



CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL & COMMUNITY SERVICE



CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

AmeriCorps VISTA Program Specific Questions

Last update 7/1/2020

CNCS is closely monitoring the latest developments related to COVID-19. As America responds to the COVID-19 pandemic, you may have concerns about the potential impacts on your program. The below FAQs address questions posed by the outbreak. Check back as they are updated regularly.

These FAQs 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. You should refer to CNCS's statute and regulations for applicable requirements.

I am an AmeriCorps VISTA member with questions about my service/benefits, who should I contact?

AmeriCorps VISTA members with questions can review the FAQs below, and should contact their program sponsor or supervisor with specific questions. If you have additional questions after speaking with your sponsor or supervisor, contact the National Service Hotline at 1-800-942-2677, via [webform](#), or [LIVE CHAT](#).

Teleservice and Emergency Leave

1. May AmeriCorps VISTA members teleserve full time?

Yes. At this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, CNCS has determined that providing VISTA members the option to teleserve, up to and including full time, as needed, is necessary and appropriate support. Thus, until further notice from CNCS, AmeriCorps VISTA members may teleserve, up to and including full time, as needed and until it is appropriate to return to site full time.

VISTA is granting two temporary exceptions to the teleservice policy: (1) VISTA members may exceed the two-day per pay period cap, and (2) all currently serving VISTA members are eligible to teleserve, regardless of when their service began. In accordance with VISTA policies, a VISTA project should ensure that the member has an approved teleservice agreement in place before permitting a VISTA member to engage in teleservice activities. The teleservice agreement can be [found online here](#). Members who have an existing teleservice agreement do not need to complete a new one. *[updated 5/14]*

2. What if a VISTA member cannot teleserve due to lack of teleservice resources?

If a member cannot teleserve due to lack of teleservice resources or lack of assignments suitable for teleservice, the sponsor may grant emergency leave, as needed, through Wednesday, June 10, 2020. VISTA members may use emergency leave for COVID-19 related reasons through June 10, 2020. This is a temporary exception to the policy permitting sponsors to grant up to five days of emergency leave. Section 105(b)(1) of the Domestic

Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, authorizes CNCS to provide leave allowances to members, and gives CNCS the discretion to make a temporary exception to the policy. Per standard VISTA practice, sponsors should track the use of such emergency leave. *[updated 4/9]*

3. Who determines if a VISTA member should teleserve, be granted emergency leave, or continue reporting on site?

The health and safety of our AmeriCorps VISTA members is our top priority. What health and safety looks like for members varies by individual circumstances, which is why members are in the best position to determine for themselves if they can serve.

As a general principle, members who elect not to report to their service site should teleserve. Members who cannot teleserve due to lack of teleservice resources or lack of assignments suitable for teleservice, will be granted emergency leave, as appropriate, through June 10, 2020.

For members who are not reporting on site, supervisors and members need to communicate, via email, about whether the member is teleserving or taking emergency leave. Whether a member is teleserving or taking emergency leave, the member must record their time appropriately. If a member asks to teleserve or take emergency leave, we ask that all supervisors and sponsors fully honor and grant each member's request.

[updated 4/9]

4. After June 10, 2020, what happens to members who had been utilizing Emergency Leave?

Effective June 11, 2020, all VISTA members who had been utilizing emergency leave will be expected to return to full time service, via teleservice or returning to site, if safe to do so at that time. If a VISTA member cannot return to full time service effective June 11, 2020, they may be early terminated by CNCS, and CNCS will determine whether their early termination was for compelling personal circumstances.

If a VISTA member is utilizing emergency leave, either full time or in combination with teleservice, the sponsor/supervisor must communicate with the member to determine if they are able to return to full time service effective June 11, 2020. Sponsors/supervisors should complete these communications with members by May 15, 2020. If a member states that they anticipate that they will not be able to return to full-time service, the sponsor/supervisor must notify their Portfolio Manager or Program Officer by May 15, 2020. Please email your Portfolio Manager or Program Officer with the name and NSPID (if available) of members who will not be able to return to full-time service effective June 11, 2020. These members may be early terminated on or around June 11, 2020, and CNCS will determine whether their early termination was for compelling personal circumstances. *[updated 4/9]*

5. Once I notify my Portfolio Manager or Program Officer that a member cannot return, or has not returned, to full time AmeriCorps VISTA service effective June 11, 2020, what happens next?

