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Summary: This is guidance for Project Sponsors to direct the development of new projects and outlines national programming priorities for FY 2021.

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 VISTA ANNUAL PROGRAM GUIDANCE FOR CURRENT AND POTENTIAL PROJECT SPONSORS

Fiscal Year 2021
October 1, 2020 – September 30, 2021



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I. MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

At the start of the fiscal year, none of us could have imagined how a pandemic would upend the world and that the AmeriCorps VISTA community would pivot on so many fronts. From sponsors' temporarily shuttering their doors to VISTAs' adapting their assignments for teleservice, our members and partners persevered. For more than 55 years, VISTA has been on the front lines of the toughest problems facing our nation. And here we are again; sponsors, members and the VISTA team addressing critical needs in our communities during the pandemic. I'm proud of the work we are all doing together.

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately effects Black and other communities of color, the longstanding racial inequities in our country have been elevated to a national conversation. Economic inequity is inexorably linked to the history of racial inequity in this country and CNCS is committed to addressing these injustices. CNCS will focus on awarding projects that advance racial equity and increase opportunity in order to achieve sustainable change in low-income communities. AmeriCorps VISTA encourages project applications from Black and other minority-led organizations that focus on economic security, access to food and healthcare, workforce development, legal services and housing.

As Congressman John Lewis, a former Associate Director of ACTION (the federal government agency that included programs like VISTA and Peace Corps) said, "Take a long, hard look down the road you will have to travel once you have made a commitment to work for change. Know that this transformation will not happen right away. Change often takes time. It rarely happens all at once." For the individuals who choose to serve with VISTA as part of their commitment to work for change, I thank you. AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors know the tremendous difference VISTAs make in scaling up programming to serve more people in their communities. AmeriCorps VISTA has always been about necessary and positive change. If you are interested in becoming a project sponsor and you believe VISTA could be the change agent your organization needs to grow, please reach out to your local CNCS Regional Office for application information.

In service,
Desiree Tucker-Sorini, 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 2021. New AmeriCorps VISTA projects developed this fiscal year must adhere to this guidance. We anticipate awarding 150 new and 770 continuation applications to support placement of an estimated 7,600 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, housed at the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS).

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 non-profit organization or government agency 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, and state and local government agencies are eligible to apply to be 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 or lobbying are not eligible.

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. 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 2021 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 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/ameri-corps/ameri-corpsvista/start-your-application>.

In FY 2021, AmeriCorps VISTA plans to support approximately 7,600 full-time VISTA members and Summer Associates who will serve with approximately 920 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 eliminate and 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, 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 antipoverty initiative being created or enhanced as opposed to focusing solely on capacity building for the organization. The antipoverty 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

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.

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. Projects must be developed 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 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 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 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 2021

AmeriCorps VISTA is seeking project applications for programming in any of the following four CNCS Focus Areas in FY 2021:

- 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 CNCS staff, sector research, and a

review of the existing portfolio of AmeriCorps VISTA projects nationwide. VISTA will also focus on awarding projects that advance racial equity in all of the program priorities.

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. Organizations focused on eviction prevention are also strongly encouraged to apply.
- **Employment/Workforce Development:** Improving or creating job skills training programs, particularly career and technical education (CTE) programs, that lead to increased employment.
- **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 to preventative education and treatment/recovery services regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and opioid crisis, to include mental health services. For FY 2021, we will continue to look for new project opportunities, specifically in geographic areas not currently served by other VISTA or other CNCS healthy futures projects. Programming in this area must focus on interventions that directly benefit individuals as opposed to supporting research efforts or supplanting medical staff.
 - As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, there continues to be many different negative impacts on low-income individuals and families. Existing AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors wishing to reorient some of their programming to address these issues should contact their Portfolio Manager to discuss their options.
 - AmeriCorps VISTA encourages public health agencies and their community partners to consider using AmeriCorps VISTA members to create robust contact tracing programs that not only serve low-income communities but utilizes those community members as contact tracers. The Center for Disease Control has called on all communities to “scale up and train a large contact tracer workforce and work collaboratively across public and private agencies to stop the transmission of COVID-19.” Public health agency representatives can contact AmeriCorps VISTA directly at vista@americorps.gov for additional information.

- **Food Security:** Alleviating hunger and increasing access to nutritious food, particularly the development of alternate food distribution and feeding sites to accommodate closures of traditional feeding sites, such as schools or after-school program sites. Potential partners may include, but are not limited to, individual food banks and pantries; networks of food banks and K-12 schools 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 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 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 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 2021 Summer Associate Programming

In FY 2021, 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.
- Scaling up a contact tracing program due to COVID-19

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, 2021 for the organization to be considered a current sponsor. AmeriCorps VISTA strongly encourages 2021 Summer Associate projects from current sponsors that are serving or planning to serve tribal communities.

