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Summary: This guidance for potential and existing project sponsors directs the development of new projects and outlines national programming priorities for FY 2022. The contents of this document do not have the force and effect of law and are not meant to bind the public in any way. This document is intended only to provide clarity to the public regarding existing requirements under the law or agency policies.



AmeriCorps

**AMERICORPS VISTA
ANNUAL PROGRAM GUIDANCE
FOR CURRENT AND POTENTIAL
PROJECT SPONSORS**

Fiscal Year 2022

October 1, 2021–September 30, 2022

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I. MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

It is an incredible honor to serve as the director of AmeriCorps VISTA.

In my first months in this role, I've witnessed the amazing impact of members, sponsors, and communities working together to fight poverty and other critical issues while changing lives through service. Now more than ever, our country needs all of us serving and doing everything we can to help our country build back better.

Each fiscal year, Congress must appropriate federal funding to enable AmeriCorps to carry out the AmeriCorps VISTA program. In March 2021, Congress provided the VISTA program with additional funds as part of the American Rescue Plan (ARP). These funds allow us to increase the living allowance for members while providing more opportunities for individuals to serve across the country and where the need is greatest.

As part of this effort, VISTA is seeking to partner with organizations looking to advance racial and economic equity, particularly those that prioritize underserved individuals and communities as well as those most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis. Additionally, because our members are the heart of our program, we will prioritize partnering with organizations willing and able to create a rewarding and high-quality member experience.

Please consider joining us in this effort.

Yours in service,
Meg Ansara
Director, AmeriCorps VISTA

II. INTRODUCTION

This AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance for current and potential project sponsors directs the development of new projects and outlines national programming priorities for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022. We anticipate awarding more than 100 new and 700 continuation applications to support placement of an estimated 8,000 full-time VISTA members, leaders, and summer associates.

Prospective AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors should read the guidance in its entirety. Current sponsors should review this guidance to stay informed of VISTA's programming priorities. Existing VISTA projects are not expected to shift priorities to address changes in this guidance.

Overview of the AmeriCorps VISTA Program

Founded in 1965, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) is a federal anti-poverty national service program designed to provide resources to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to address poverty and poverty-related problems in the United States. In 1993, VISTA was incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of national service programs, administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, now known as AmeriCorps.

AmeriCorps VISTA supports efforts to address poverty by providing opportunities for Americans, 18 years of age and older, from a diverse range of backgrounds, to dedicate a year of full-time service with a sponsoring organization ("sponsor") on a project that will create or expand programs designed to empower individuals and communities in overcoming poverty.

About AmeriCorps VISTA Projects

An AmeriCorps VISTA project refers to a set of activities, as set forth in a project application, for which a federal award of VISTA resources is made. An AmeriCorps VISTA project is operated and overseen by, and the responsibility of, a sponsor. The duration of projects varies, but typically lasts for three to four years. Projects are carried out by AmeriCorps VISTA members placed at project sites.

About AmeriCorps VISTA Sponsors

An AmeriCorps VISTA Sponsor is a nonprofit organization, government agency, or Native American Tribal organization that applies for and receives an award to place AmeriCorps VISTA members, and in limited cases, receives VISTA grant funds. Sponsors design, operate, and direct the project, recruit and supervise AmeriCorps VISTA members, and provide the necessary administrative support to achieve the goals of the project. Sponsors develop and implement projects with meaningful involvement of the low-income communities to be served.

Nonprofit organizations, Native American Tribes, public and/or nonprofit schools, and state and local government agencies are eligible to apply to be AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors. Sponsorship is not limited to nonprofit organizations designated by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) specifically as 501(c)(3).

Nonprofits with other IRS-designated 501 (c) statuses that focus on anti-poverty outcomes are eligible to apply. Organizations that focus solely on advocacy or lobbying are not eligible.

Organizations interested in becoming a sponsor should begin by visiting [AmeriCorps.gov](https://americorps.gov) for additional information. Interested organizations can also learn more by participating in a scheduled webinar or listening to a recorded webinar. [AmeriCorps Region Office staff](#) are available to answer questions, discuss project proposals, and to provide technical assistance throughout the application process.