Once a supervisor notifies a Portfolio Manager or Program Officer that a member cannot return, or has not returned, to full time VISTA service effective June 11, 2020, the VISTA program will review the VISTA member's case individually to determine the appropriate course of action. A likely course of action would be that the VISTA program will remove the VISTA from the project where they had been assigned, place the VISTA in Administrative Hold status in the VISTA program, and offer the VISTA the opportunity to secure reassignment. While on Administrative Hold, the VISTA member continues to receive all member benefits. The opportunity to secure reassignment grants the VISTA member the option to find another assignment where they can complete the remainder of their service term, either via teleservice or on site, depending on the

circumstances. If a VISTA member does not return to their original assignment or secure a suitable reassignment effective on or around June 11, 2020, they will likely be early terminated from the VISTA program. In accordance with 45 CFR §2556.320(i), CNCS will determine whether their early termination is for Compelling Personal Circumstances due to COVID-19. *[updated 5/14]*

6. What does it mean for an AmeriCorps VISTA member to be early terminated at this time, during the COVID-19 pandemic?

When an AmeriCorps VISTA member is early terminated for Compelling Personal Circumstances (CPC) due to COVID-19, it means their term of service has permanently ended and they are no longer enrolled in the VISTA program. As such, all member benefits (living allowance, health care allowance, child care allowance, etc.) stop effective the day of the early termination. Members who are early terminated for CPC due to COVID-19 are eligible for noncompetitive eligibility status, regardless of how long the member served. Please see the additional questions on Member Early Exits for information on how early termination impacts Education Awards and end of service cash stipend benefits.

When an AmeriCorps VISTA member is early terminated for non-compelling circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic, it also means their term of service has permanently ended and they are no longer enrolled in the VISTA program. As such, all member benefits (living allowance, health care allowance, child care allowance, etc.) cease effective the day of the early termination. However, members who are early terminated for non-compelling circumstances are not eligible for noncompetitive eligibility status, or an end of service benefit (Education Award or cash stipend). *[updated 5/14]*

7. May AmeriCorps VISTA members and Summer Associates who are starting service at this time teleserve full time from their first day of service due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

At this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and until further notice from CNCS, AmeriCorps VISTA members and Summer Associates may teleserve full time and may do so immediately upon starting service, in consultation with the member's supervisor at the VISTA project. In carrying out such teleservice arrangements, the VISTA project sponsor must ensure the following with regards to VISTA members and Summer Associates who teleserve:

- **Teleservice Capabilities**: For VISTA members and Summer Associates who will be teleserving, sponsors/supervisors must ensure they have proper equipment, workspace, and capabilities to teleserve on a full-time basis.
- **Orientation and Training Plans**: Consistent with the Memorandum of Agreement, sponsors are responsible for providing members with an Orientation and Training plan to ensure members get to know the organization and the community sufficiently enough to serve them well.
- **Teleservice Agreements**: Teleserving VISTA members and Summer Associates must have completed a teleservice agreement that has been submitted by the sponsor to the State or Regional Office.
- **Daily Supervision**: Sponsors must also provide supervision to all assigned VISTA members and Summer Associates on a daily basis. If VISTA members and Summer Associates are placed at sites, the sponsor shall ensure that each site organization provides daily supervision and support.

This is a constantly evolving situation, and for that reason, all VISTA members must be prepared to report to their service site **within 24 hours** once safe to do so. *[updated 4/15]*

8. May relocating, full-year AmeriCorps VISTA members who are starting service during the COVID-19 pandemic teleserve full time from their home of record until it is safe to relocate to the service site?

At this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and until further notice from CNCS, relocating members may start service on their scheduled start date by teleserving from their home of record in consultation with the member's supervisor. Members may teleserve until it is safe for them to relocate to their site.

- Consistent with the Memorandum of Agreement, sponsors are responsible for providing members with an Orientation and Training plan to ensure members get to know the organization and the community sufficiently enough to serve them well.
- Sponsors must ensure the member has completed a teleservice agreement that has been submitted to the State or Regional Office.

Sponsors must also provide supervision to all assigned VISTA members on a day-to-day basis. If VISTAs are placed at Sites, the Sponsor shall ensure that each Site organization provides day-to-day supervision and support.

Sponsors/supervisors may authorize VISTA members **up to five (5) business days** to safely relocate from their home of record to site, once it is safe for the member to relocate.

- Sponsors/supervisors must email their State or Regional Office with the name of any member teleserving from their home of record at the start of service, and will need to relocate to the site when it is safe to do so.

Sponsors/supervisors must also email their State or Regional Office to confirm the date the member has successfully reported to site after they relocate. Failure to report to site, or commence service at the site when it is safe to do so, may result in early termination from the VISTA program. *[updated 4/15]*

9. Can VISTA members use a combination of emergency leave & teleservice?

Yes, VISTA members may use a combination of emergency leave and teleservice. VISTA members must communicate their emergency leave and teleservice schedules to their supervisor. *[updated 3/20]*

10. May a VISTA teleserve from a place other than their residence?

VISTA members, with supervisor approval, may teleserve from a location other than their current residence. VISTA members should request, and supervisors should approve, the new location in writing, via email. This is a constantly evolving situation, and for that reason, all VISTA members must be prepared to report back to their service site within 24 hours. *[updated 3/20]*

11. For VISTA members using a combination of teleservice and emergency leave, can emergency leave be utilized on an hourly basis?

