

AmeriCorps VISTA

Key Points for Sponsors and Supervisors

This document is a quick reference summary of VISTA terms, conditions, and member benefits. For details on VISTA requirements, refer to the VISTA Supervisor and Member Handbooks.

Conditions of VISTA Service

Employment Restrictions Key Points

- Outside employment while in VISTA service is permissible.
- Under no circumstances may a VISTA member be an employee of or contractor for the sponsor or project to which s/he is assigned to serve.
- Outside employment must be part-time, not conflict with project or service hours, nor conflict with any applicable law or AmeriCorps VISTA program requirements or policies.
- Supervisor's approval of the member to work is required.

Religious Activities Key Points

Though your VISTA member is entitled to religious beliefs, they cannot participate in religious activities while on duty or perceived to be on duty as a VISTA. They cannot:

- Provide religious instruction
- Conduct worship services
- Proselytize
- Be admitted to a VISTA program based directly or indirectly on religious affiliation
- Induce others to participate in religious activities

Education Restrictions Key Points

Your VISTA member is allowed to attend class(es) as long as their studies do not interfere with their VISTA responsibilities. You and your member will need to determine whether or not the class(es) will detract from their commitment to the VISTA project.

If your member enrolled in a class(es) before they enrolled in VISTA, it is still important to discuss their study plan right away and make sure that the class(es) will not interfere with the project.

If your member's class(es) interferes with their VISTA responsibilities, discuss this with your member right away. If you cannot come to a joint decision about how to make the VISTA project the member's main focus, you may want to contact the AmeriCorps Regional Office. The Regional Office may ask a member to withdraw from the course or end their VISTA service.

Political Restrictions Key Points

The federal Hatch Act applies to VISTA members at all times during their service, including certain activities during their off-duty hours. Your VISTA member can't engage in any political activity (either partisan or nonpartisan) that would result in identifying the VISTA program

with the activity. While on duty or perceived to be identified with the VISTA program, VISTA members cannot show partisanship or work to direct resources (financial or human) to influence elections or legislation (e.g., lobby), engage in voter registration, or provide transportation to the polls.

Specific examples of activities your VISTA member CANNOT participate in, either on or off duty:

- Soliciting or accepting from others monetary contributions for a partisan political candidate
- Pro-labor or anti-labor organizing
- Running for a partisan elected office

Participating in prohibited political activities during the VISTA term of service is cause for termination. Refer to the VISTA Member Handbook for more information and a full list of prohibited political activities.

VISTA Basic Benefits

VISTA Living Allowance Key Points

- Covers basic needs – housing, food, utilities
- Varies in amount, depending on location – the rate is based on poverty guidelines for a single individual in your area
- Is paid every two weeks via direct deposit
- Is taxable; federal taxes are withheld, though state and local are not – VISTA members are responsible for paying state and local taxes
- Does not qualify VISTA members to collect unemployment compensation after service

VISTA Healthcare Benefits Key Points

AmeriCorps VISTA offers two healthcare benefit options to VISTA members based on whether they have health insurance coverage when they start service.

Members who maintain health insurance during their service term may enroll in the VISTA Healthcare Allowance. This allowance is a reimbursement program that covers out-of-pocket costs associated with healthcare. Out-of-pocket expenses may include annual deductible, copayments, and other charges for qualified medical, dental, and vision expenses. The Healthcare Allowance will help offset these expenses up to the out-of-pocket maximum for the year set by the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

The Healthcare Allowance does not cover insurance premium payments or charges associated with dependents or any other individuals.

Members who do not have health insurance coverage 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 many routine services, limited preventive care, medical emergencies, surgical and hospitalization expenses, limited dental and vision, and certain prescription drug costs. It does not cover pre-existing conditions, spouse, or dependents. The Health Benefits Plan does not satisfy the individual responsibility requirement of the ACA.

In addition to enrolling in a health benefit, VISTA members can access telehealth, which allows members to consult with board certified physicians, psychologists, social workers, and professional counselors via phone or video chat, at no cost.