Prospective sponsors apply by submitting a concept paper and application through the AmeriCorps web-based eGrants system under the FY 2022 AmeriCorps VISTA New Projects Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO). Additional details, including a timeline with key dates, is available on the [AmeriCorps Funding Opportunities webpage](#).

About AmeriCorps VISTA Members

[AmeriCorps VISTA members, including VISTA leaders](#), vary in age and hail from a range of diverse backgrounds and experiences. AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors are responsible for recruiting and selecting candidates to serve as members with their project. AmeriCorps staff maintain final approval for all sponsor selected candidates.

Each VISTA commits to one year of full-time service on a specific project operated by a sponsor. A member's service should focus on creating or expanding an organization's specific anti-poverty initiative and building local capacity to ensure sustainability once VISTA resources are withdrawn.

Project sponsors are eligible to apply for summer associate resources to complement their year-round programming. The AmeriCorps VISTA [Summer Associate Program](#) allows members to serve with an existing VISTA project for 8, 9, or 10 weeks during the summer months. Summer associates may perform both direct service and capacity building activities.

All members receive a modest living allowance and other benefits during their service. After successfully completing a term of service, VISTA members and summer associates may receive either a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, which can be used to pay for college or student loans, or an end-of-service cash stipend. Individuals interested in serving as a VISTA should visit <https://americorps.gov/join>.

In FY 2022, AmeriCorps VISTA plans to support approximately 8,000 full-time VISTA members and summer associates who will serve with approximately 800 sponsors. They will leverage people, financial, and material resources to develop sustainable solutions to challenges in low-income communities across the country.

III. FRAMEWORK FOR VISTA PROGRAMMING

Core Principles

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

Anti-Poverty Focus

The statutory purpose of AmeriCorps VISTA is to strengthen and support efforts to alleviate poverty and poverty-related problems in the United States.

The organizations supported with VISTA resources address poverty in many ways. Some projects address social determinants of health and well-being (e.g. improving education, neighborhood resilience, access to health care, and healthy food); other approaches are targeted directly at increasing a household's income and assets (housing, connection to benefits like cash and in-kind transfers, financial savings, and asset development); and still other approaches attempt to address larger regional systemic barriers to community development.

All VISTA service activities must be designed to support one or more specific anti-poverty projects at a site. Applications must clearly define the anti-poverty initiative being created or enhanced as opposed to focusing solely on capacity building for the organization. The anti-poverty initiative described in the Application Narrative must carry through to the Performance Measures and to the VISTA Assignment Description(s), created by approved sponsors as part of the recruitment process.

Community Empowerment

Community empowerment aims to increase the influence and control a community has over their lives as well as programs and structures that impact their lives. Prospective and current AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsors must engage people of the communities affected 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 must tap into inherent community assets, strengths, and resources. To foster community empowerment, projects may choose to form an advisory council that engages community members while strengthening relationships.

Sustainable Solutions

AmeriCorps VISTA members serve as short-term resources to build the long-term sustainability of anti-poverty efforts. VISTA projects make a lasting difference through the commitment, energy, and initiative that VISTA members bring to the community; involvement of the sponsoring agency in supervising the project, supporting the VISTA members, and assessing the progress of the project toward meeting its goals; participation of the project beneficiaries in all phases of project development and implementation; and the continued involvement of community members by providing needed resources such as volunteers, material and financial resources, and expertise. Sponsors must develop projects with a goal to phase out the need for VISTAs and have the project continue without VISTA resources.

Capacity Building

VISTAs create systems that remain long after their term of service ends. VISTA projects expand the scale, impact, and resource-leveraging ability of specific anti-poverty initiatives. VISTA members strengthen sponsors' efforts by expanding community partnerships, securing cash and in-kind resources, recruiting and managing volunteers, and addressing specific local needs, with all activities focused on creating pathways out of poverty for low-income communities. VISTA members must focus on building the capacity of specific anti-poverty programs and interventions and not on general capacity building for the sponsor or its sites.