Yes, emergency leave can be utilized on an hourly basis. A service day is equivalent to the number of hours a sponsoring organization considers a typical full day of service. Emergency leave may be granted on an hourly basis, in proportion to the hours typically considered a full day of service.

For example, a VISTA member serving at an organization where a full day of service is typically considered eight (8) hours who serves for half the day and uses emergency leave for the rest of the day would utilize four (4) hours of emergency leave that day. *[updated 4/9]*

12. May members who are utilizing emergency leave also utilize their Personal Leave and Medical Leave days?

In addition to utilizing approved emergency leave, VISTA members are still entitled to their Personal Leave and Medical Leave benefits and may use those leave benefits in accordance with sponsor and/or subsite policies. Per standard VISTA practice, sponsors should track the use of such emergency, personal, and medical leave. *[updated 4/9]*

13. May a VISTA member teleserve if the member is quarantined?

If a member is not ill and is able to teleserve, the existence of a quarantine does not prevent teleservice. VISTA is granting two temporary exceptions to the teleservice policy: (1) VISTA members may exceed the two-day per pay period cap, and (2) all currently serving VISTA members are eligible to teleserve, regardless of when their service began. *[updated 3/12]*

14. What should a VISTA who has reason to self-quarantine or would like to self-isolate do?

Members who can teleserve should do so. See above regarding the availability of teleservice.

If a member cannot teleserve due to lack of teleservice resources or lack of assignments suitable for teleservice, the sponsor may grant emergency leave, as needed, through Wednesday, June 10, 2020. VISTA members may use emergency leave for COVID-19 related reasons through June 10, 2020. This is a temporary exception to the policy permitting sponsors to grant up to five days of emergency leave. Section 105(b)(1) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, authorizes CNCS to provide leave allowances to members, and gives CNCS the discretion to make a temporary exception to this policy. Per standard VISTA practice, sponsors should track the use of such emergency leave. *[updated 4/9]*

15. If a member chooses to continue reporting to site now, will the member be able to utilize teleservice or emergency leave at a later date?

Yes, a member may utilize teleservice and/or emergency leave, any time between now and June 10, 2020. We understand that this is an evolving situation and that a member's individual circumstances may also change. Per standard VISTA practice, sponsors should track the use of such emergency leave. *[updated 4/9]*

16. If a member utilizes emergency leave, is a sponsor still required to make sponsor benefit payments such as housing or gas cards?

A member utilizing emergency leave is still considered to be in a service status, and therefore will continue to receive standard benefits from CNCS (e.g. living allowance). We understand that some projects elect to provide additional benefits to members as part of their service commitment. While CNCS does not require sponsors to provide additional benefits to members, we do require additional benefits to be offered and available equally to all members at a site. This includes members who are teleserving as well as those utilizing emergency leave. Please note that a sponsor's withdrawal of benefits originally provided to members may impact their ability to continue or complete their service term. *[updated 3/20]*

17. May Summer Associates teleserve full time, for the duration of their assignment?

Yes, in accordance with section 104(e) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended (DVSA), Summer Associates may teleserve full time, so long as the project can provide the necessary supervision, support, and service activities. Given the short time frame of service (8, 9, or 10 weeks), Summer Associates may teleservice full time, for the duration of their assignment.

Please review the [Onboarding New AmeriCorps VISTA Members](#) message to sponsors, issued on April 14, 2020, for additional details regarding onboarding members during the COVID-19 pandemic. *[updated 5/14]*

VISTA Projects and Grants

1. Should we continue to place and plan on members participating in upcoming VISTA Member Orientations (VMOs)?

Yes, at this time, the VISTA program plans to hold the VMOs scheduled for May, June, and beyond, as well as onboard Summer Associates. As always, you should work with your State or Regional Office to identify the appropriate onboarding window for new VISTA Members and Summer Associates at your project.

Please review the [Onboarding New AmeriCorps VISTA Members](#) message to sponsors, issued on April 14, 2020, for additional details regarding onboarding members during the COVID-19 pandemic. *[updated 5/6]*

2. Can VISTA assignments be amended to add activities related to COVID-19 response efforts? Can the activities include direct service?

Yes, on a limited basis, sponsors may participate in short-term response activities in low-income communities following an emergency such as COVID-19.

In response to COVID-19, VISTA members may engage in limited direct-service activities that are not part of their original project application, for a short period of time, through June 10, 2020. This is a temporary exception to the policy prohibiting direct service; this temporary exception permits VISTAs to engage in limited direct-service activities that are not part of their original project application.

In making changes to VISTA assignments, the sponsor must ensure:

- The sponsor and VISTA member both voluntarily wish to be involved in such service.
- Appropriate supervision and other supports are available to the VISTA.
- The services activities will not endanger the safety of the VISTA. VISTA members may not engage in medically related activities that put them in direct contact with individuals known to be diagnosed with or potentially exposed to COVID-19.
- The service activities are targeted to the low-income community.