International Medical Group (IMG) is the administrator of all these benefits; find more details at americorpsvista.imglobal.com.

VISTA Leave of Absence

VISTA members receive personal, medical, and holiday leave. They may also receive emergency leave if appropriate.

- Personal: 10 personal days for vacation, personal days off, or for religious observances not given as holidays by your sponsoring organization.
- Medical: 10 days of medical leave for illness, injury, or medical appointments.
- Holiday: Your VISTA member receives any holidays recognized by their sponsoring organization. If a federal holiday is not recognized by your organization, such as Veteran's Day, a member can request use of personal leave.
- Emergency: Up to five workdays of emergency leave for death or critical illness of an immediate family member or if your VISTA member is serving in an area where there has been a natural disaster and they must leave the area temporarily. Emergency leave is granted by the sponsoring organization with agreement of the AmeriCorps Regional Office. The VISTA program will purchase a ticket or reimburse your VISTA member for actual travel expenses for the fastest regularly scheduled means of transportation from their site. The VISTA program will not cover expenses for international travel. VISTA members should contact the VISTA Member Support Unit if they need to travel for an emergency (vmsu@cns.gov).

Get Approval for Leave

As a supervisor, you are responsible for approving personal leave for your VISTA members. They should request approval in advance from you for personal leave and provide notice when possible of medical and emergency leave requests.

VISTA Training

As a benefit of VISTA service, your VISTA member will receive several training opportunities:

- VISTA Member Orientation - A series of live webinars, online coursework, and materials that enrolls members in AmeriCorps and introduces incoming members to the VISTA program mission, history, and policies, and member roles and responsibilities.
- On-Site Orientation and Training - Supervisor-led training to familiarize VISTA members with the sponsoring organization, project, community, and specific tasks required.
- In-Service Training - Online or in-person training provided by the VISTA program to help members build skills for successful AmeriCorps service.

Costs for approved training (e.g., registration fees and travel) are covered by the VISTA program or the sponsoring organization.

VISTA Optional Benefits

VISTA Relocation and Settling In

For detailed information about relocation review the [VISTA Relocation Fact Sheet](#). If your VISTA member is moving more than 50 miles to a new community to begin service, they are sheentitled to relocation assistance from the VISTA program:

1. The Settling in Allowance
 - Is intended to help with initial settling in expenses (rental application fees, utility deposits, etc.).
 - Standard amount of \$750. Is taxable income.
 - Is paid as a lump sum with your VISTA member's first living allowance payment.
2. Travel Relocation Reimbursement

VISTA members approved to relocate will receive a relocation allowance based on the direct mileage between their home of record and VISTA project site, regardless of the mode of transportation used. The relocation allowance may not cover all expenses incurred or alleviate all inconveniences.

Once a relocation request has been approved by the VISTA program, the member arranges their own travel from home to their service site. The mode of travel is up to the member—air, rail, bus, or car—but the member must arrive at the project site by the first day of service.

Note:

- VISTA also provides an allowance for travel from the project site back to the home of record when a member finishes service. If you or your member has questions, contact your AmeriCorps Regional Office or the VISTA Member Support Unit (vmsu@cns.gov).

Delinquent Debts

- If your VISTA member has delinquent federal or state debts, their travel allowance or miscellaneous reimbursements can be reduced.
- These reimbursements are covered under the Treasury Offset program, administered by the Department of Treasury, which helps government agencies collect delinquent debts.

Transportation

Service-Related Transportation and Reimbursement

If you think your VISTA member needs to use a personal vehicle for service-related activities (other than the daily commute) you can reimburse them for approved transportation expenses at the organization's standard rate. If your organization has no standard rate, your member will receive the federal mileage reimbursement rate.

Your VISTA can expect to be reimbursed within one month after submitting their mileage statement form to you.

Protection of Public Assistance

- If your member and/or their family are receiving assistance or services under any federal, state, or local governmental program before entering VISTA service, they won't lose or have benefits reduced by serving as a VISTA. This includes WIC/SNAP, TANF, Social Security Disability (SSI) payments, Veteran's Benefits, subsidized housing programs (Section 8), and any childcare subsidy provided by VISTA.

