

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

Fiscal Year 2020  
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## I. MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

First, I would like to thank our existing AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsors and members for being key partners in the fight against poverty. The work you do every day to deliver sustainable anti-poverty programming to your communities is inspiring and drives me and my staff to strengthen and improve the AmeriCorps VISTA program. I would also like to welcome potential project sponsors to VISTA. This year's Program Guidance should help you determine if VISTA resources are a good fit for your organization's anti-poverty programs.

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

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

In service,  
Eileen Conoboy, Acting Director  
AmeriCorps VISTA

## II. INTRODUCTION

This AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance for Current and Potential Project Sponsors directs the development of new projects and outlines national programming priorities for FY 2020. New AmeriCorps VISTA projects developed this fiscal year must adhere to this guidance. We anticipate awarding 850 new and continuation applications for an estimated 8,100 full-time VISTA members and Summer Associates.

Prospective AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors should read the guidance in its entirety. Current sponsors should review this guidance to stay 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 program designed to provide needed resources to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to increase their capacity to lift communities out of poverty. In 1993, VISTA was incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of national service programs, housed at the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS).

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

## About AmeriCorps VISTA Sponsors

Nonprofit organizations, Native American Tribes, and state, and local government agencies are eligible to apply for AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors. With regard to nonprofit organizations, sponsorship is not limited to those 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 and lobbying are not eligible. Sponsors must be able to operate and direct the project, recruit and supervise AmeriCorps VISTA members, and provide the necessary administrative support to achieve the goals of the project. Sponsors must also develop and implement projects with meaningful involvement of the low-income communities to be served.

Organizations interested in becoming a sponsor should begin by visiting [NationalService.gov](https://www.nationalservice.gov) and reviewing [VISTA 101: Understanding VISTA](#) for more in-depth information about becoming a sponsor. Interested organizations can also learn more by participating in a scheduled webinar or listening to a recorded webinar. Prospective sponsors apply by submitting a concept paper and application through the CNCS web-based eGrants system under the FY 2020 AmeriCorps VISTA New Projects Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO). Additional details, including a timeline with key dates, is available on the VISTA webpage.

## About AmeriCorps VISTA Members

[AmeriCorps VISTA members, including VISTA Leaders](#), vary in age and hail from a range of diverse backgrounds and experiences. Each VISTA member commits to one year of full-time service on a specific project operated by a sponsor. A member's service should focus on creating or expanding an organization's specific anti-poverty program and building the program's capacity to ensure sustainability once VISTA resources are withdrawn.

The AmeriCorps VISTA [Summer Associate Program](#) allows members to serve through an existing VISTA project for 8, 9, or 10 weeks during the summer months. Summer Associates may perform both direct service and capacity building activities.

Both VISTA members and Summer Associates live and serve in some of our nation's poorest areas. They receive a modest living allowance and other benefits during their service. After successfully completing a term of service, VISTA members and Summer Associates may receive either a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, which can be used to pay for college or student loans, or an end-of-service cash stipend. Individuals interested in serving as a VISTA should apply at <https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameriCorps/ameriCorpsvista/start-your-application>.

In FY 2020, AmeriCorps VISTA plans to support approximately 8,100 full-time VISTA members and Summer Associates who will serve with approximately 850 sponsors. They will leverage human, financial, and material resources to develop sustainable solutions to 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 eliminate and alleviate poverty and to address poverty-related problems in the United States. Each VISTA project must focus on empowering individuals to emerge from poverty, not simply making poverty more tolerable. VISTA projects should focus on long-term solutions to poverty rather than short-term services.

All VISTA service activities must be designed to support one or more specific anti-poverty programs at a site. Applications must clearly define the antipoverty program being created or enhanced as opposed to focusing solely on capacity building for the organization. The antipoverty program 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

Prospective and current AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsors must engage people of the communities to be served by the project in planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating the project. Each project must be responsive and relevant to the lives of community residents and must tap into inherent community assets, strengths, and resources.

##### Sustainable Solutions

AmeriCorps VISTA members serve as short-term resources to build the long-term sustainability of anti-poverty programs. Projects must be developed with a goal to phase out the need for VISTAs and have the project continue without VISTA resources. Both New and Continuation applications must address specific steps the resource recipient will take to ensure the antipoverty project(s) created or enhanced using VISTA resources will be available to the community after VISTA resources are withdrawn.

##### Capacity Building

VISTAs create systems that remain long after their term of service ends. VISTA projects expand the scale, impact, and resource-leveraging ability of specific anti-poverty programs. VISTA members strengthen sponsors' efforts by expanding community partnerships, securing long-term resources, and addressing specific local needs, with all activities focused on creating pathways out of poverty for low-income communities. VISTA members 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 may 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 CNCS grants and programs.