VISTA member assignments may also be modified to include indirect service and teleservice activities that were not part of the original assignment. Sponsors must notify their Program Officer/Portfolio Manager via email to report the new activities that will take place, and the members who will participate in those activities.

All VISTA program policies, terms and conditions remain in effect and benefits and protections afforded and provided to VISTAs and sponsors shall continue as if the VISTAs are in traditional service at the originally assigned site. *[updated 4/15]*

3. For VISTA assignments that continue, or begin, after June 10, 2020, may sponsors amend those assignments so that activities related to COVID-19 response efforts are added? Can the activities include direct service?

On March 18, 2020, due to COVID-19, CNCS issued a temporary policy exception allowing VISTA member assignments to be modified to include indirect service and teleservice activities that were not part of VISTA members' original assignments. The temporary policy exception allowed VISTA members to engage in limited direct-service activities that were not part of their original project application, for a brief period. On April 15, 2020, this exception was extended to remain in effect through June 10, 2020. Through June 10, a sponsor may notify in writing the sponsor's CNCS Portfolio Manager or Program Officer of modifications to member assignment.

In that vein, for VISTA assignments that continue, or begin, after June 10, 2020, sponsors may continue to make modifications so that the assignments include COVID-19 response efforts. Sponsors may do so, as long as the activities align with the VISTA program's purposes, as set forth in section 104(a) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended (DVSA). The activities must relate to combatting poverty or addressing poverty-related problems in communities across the country. However, full year members may not engage in direct service activities as a primary function of their assignment.

Sponsors must formally document changes made to VISTA assignments that continue or begin after June 10, 2020, via an amendment to the project application and/or an update to the VISTA Assignment Description, depending on the nature of the change. Please work with your Portfolio Manager or Program Officer to make these changes. *[updated 5/14]*

4. A VISTA project has been notified that its fingerprint location is closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Are there any alternative solutions for fingerprinting VISTA members at this time?

VISTA has developed a virtual alternative to fingerprint submissions for background checks.

Effective March 16, 2020 and until further notice, for all full year VISTA members who start service during the COVID-19 pandemic, AmeriCorps VISTA is conducting online name-based criminal history background checks. This means VISTA members do not need to physically get fingerprinted or mail fingerprint cards to VISTA Headquarters. However, VISTA members are still required to complete a criminal history background check, via the online name-based process.

VISTA members who started service on or after March 16, 2020 receive an email from VISTAFingerprint@cns.gov with instructions and timelines for completing the online criminal history background check. Questions about this process should be directed to VISTAFingerprint@cns.gov.

In accordance with sections 103(a) and 404(e) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended (DVSA), VISTA is authorized to select individuals to serve in the VISTA program and evaluates who is qualified to serve in the VISTA program. As part of the evaluation process, and in accordance with VISTA program policy, the VISTA program conducts criminal history background checks on all incoming VISTA members. The VISTA program has discretion to devise the processes by which it conducts criminal history checks. *[updated 5/6]*

5. I am unsure of who my CNCS Portfolio Manager/Program Officer is and how to contact them. What should I do?

Please visit [NationalService.gov/about/contact-us/state-offices](https://www.nationalservice.gov/about/contact-us/state-offices), and contact the State Program Director or Senior Portfolio Manager listed for the state in which your sponsoring organization is located. *[updated 3/20]*

6. I oversee an intermediary VISTA project. Should members communicate their plans to use emergency leave to their site supervisors or to me?

As the intermediary project director, you are responsible for knowing the status of each member serving with your project, and for timely communicating such information to VISTA program as needed. Please ensure that you are in close communication with members and/or site supervisors with your project. Understanding the operating status of a site and/or member will help you ensure the guidance is followed and will also help you determine when you need to contact your Program Office or Portfolio Manager. *[updated 3/20]*

7. What should a VISTA member do if a service site is closed for a significant amount of time?

If the physical service site is closed, the VISTA should teleserve, if they are able to do so. See above for details. If the service site is ceasing operations altogether, the VISTA Supervisor should contact the assigned Portfolio Manager/ Program Officer. *[updated 3/12]*

8. Can VISTA grant funds be used to offset costs of additional expenses related to coronavirus?

No. The use of VISTA grant funds is restricted to payroll, supervision, training, and travel. *[updated 3/12]*

9. I have a Project Progress Report (PPR) due soon. Due to the COVID-19 response, our VISTA members have been on emergency leave, the project has not met planned accomplishments for the reporting period, and/or I am not able to collect data from some sites. What should I do?

You should complete the PPR by the established due date and include the information you have available. Document your challenges, how you mitigated them, and any technical assistance you need from CNCS. The PPR is a way for sponsors to document project accomplishments during a certain reporting period, as well as challenges, support provided to VISTA members, and technical assistance (TA) needs. CNCS personnel use the PPR to assess progress and to determine what feedback, technical assistance, or other interventions are needed.