- If your member becomes eligible for assistance while serving (e.g., they turn 65), the living allowance income won't be counted in determining eligibility for, or the level of, Social Security retirement benefits.
- If your member was NOT receiving SNAP before joining VISTA, the living allowance WILL count as income in determining SNAP eligibility. The living allowance could decrease the member's SNAP allotment.

Public Assistance and the State

If your VISTA member receives cash assistance from your state, encourage them to talk with a state (or county) agency worker to learn if VISTA service will affect their eligibility. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 (Welfare to Work) affects VISTA members who are eligible for or receive public assistance in a number of ways.

Childcare Benefit Key Points

- Your VISTA member may be eligible for a childcare benefit from the VISTA program.
- Qualifying children must be under 13 and live with the member.
- Eligibility is based on income guidelines.
- All income of all family unit members living in the household is counted to determine eligibility. This includes any wages, SSI, TANF, public assistance, unemployment, child support or alimony, worker's compensation, retirement benefits, Social Security, and self-employment earnings.
- Your member cannot receive childcare benefits from any other source if they are receiving VISTA childcare subsidies.
- Each state has set income limits. If your member's family unit income is above the limit, they cannot receive childcare benefits. They should contact [Gap Solutions, Inc.](#) for more information.

End of Service Benefits

Education Award Key Points

- \$6,345 for completing a full year of service. (FY2021)
- Can only be used to pay for tuition/college costs and related expenses at Title IV schools and to repay existing qualified student loans for the VISTA member (cannot be transferred).
- Can access part or all, up to seven years after your VISTA member successfully completes service.
- When any portion of it is used during a particular calendar year, it is considered taxable income in that year.
- A person can only receive up to the value of two full-time awards in a lifetime.
- If the education award was selected, your VISTA member can switch to the stipend before the end of their 10th month of service.

Stipend Key Points

- \$1,800 cash stipend, paid to your VISTA member in the last two living allowance payments.
- Some taxes are deducted when the payment is made.
- It can be used however the member wants.

- If the stipend was selected at the start of the service year, your VISTA member cannot switch to the education award.

When your VISTA member is making their selection, they should consider the following:

- Do they plan to go to college, a technical or trade school, or attend any other credit or non-credit training program(s) after finishing service?

If the answer could be yes, then your VISTA member should consider that the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. It can be used to pay for education costs at Title IV schools – these participate in federal student aid programs. Most two- and four-year institutions in the United States are Title IV schools, including thousands of technical and trade schools. Your member should contact the school they want to attend to make sure it is Title IV.

Your VISTA member will select the education award or end of service stipend on the End of Service Option form in their account in My AmeriCorps (my.americorps.gov).

Student Loan Forbearance and Deferment Comparison

Forbearance (pairs with education award)	Deferment (pairs with stipend)
Loan interest continues to accrue, but when your VISTA member successfully completes their year of service, the National Service Trust will pay interest on their behalf.	For subsidized loans, accrued interest will automatically be paid by the U.S. Department of Education if the loan is deferred.
However, these payments are considered income, so the member will have to pay taxes on the amount of interest paid by the National Service Trust.	Your VISTA member’s lender decides if they can defer their student loans during the year of service.
Reason for forbearance is “national service.”	The member will need to obtain forms from their lender.
	Reason for deferment is “economic hardship.”
	Cancellation of part of the member’s Perkins Loan may be an option.

Regardless of which route your VISTA member takes for student loans during the year of service, they should contact their lender ahead of time to make sure the type of loans they have is eligible for forbearance or deferment, and receive details about what that means financially.

Non-Competitive Eligibility Key Points

Non-Competitive Eligibility (NCE) allows a VISTA member who meets the minimum qualifications for a job to be hired by a federal agency, without having to compete with the general public.

- If your member successfully completes one full year of service, they earn one year of NCE status from the day they completed their assignment.
- NCE can be extended two additional years if an individual is in the military, Peace Corps, attending college, or engaged in another activity a hiring agency believes warrants an extension.

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