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

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

Key Legislation and Regulations

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

- [Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 \(as amended\)](#)
- [National and Community Service Act of 1990 \(as amended\)](#)
- Code of Federal Regulations, [Title 45, Chapter 25 Part 2556](#)

IV. VISTA PROGRAMMING PRIORITIES FOR FY 2022

VISTA is seeking project applications for programming in any of the following five AmeriCorps Focus Areas in FY 2022:

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

Priority consideration will be given to project applications that fall under the specific programming areas below. Additionally, VISTA will focus on awarding projects that advance racial equity and that invest in underserved communities, particularly those impacted by the pandemic. These priorities are established annually based on Administration guidance, input received from AmeriCorps staff, sector research, and a review of the existing portfolio of AmeriCorps VISTA projects nationwide.

Economic Opportunity

AmeriCorps VISTA's commitment to addressing poverty includes focusing on projects that create or strengthen opportunities for low-income individuals to develop workforce knowledge and skills that will meet the needs of employers. In addition, projects that focus on housing are strongly encouraged to apply.

Priority areas include:

- **Housing:** Transitioning individuals into or helping them remain in safe, affordable housing, with a special focus on veterans and those displaced due to COVID-19 related unemployment. VISTA also strongly encourages organizations focused on eviction prevention to apply.
- **Employment/workforce development:** Improving or creating job skills training programs that lead to increased employment.
- **Federal Benefit access:** Increasing awareness of and access to federal benefit programs such as the Child Tax Credit (CTC), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and others.

Healthy Futures

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

Priority areas include:

- **Access to health care:** Connecting economically-disadvantaged individuals to preventative education and treatment/recovery services regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and opioid crisis, to include mental health services.
- **Food security:** Alleviating hunger and increasing access to nutritious food. Potential partners may include, but are not limited to, individual food banks and pantries, networks of food banks, K-12 schools, community gardens, and after-school programs.

Education

The VISTA program will support projects that enhance access to services and resources that contribute to improved educational outcomes for economically-disadvantaged children. AmeriCorps VISTA will target new project development in communities with large concentrations of low-income students (e.g., Title I schools).

Priority areas include:

- **School readiness and learning loss** for economically-disadvantaged children.
- **K-12 success** in student educational and behavioral outcomes in low-achieving schools, including remote learning program development.
- **Career and Technical Education (CTE)** to help students gain the skills they need to compete for employment.
- **College access and success** for low-income students.
- **STEM** (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) programs as pathways for economically-disadvantaged students.

Veterans and Military Families

AmeriCorps VISTA will support projects that focus on Veterans and military families experiencing poverty as beneficiaries.

Priority areas include:

- **Economic opportunity:** Employment and homelessness prevention/reduction.
- **Education:** School readiness, success in K-12 education, and post-secondary employment success.
- **Healthy futures:** Access to health services, including substance abuse prevention and recovery and mental health services.

Environmental Stewardship

The AmeriCorps VISTA program will support anti-poverty initiatives that focus on environmental stewardship and climate change in low-income communities.

Priority areas include:

- **Renewable energy and energy efficiency**
- **Building community resilience**
- **Conservation and habitat preservation**

FY 2022 Summer Associate Programming

In FY 2022, VISTA summer associate programming priorities include:

- Programming to prevent summer learning loss for students.
- Programming to combat hunger and food insecurity, including USDA Summer Food Service Programs and senior meal programs.
- Programming to support public health needs.

Only current sponsors are eligible to participate in the summer associate program, pending the availability of resources to fund summer programming. AmeriCorps must have a Memorandum of Agreement in place by March 31, 2022 for the organization to be considered a current sponsor. AmeriCorps VISTA strongly encourages 2022 summer associate projects from current sponsors that are serving or planning to serve tribal communities.

AmeriCorps VISTA encourages current project sponsors that are interested in summer associate programming to plan for and include such requests in their continuation applications.