By completing the PPR, you are providing CNCS with information about your COVID-19 related challenges in implementing the project, which allows CNCS to work with you on potential changes to programming, flexibilities, or other technical assistance that your organization, partners, staff, and members need. You can document what has transpired (successes, challenges, changes in member status and recruitment plans, TA needs, etc.) in the narrative section of the PPR. Please be specific in the narrative section. For performance measures, if you would like to provide any additional information for a performance measure set, you should provide it in the "Sponsor Note" section. If targets are not on track to be achieved, provide an explanation, such as "No data from ABC After-School Program due to March 12, 2020, closure at XYZ Elementary School in response to COVID-19." *[updated 3/30]*

10. If a VISTA Supervisor or other staff members who are paid through an AmeriCorps VISTA grant need to take leave because of COVID-19, is it allowable to continue to pay them their salary under the grant?

Yes, under certain conditions, it is allowable to continue to pay VISTA grant-funded staff members their hourly pay or salaries under the grant. If a VISTA grant recipient's policies allows for the grantee to continue to charge staff hourly pay or salaries during a period when no work is performed due to unexpected or

extraordinary circumstances, then such charges to the VISTA grant award are allowable through September 30, 2020. The policy must allow the grantee to continue to charge wages and salaries regardless of the funding source, including Federal and non-Federal sources. These pay policies must also be applicable to the grant recipient's entire workforce.

Originally, this pay action was valid for a 90-day period consistent with the March 19, 2020 memorandum issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) that provides federal grant awarding agencies, such as CNCS, the authority to provide short term administrative relief to grant recipients affected by the loss of operational capacity and increase costs due to COVID-19. The 90-day period expired on June 18, 2020. See OMB Memorandum M-20-17.

On June 18, 2020, OMB issued a follow-on memorandum extending CNCS's authority to provide this short-term administrative relief, to September 30, 2020. See OMB Memorandum M-20-26.

As provided in the June 18, 2020 OMB memorandum, CNCS is authorized, through September 30, 2020, to allow grant recipients to continue to charge salaries and benefits to active grant awards consistent with the grant recipient's policy of paying salaries (under unexpected or extraordinary circumstances) from all funding sources. Please note that under this continued pay flexibility, payroll costs paid with the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans or any other Federal CARES Act programs must not be also charged to current Federal awards as doing so would result in the Federal government's paying for the same expenditures twice. Please also note that due to the limited funding resources under each federal award to achieve its specific public program goals, CNCS grant recipients must first exhaust other available funding sources to sustain its workforce, and implement necessary steps to save overall operational costs (such as rent renegotiations) during this pandemic period, in order to preserve Federal funds for the ramp-up effort. See OMB Memorandum M-20-26.

CNCS may also evaluate the grantee's ability to resume the project activity in the future and the appropriateness of future funding, as done under normal circumstances based on subsequent progress reports and other communications with the grantee.

Finally, as required by 2 CFR § 200.302 -*Financial management* and 2 CFR § 200.333 -*Retention requirement of records*, CNCS grant recipients are required to continue to maintain appropriate records and documentation to support the hourly pay or salary charges that it made against the grant. This complies with OMB's cost principle requirements that require grant recipients to maintain appropriate records and cost documentation to substantiate charging hourly pay or salaries or other project activity costs related to the interruption of operations or services. 2 CFR §§ 200.302, 200.333. *[updated 7/1]*

11. My organization can no longer afford cost share due to financial difficulties related to COVID-19. Do we still need to recruit and make placements for all of the cost share positions in our Memorandum of Agreement?

No. If your organization can no longer afford, due to COVID-19, to place the originally agreed upon number of cost share members, you do not have to recruit or make placements for those cost share positions. You may continue to recruit and make placements for the standard/non-cost share members that are part of your Memorandum of Agreement.

Please note that CNCS cannot convert cost share positions to standard positions. This means that, for example, if you were planning on recruiting and placing three standard members and two cost share members, but you can no longer afford to cost share future member placements due to COVID-19, you may limit your recruitment and placement efforts to the three standard members. Please email your Portfolio Manager/Program Officer to inform them of any changes you need to make to your recruitment and placement plans. *[updated 5/14]*

Member Early Exits

1. Can AmeriCorps VISTA members get a full education award if they have to early terminate due to circumstances related to COVID-19?

