (regular exit, extension, reenrollment, or early exit). The sponsor plays an active role in ensuring each member submits a FPF at least 45 days prior to the end of the 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 members end their service as scheduled, following a full year of service. This is a regular exit.

REENROLLMENT

A reenrollment occurs when a 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 AmeriCorps that the member serve on a project, whether the same project or a different project, and AmeriCorps field office approval. Sponsors are encouraged to ensure member performance is thoroughly documented in project materials, including both PPRs and FPF, to facilitate AmeriCorps field office approval. Members who have attended a VISTA Member Orientation (VMO) within the last five years are not required to attend again. Members are only able to serve a total of five full-year service terms. If the member 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 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 member. Extensions can last from two weeks to six months and are subject to approval by the AmeriCorps field office. During an extension, the 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 member 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 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 members may be reinstated within six months without resubmitting an application and attending VISTA Member Orientation. For more information on deferral, see the *Member Handbook – Administrative Policies*.

FUTURE PLANS FORM (FPF) SUBMISSION

Timely submission of Future Plans Form (FPF) is essential for ensuring that 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 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 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 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 member reviews it, the AmeriCorps field office completes Part C to approve the member and sponsor selections. They do this at least 14 days before the scheduled end date.
- After the AmeriCorps field office submits Part C, the VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU) processes the end of service action. This happens on or shortly after the member's approved end date and opens access to the member's end-of-service benefits.
- If five days have passed since the 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, sponsors build awareness of and support for their projects, AmeriCorps VISTA, and AmeriCorps. 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, members, or request specific support of your project needs.

Find our communications resources here.

Social Media

On social media, sponsors can use #AmeriCorpsVISTA and #IamVISTA, and tag @AmeriCorpsVISTA, @AmeriCorps, and in posts related to projects where members are present. Sponsors are also encouraged to like and re-tweet national service-related posts and to follow VISTA and AmeriCorps on social media platforms. In addition, many State Commissions have accounts that sponsors can follow.

VISTA has a presence on Facebook (@AmeriCorpsVISTA), Twitter (@AmeriCorpsVISTA).

AmeriCorps has a presence on a number of social media sites:

- Twitter: @AmeriCorps
- Facebook: Facebook.com/AmeriCorps
- Instagram: @AmeriCorps
- YouTube: youtube.com/nationalservice
- Snapchat: nationalservice

Outreach to Elected Officials

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 (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 AmeriCorps Seniors 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 AmeriCorps, the National League of Cities, the National Association of Counties, and Cities of Service.

In coordination with other local national service sponsors, 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

Sponsors and sites are encouraged to connect with other national service programs in their geographic areas. The AmeriCorps field 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 members to host or participate in Days of Service events. In some cases, members may be involved in organizing Days 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. 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.

AmeriCorps Field Office

Each state has a designated AmeriCorps field office to help develop, manage, and monitor projects in their state and sometimes in other states (for national projects). The role of a AmeriCorps field office is outreach, project development, technical assistance, monitoring and evaluation, and member support. Each AmeriCorps field office includes a Regional Administrator (RA), Deputy Regional Administrator (DRA), and multiple Senior Portfolio and Portfolio Managers (SPMs and PMs). Major duties of AmeriCorps field office staff are:

- Manages a portfolio of AmeriCorps VISTA, AmeriCorps State and National, and AmeriCorps Seniors 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 AmeriCorps guidance
- Assures portfolio records are well organized and comply with office requirements
- Continually reviews and evaluates project operations through 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 an applicant
- Arranges for candidates to enroll in Virtual Member Orientation (VMO)
- Supports members and sponsors during project implementation with in-service training and technical assistance
- Reviews progress reports
- Closes out VISTA projects

- Works with elected officials
- Conducts community outreach

AmeriCorps Hotline and VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU)

The AmeriCorps Hotline is a service that provides general AmeriCorps and VISTA program information as well as eGrants and My AmeriCorps portal technical help. Support can be requested by web form, via live chat, or by phone at 800-942-2677.

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

AmeriCorps.gov

This is the official website for AmeriCorps, where you can find information for every stream of service, AmeriCorps focus areas, special initiatives, legislation, press releases, blog posts, and more.

AmeriCorps Service Gear

Branding your members with both AmeriCorps and your organization's gear is a great way to raise awareness for what your members are doing in your community. Members are provided an AmeriCorps logo polo when they start service, but you can also buy additional items on the AmeriCorps 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 AmeriCorps VISTA program, so it is important to have a working knowledge of what these acronyms mean.

Acronym	Description
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
COS	Close of Service
DRA	Deputy Regional Administrator
DVSA	Domestic Volunteer Service Act
EOS	End of Service
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
PM	Portfolio Manager
PMS	Payment Management System
PO	Program Officer
PPR	Project Progress Report
PRS/VPRS	VISTA Progress Report Supplement
RA	Regional Administrator
RFCP	Request for Concept Papers
RFP	Request for Proposals
SOL	Service Opportunity Listing
SPM	Senior Portfolio Manager
T/TA	Training and Technical Assistance
TCB	Terms, Conditions, and Benefits
VAD	VISTA Assignment Description
VLAD	VISTA Leader Assignment Description
VMO	VISTA Member Orientation
VMSU	VISTA Member Support Unit
VTU	VISTA Training Unit