We also encourage current project sponsors to incorporate Summer Associate programming into their full-year project model by including Summer Associate requests in their Continuation Applications. The Summer Associates program can lead members to participate in our other AmeriCorps programs, such as NCCC, AmeriCorps State and National as well as VISTA.

V. PRIORITY POPULATIONS AND REGIONS FOR FY 2021

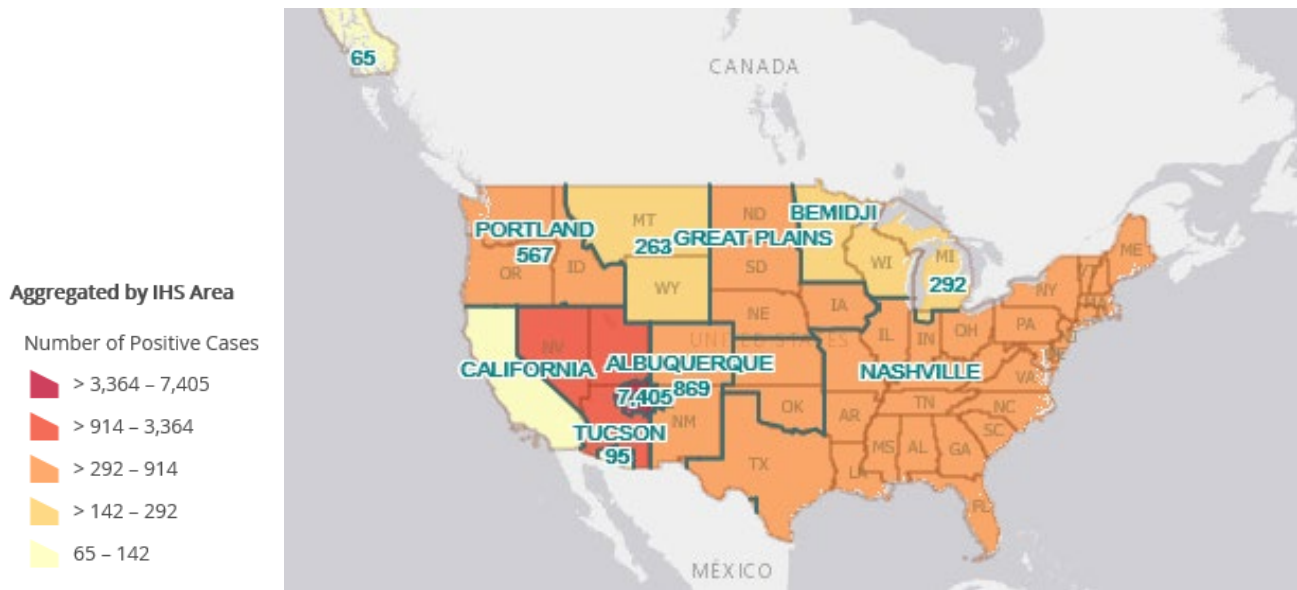
Within the focus areas described in Section IV, AmeriCorps VISTA encourages new project development in the following specific populations and geographic areas. Projects focused on serving these populations and communities will be given the highest consideration for investments of AmeriCorps VISTA resources.

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 and ensure access to health care in rural communities.

Indian Country

In FY 2021, 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. The Navajo Nation alone surpassed New York and New Jersey for the highest per-capita infection rate in the US in May 2020. (CNN)



Esri, HERE; US Census Bureau, Indian Health Service.

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.

Existing sponsors should prioritize expansion of additional sites into areas of concentrated poverty.

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 community members 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 so that some systems, processes, and project activities continue beyond the VISTA term of the project.
- 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 project 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.

To best support VISTA programming during times of uncertainty related to COVID-19, sponsors are asked 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. AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBER RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Once an organization's project application is approved, CNCS staff will work with the organization to determine when the sponsor's project director will participate in the Virtual Supervisor Orientation. Next, the CNCS 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 Virtual Member Orientation (VMO) at the start of service. In FY 2021, VISTA will offer In-Service Training opportunities for VISTA members.

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

VIII. VISTA CONCEPT PAPER AND APPLICATION PROCESS

For organizations that wish to develop an AmeriCorps VISTA project, CNCS 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 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](#). In addition, a [webinar recording](#) is available to assist with this process. You can also email vista@americorps.gov.

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