It depends. With regard to VISTA members who elect the AmeriCorps Segal Education Award (Education Award) as their end-of-service award, there are three situations that have different outcomes:

- a) **AmeriCorps VISTA members who have served less than 15 percent of their term of service at time of exit:** AmeriCorps VISTA members who elect the Education Award as their end-of-service award, but who have served less than 15 percent of their term of service at the time they exit, are not eligible for a full or prorated Education Award, even if their early exit is due to a Compelling Personal Circumstance (CPC) related to COVID-19. See 45 CFR § 2522.230(a)(2).
- b) **AmeriCorps VISTA members who have served between 15 and 50 percent of their term of service at time of exit:** AmeriCorps VISTA members who elect the Education Award as their end-of-service award, and who completed between 15 and 50 percent of the term of service may be released for a CPC and receive an Education Award proportional to the number of days they have served. They are not eligible for a full Education Award with a CPC exit related to COVID-19. 45 CFR § 2522.230(a)(2); 45 CFR § 2556.320(i).
- c) **AmeriCorps VISTA members who have served more than 50 percent of their term of service at time of exit:** AmeriCorps VISTA members who have completed more than 50 percent of their term of service (i.e., at least 183 days of a yearlong term of service) may be eligible to receive the full Education Award amount with a CPC exit related to COVID-19. See section 3514(a) of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act; see also 45 CFR § 2556.320(i).

[updated 4/15]

2. Can an AmeriCorps VISTA member get a full cash stipend as his or her end-of-service benefit if the member has to early terminate due to circumstances related to COVID-19?

No, VISTA members who elect to receive the cash stipend (instead of the Education Award), and who are released from the program early due to COVID-19, are not eligible to receive a full cash stipend. The CARES Act does not allow for a VISTA member who selects the stipend as his or her end-of-service benefit to receive the full value of the stipend. However, exiting from the VISTA program early due to COVID-19 is still considered to be a Compelling Personal Circumstance (CPC) exit. Thus, a VISTA member who exits early from the VISTA program due to COVID-19, and elects the stipend, is still eligible to receive a prorated stipend CPC (i.e., due to circumstances related to COVID-19). See 45 CFR 2556.320(i). *[updated 4/15]*

3. For VISTA members who elect the Education Award, and have served over 50 percent of their service term, what qualifies as “circumstances related to COVID-19”?

AmeriCorps VISTA members who elect the Education Award as their end-of-service award, and who have served at least 50 percent of their service term, may need to early terminate from their term of service due to circumstances related to COVID-19. These are circumstances beyond the control of VISTA members that have a direct correlation with the COVID-19 outbreak.

Circumstances related to COVID-19 that may require a member to early terminate service include, but are not limited to:

- Lack of service activities, such as lack of on-site or teleservice assignments, lack of teleservice resources, or project closure;
- Continued service would pose a risk to the health or safety of the VISTA member or others, e.g., the VISTA member tests positive for COVID-19; the VISTA member is deemed by a medical professional to be high risk and unable to serve due to risk(s) posed by COVID-19; or
- The VISTA member needs to provide full-time caregiver responsibilities, including situations in which the member's regularly scheduled caregiver services have been canceled or disrupted due to COVID-19.

See 45 CFR 2556.320(i). CNCS will promptly review and decide on all requests for early terminations due to COVID-19 made by, or on behalf of, VISTA members. Upon review of the requests, and related information submitted (including supporting documentation), CNCS will decide whether such an early termination is due to circumstances related to COVID-19, and whether the member is eligible for a full or pro-rated Education Award. *[updated 4/15]*

4. What process may sponsors use to request that VISTA members who have served more than 50 percent of the term of service and need to early terminate due to circumstances related to COVID-19, so that the member can receive the full education award amount?

If the VISTA member has served at least 50 percent of his or her service term, and he or she needs to early terminate for circumstances related to COVID-19, the VISTA member and the sponsor should complete the Future Plans Form. The VISTA member must also provide a written statement explaining how his or her early termination is related to COVID-19, and any supporting documentation. The member must email this statement to the VISTA Member Support Unit at vmsu@cns.gov.

If the circumstances are related to lack of service activities, the sponsor/supervisor may provide the written statement in place of the member. If multiple VISTA members need to early terminate, the sponsor/supervisor may provide one written statement that includes the names of all VISTA members early terminating under the circumstances related to COVID-19.

As with all early terminating members, the VISTA Member Support Unit will review the individual member's exit and the documentation provided to ensure compliance with VISTA policies. In addition, the VISTA Member Support Unit will review the percentage of the service term completed to determine if the member is eligible for a pro-rated or full education award. *[updated 4/15]*

5. Will I still qualify for interest accrual benefits if I was prevented from completing my full term of service due to COVID-19?

Individuals who are prevented from completing their full term of service due to COVID-19 may still qualify to receive interest accrual benefits. In accordance with 45 CFR § 2529.10, the National Service Trust (Trust) pays up to 100 percent of the interest that accrued on an AmeriCorps member's qualified student loans during their service. These are the conditions that apply:

- An interest payment can only be made after you have exited the program and have earned a full, partial, or prorated education award.
- The percentage of interest accrual benefit that you are eligible to receive is based upon your total service hours accrued, or the amount of time (in days), you were enrolled when you exited.
- If you qualify for additional hours/time under the CARES Act, such hours/time will be provided to the Trust and be considered “hours/time served.”
- The Trust will only pay interest on qualified student loans, as described on the Using Your Segal AmeriCorps Education Award web page.