### Key Legislation and Regulations

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

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

## IV. VISTA PROGRAMMING PRIORITIES FOR FY 2020

AmeriCorps VISTA is seeking project applications for programming in any of the following four CNCS Focus Areas in FY 2020:

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

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

### Economic Opportunity

AmeriCorps VISTA’s commitment to ending poverty requires focusing on project sponsors that provide opportunities to low-income individuals to get workforce training, education, and skills that will meet the needs of employers. In addition, projects that focus on housing are strongly encouraged to apply.

Priority areas include:

- **Housing:** Transitioning individuals into or helping them remain in safe, affordable housing, with a special focus on veterans. Organizations focused on eviction prevention are also encouraged to apply.
- **Employment/Workforce Development:** Improving or creating job skills training programs that lead to increased employment, particularly career and technical education (CTE) programs.
- **Bridging the Digital Divide:** Improving access to computers and high-speed internet as well as the skills to effectively use this technology, particularly for underserved rural and tribal areas.

## Healthy Futures

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

Priority areas include:

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

### Opioid Addiction Prevention and Recovery

VISTA opioid programming focuses on addressing the opioid crisis in the United States by placing VISTA members with organizations that are creating or expanding opioid prevention and recovery projects targeting low-income communities. These communities often suffer from a lack of resources and may be disproportionately impacted by the opioid crisis as a result. VISTA programming supports prevention, intervention/treatment, and recovery efforts under CNCS's Healthy Futures focus area. For FY 2020, we will continue to look for new project opportunities, specifically in geographic areas not currently served by other VISTA or other CNCS opioid-focused projects.

## 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 not currently served by other AmeriCorps VISTA education focused projects and with large concentrations of low-income students (e.g., Title I schools).

Priority areas include:

- **School readiness** for economically disadvantaged children.
- **K-12 success** in student educational and behavioral outcomes in low-achieving schools.
- **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 low-income veterans and military families as beneficiaries.

Priority areas include:

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

## FY 2020 Summer Associate Programming

In FY 2020, VISTA Summer Associate programming priorities include:

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

Only current sponsors are eligible to participate in the Summer Associates program, pending the availability of resources to fund summer programming. A Memorandum of Agreement with any new organization must be in place by March 31, 2020 for the organization to be considered a current sponsor. AmeriCorps VISTA strongly encourages 2020 Summer Associate projects from current sponsors that are serving or planning to serve tribal communities.

### V. PRIORITY POPULATIONS AND REGIONS FOR FY 2020

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

#### Rural Communities

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

#### Indian Country

In FY 2020, programming in Indian Country remains a priority. According to the Census Bureau, Native Americans have the highest poverty rates in the country, and reservations are some of the poorest locations in the United States.

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

#### Areas of Concentrated Poverty

Additionally, priority will be given to projects that serve areas of concentrated poverty. This is defined as Census tracts or counties with poverty rates at or above 20 percent. These can be rural or urban areas, and the projects can be located in or serve the high-poverty areas. Special consideration should be given to persistent poverty areas – those that have had a poverty level of 20 percent or higher for 30 years or more. To assist in targeting these areas, USDA has developed a [concentrated poverty mapping tool](#) that provides a way to identify them easily.

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

## VI. ASSESSMENT OF PROJECT APPLICATIONS

In choosing which project applications to support, CNCS evaluates prospective and current VISTA sponsors on their ability to manage and effectively apply VISTA resources to build long-term, sustainable solutions to poverty in their community. A VISTA project must:

- Involve stakeholders in project development and implementation through the duration of the project.
- Address the relevant needs of low-income communities and otherwise comply with the provisions of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973 (DVSA), as amended (42 U.S.C. 4950 et seq.), and all applicable regulations, guidelines, and policies.
- Build organizational and/or community capacity to sustain the project beyond the VISTA term of service.
- Describe the intended outcomes of the project on the targeted population and community.
- Clearly state how VISTAs will be trained, supervised, and supported to ensure mission success, as well as comply with the DVSA, VISTA regulations and VISTA program policies.
- Illustrate the relationship between key project elements throughout the application, including: a statement demonstrating the need and intended outcomes; performance measures; and VISTA member assignment description(s).
- Ensure that VISTA and community resources are sufficient to achieve project goals.
- Possess sufficient management and technical capability to implement and oversee the project.
- Request an appropriate number of VISTAs to achieve the project mission and 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.

## VII. AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBER RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

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

All new AmeriCorps VISTA member candidates must complete Virtual Member Orientation (VMO) at the start of service. In FY 2020, VISTA will offer In-Service Training opportunities for VISTA members.

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



## VIII. VISTA CONCEPT PAPER AND APPLICATION PROCESS

VISTA conducts a quarterly 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 CNCS uses to evaluate whether the organization would be an appropriate VISTA sponsor.

### Step 2 – AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application

If the Concept Paper is approved, the organization is invited to submit a full AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application. Information from the approved Concept Paper populates the application narrative sections.

Learn more about the concept papers process and the corresponding timeline [here](#). In addition, a [webinar recording](#) is available to assist with this process.