V. PRIORITY POPULATIONS AND REGIONS FOR FY 2022

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

Areas of Deep Poverty

Additionally, priority will be given to projects that serve individuals experiencing deep poverty and communities with a high number of households experiencing deep poverty. Deep poverty is defined as having a household income below 50% of the federal poverty line.

Rural Communities

VISTA seeks a balanced portfolio of urban and rural programming. More than 35% of those living in rural counties live in high-poverty areas, and 85% of persistent poverty counties are in rural America. VISTA will continue to invest resources to create economic opportunity and ensure access to health care in rural communities.

Indian Country

In FY 2022, programming in Indian Country remains a priority. According to the Census Bureau, Native Americans have the highest poverty rates in the country, and reservations are some of the poorest locations in the United States. The devastating impact of COVID-19 on tribal nations and communities was a clear demonstration of the continuing need to support economic and health initiatives in Indian Country.

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

VI. ASSESSMENT OF PROJECT APPLICATIONS

In choosing which project applications to support, AmeriCorps evaluates prospective and current VISTA sponsors on their ability to manage and effectively apply VISTA resources. A VISTA project application should:

- Explain how community members will be involved in project development and implementation.
- Address the relevant needs of low-income communities and otherwise comply with the provisions of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (DVSA), as amended (42 U.S.C. 4950 et seq.), and all applicable regulations, guidelines, and policies.
- Describe how the project intends to build program, organizational, network, and/or community capacity so that some systems, processes, and project activities continue beyond the VISTA term of the project.
- Describe the intended outcomes of the project with the targeted population and community.
- Clearly state how VISTAs will be trained, supervised, and supported to ensure project success and to comply with the DVSA, VISTA regulations, and VISTA program policies.
- Illustrate the relationship between key project elements throughout the application, including a statement demonstrating the need and intended outcomes, performance measures, and VISTA member assignment description(s).
- Ensure that VISTA and community resources are sufficient to achieve project goals.
- Explain how the applicant possesses sufficient management and technical capability to implement and oversee the project.
- Request an appropriate number of VISTAs to achieve the project mission and recommend for selection VISTAs with the requisite skills and qualifications to meet established goals and objectives.
- Clearly outline how the VISTA project will establish a recruitment schedule and onboarding process.

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

To best support VISTA programming during times of uncertainty related to COVID-19, VISTA asks sponsors to plan and prepare for extended teleservice programming, wherever possible. This includes providing remote supervision and project management, as well as necessary equipment and access to materials to support teleservice of VISTA members.

VII. MEMBER RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

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

All new AmeriCorps VISTA member candidates must complete VISTA Member Orientation (VMO) at the start of service. VISTA sponsoring organizations must design and deliver On-Site Orientation and Training for new members and must have a plan to supervise and support members throughout their terms of service. By working together to provide this type of orientation, training, and support, VISTA and sponsoring organizations help members have effective and high-quality service experiences.

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

VIII. VISTA CONCEPT PAPER AND APPLICATION PROCESS

For organizations that wish to develop a VISTA project, AmeriCorps conducts a Request for Concept Papers process, and organizations complete a two-step process to apply for VISTA resources:

Step 1: AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper

Organizations submit an AmeriCorps VISTA concept paper via eGrants. The concept paper is a preliminary screening tool that AmeriCorps uses to evaluate whether the organization would be an appropriate VISTA sponsor and if the proposed project meets core criteria.

Step 2: AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application

If the concept paper is accepted, the organization is invited to submit a full AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application, which includes additional narratives and performance measures.

Learn more about the concept paper process and the corresponding timeline [here](#). For additional information, please contact your [AmeriCorps Region Office](#).

Current AmeriCorps VISTA project Sponsors must submit continuation applications when notified by their AmeriCorps Portfolio Manager to ensure the Memorandum of Agreement does not lapse. Continuation applications should not only discuss the previous year's accomplishments but should also address and incorporate any necessary program model changes to achieve sustainability.