For the AmeriCorps VISTA Program, if you successfully completed your term of service, the Trust will pay the interest accrued for the entire term of service. If you exited early from the VISTA program due to a Compelling Personal Circumstance (CPC), the Trust will pay the interest accrued during the days you were enrolled in the VISTA program before your early exit. If you exited the VISTA program early, and your exit was not for a CPC, you are not eligible to have the Trust pay the interest that accrued while you served. *[updated 4/15]*

6. Is medical documentation necessary to receive a prorated end-of-service benefit if a member needs to early terminate due to coronavirus issues?

No. As a temporary exception to VISTA policy, a member may submit a written statement describing the member’s circumstances in lieu of medical documentation. *[updated 3/12]*

7. Are members who exit AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps VISTA, AmeriCorps NCCC, or Peace Corps early due to COVID-19 eligible to apply to serve as a VISTA Leader?

Please note the answer to this FAQ has been updated. AmeriCorps State and National, AmeriCorps VISTA, and AmeriCorps NCCC members who have already completed more than 50% of their service term prior to being exited early from service due to COVID-19, are deemed to have satisfied the length of prior service requirement and are eligible to apply to serve as VISTA Leaders. Peace Corps Volunteers who have completed more than 50% of their service terms (i.e., more than one year of their two-year term of service), and who have been forced to evacuate from their posts and exit service early due to COVID-19, are deemed to have satisfied the length of prior service requirement, and are eligible to apply to serve as VISTA Leaders.

Under authority in 45 CFR §2556.7, the CNCS CEO has temporarily waived, through the pendency of the COVID-19 national emergency, the length of prior service requirement as it relates to VISTA Leader eligibility as set forth at 45 CFR §2556.605.

This temporary waiver to VISTA Leader eligibility requirements is valid only during the COVID-19 national emergency. After the conclusion of the COVID-19 national emergency, the temporary waiver will no longer be in effect, and individuals who, for whatever reason, have not served at least one full term of service, in any of the three AmeriCorps programs or in the Peace Corps, will not be eligible to apply to serve as VISTA Leaders. *[updated 5/20]*

Member Benefits

1. Can a VISTA member be reimbursed for traveling to be tested for COVID-19?

The best source for COVID-19 resources is the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Follow their guidance on who should be tested and measures for testing. If testing is recommended, and traveling to get tested presents a financial hardship, members should contact the VISTA Member Support Unit at vmsu@cns.gov for emergency funds assistance. *[updated 3/18]*

2. What provisions are available for VISTA members that have child care issues because of school closures?

The AmeriCorps Child Care benefit provider is making every effort in following CDC recommendations while the country is taking safety measures to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). If you have questions about the childcare benefit, please contact the provider, GAPSI, at:

Phone: 855-886-0687

Email: AmeriCorpsChildCare@gapsi.com

If child care services are unavailable due to school and daycare closures, VISTA members may use emergency leave to provide child care. *[updated 3/18]*

3. What emergency travel benefits are available to VISTA members?

Under section 105(b)(1) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, CNCS is authorized to provide VISTAs such “travel and other support” that is necessary and appropriate to carry out the purpose of the VISTA program. Accordingly, CNCS may provide VISTAs certain emergency travel benefits to VISTAs to support their continued service in the VISTA program during this critical time.

Therefore, members who need to travel for circumstances related to COVID-19 may be eligible for emergency travel benefits. This may include members who need to travel to an alternate location due to housing closures and members who need to travel due to their own illness or that of an immediate family member.

The VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU) will follow up individually with members approved for emergency travel who are scheduled to complete service in the near future and entitled to Close of Service travel. The VMSU will determine the appropriate benefit.

To request emergency travel, the VISTA supervisor should send the VISTA Member Support Unit (vmsu@cns.gov) an email titled “Emergency Travel – Member’s Name”, with the following information:

- VISTA Member’s Name
- National Service Participant ID (if available)
- Contact phone number and email for VISTA member
- Name of VISTA Supervisor & VISTA Project Director (if different people)
 - The supervisor must also cc the project director (if different) on the email
- Reason/need for travel
- Departure date & return date (if known)
- Departure city
- Arrival city
- Method of travel (plane, car, bus, train)

The VMSU will follow up with the member to process the request. *[updated 3/24]*

4. Is emergency assistance available to VISTA members?

Under section 105(b)(1) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, CNCS is authorized to ensure that VISTAs have available “allowances and other support” that will enable them to continue their VISTA service and thereby carry out the purpose of the VISTA program. Accordingly, CNCS may provide VISTAs certain emergency assistance to support their continued service in the VISTA program during this critical time.

Therefore, for the duration of a VISTA’s term of service, emergency assistance may be available if the assistance is essential to the VISTA’s capacity to serve effectively. Emergency funds may be appropriate in extraordinary circumstances that present the VISTA member with an undue financial hardship. VISTA members may be eligible for a one-time payment of up to \$500 to cover emergency costs. This benefit will be paid via the voucher process and may take up to 8-10 weeks to process.

To request emergency assistance, the VISTA supervisor should send the VISTA Member Support Unit (vmsu@cns.gov) an email titled “Emergency Assistance Request – Member’s Name,” with the following information:

- VISTA member’s name
- National Service Participant ID (if available)
- Contact phone number and email for VISTA member
- Name of VISTA Supervisor and VISTA Project Director (if different people)
 - The supervisor must also cc the project director (if different) on the email
- Written statement from the VISTA member detailing:
 - The circumstances surrounding the emergency costs
 - An explanation of why the emergency assistance is essential to the VISTA’s ability to serve effectively
 - The cost of the item(s) associated with the emergency assistance

The VMSU will follow up with the member to process the request. *[updated 3/24]*

5. What coverage is provided for COVID-19 testing under the VISTA health benefit? If a VISTA member is diagnosed with COVID-19, what is covered under the VISTA health benefit?

A VISTA member must be enrolled in either the AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance or the AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefit Plan to receive health benefit coverage. If a member is not already enrolled, they can enroll now at Americorpsvista.imglobal.com/.

The best source for COVID-19 resources is the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Follow their guidance on who should be tested and measures for testing. If testing for COVID-19 is recommended, testing is covered under both the AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance and the AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefit Plan. If a VISTA member is diagnosed with COVID-19, both the AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance and the AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefit Plan will cover medically necessary care, in accordance with the benefit plan.

For further questions about the VISTA health benefit, please contact International Medical Group at:
Telephone: 855-851-2974 (toll-free) or 317-833-1711
Email: VISTAcare@imglobal.com *[updated 3/30]*

6. I am a currently serving VISTA and would like to change my End-of-Service Award from the Education Award to the Cash Stipend but missed the 10th-month deadline. Am I still able to switch to the Cash Stipend?

Yes, as a temporary COVID-19 related exception to policy, members are allowed to change their End-of-Service Award from the Education Award to the Cash Stipend during this time. You must submit a request to change your End-of-Service Award from the Education Award to the Cash Stipend to the VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU) at VMSU@cns.gov at least one week prior to your end of service. One week is required for the Corporation for National and Community Service to complete the necessary actions to make the change to your End-of-Service Award status.

Individuals will not be allowed to switch their End-of-Service Award if:

- The individual already completed service.
- The member selected the Cash Stipend and wants to switch to the Education Award.

Members should contact the VMSU at VMSU@cns.gov if they have any questions or to submit a request. *[updated 3/30]*

7. Is a VISTA member who early terminates service due to COVID-19 eligible to receive noncompetitive eligibility status?

If a VISTA member demonstrates the ability to satisfactorily complete the full term of service, and early terminates due to COVID-19, then yes, they may receive non-competitive eligibility status, regardless of how long the member served. Circumstances related to COVID-19 that may require a member to early terminate service are:

- Lack of service activities, such as lack of on-site or teleservice assignments, lack of teleservice resources, or project closure;
- Continued service would pose a risk to the health or safety of the VISTA member or others, e.g., the VISTA member tests positive for COVID-19; the VISTA member is deemed by a medical professional to be high risk and unable to serve due to risk(s) posed by COVID-19; or
- The VISTA member needs to provide full-time caregiver responsibilities, including situations in which the member's regularly scheduled caregiver services have been canceled or disrupted due to COVID-19.

CNCS evaluates the facts of each case and makes the determination as to whether a VISTA member's early exit was due to COVID-19. If eligible, the VISTA Member Support Unit will provide a noncompetitive eligibility letter to the member within two weeks of their exit. Members should contact the VISTA Member Support Unit (vmsu@cns.gov) with any questions. *[updated 5/14]*

8. May Summer Associates serving in 2020 utilize sick leave?

To best support enhanced Health and Safety guidelines that many sponsors have developed in response to COVID-19, Summer Associates serving in 2020 may utilize up to three (3) days of sick leave during their term of service. Summer Associates need not make up the hours associated with any utilized sick leave.

This is a temporary exception to the policy that Summer Associates do not receive sick leave benefits. Section 104(e) of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended (DVSA) authorizes CNCS to administer a VISTA Summer Associate Program. In particular, section 104(e) authorizes CNCS to enroll full-time VISTA Summer Associates in a program for the summer months under such terms and conditions as CNCS shall deem appropriate and assign VISTA Summer Associates to serve at currently operating VISTA sponsors.

CNCS is using its authority under Section 105(b)(1) of the DVSA to make an exception to its policy that Summer Associates do not receive sick leave benefits and to provide leave allowance of up to (3) days of sick leave to VISTA Summer Associates during their term of service. Per standard VISTA practice, sponsors should track the use of such sick leave. *[updated 5/20]*