

**The Sustainability of AmeriCorps\*VISTA Programs and Activities**, Peopleworks, Inc.  
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An assessment of survival rates of VISTA program initiatives following the conclusion of the VISTA grant.

An important concern for many federal agencies is whether community development and social service programs that are supported by federal funds or resources achieve long-term sustainability. Over the past decade, greater emphasis has been placed on maximizing the role of VISTA members in organizational capacity building to increase the sustainability of projects. Each project typically operates for three to five years and with the expectation that at the end of this period a sustainable activity or organization has been created and will be supported by community resources and volunteers.

The purpose of the AmeriCorps\*VISTA sustainability study was to determine the impact of this shift in program emphasis. The two primary research goals of the study were to estimate the post-VISTA sustainability rates of service projects that had been supported by VISTAs and to identify the main factors that influenced sustainability rates. Specific objectives of the study included assessing (1) the impact of VISTAs on post-VISTA sustainability rates; (2) the role of the VISTAs in organizational capacity building; and (3) the role of national VISTA policies on survival outcomes.

In order to answer these questions, researchers attempted to contact and interview supervisory personnel from a sample of 240 VISTA supported projects that had closed two and five-years previous to April 1996. Of the 240 closed projects in the sample, 25 were found to be ineligible for the interview (the agency no longer existed, the project had VISTAs at the time of the study, or the project had never been initiated). Of the final sample of 215 eligible agencies, 119 completed a primary interview schedule, 82 completed a follow-up interview schedule, and 14 refused to be interviewed in any form, yielding a final response rate of 93 percent. The primary interview yielded information on all of the evaluation study questions. The follow-up interview was designed to determine if there were systematic differences between agencies that completed the primary interview and those that initially would not agree to be interviewed or could not be located. The follow-up interview yielded more limited information on the organizational characteristics of the VISTA supported agency, and the post project status of the VISTA supported activities. Throughout the study, a project was characterized as having continued or been sustained if the VISTA supported activities continued to exist at the originally funded agency at the time of the interview (April 1996).

Findings from the study indicate that projects are sustainable and that VISTA members were key to achieving sustainability. Nearly 68% of the VISTA supported projects continued to operate two and five years after the VISTA members had completed their assignments. While 76% of the two-year sample had survived, only 61% of the five-year sample were found to be operating.

Significantly, it was the programmatic activities, and not the period of time that had passed, that determined the sustainability rate. The shift on program emphasis to fundraising and resource development enabled projects to secure post-VISTA support from a variety of sources. Also, sponsors credited VISTA members with improving services, increasing the number of clients an agency served, or allowing a previous service to thrive. Agencies also gained additional resources through the members' efforts, as they recruited and trained community volunteers who continue to support local projects. Changes in national policies appear to have contributed to a dramatic shift in the way that projects used VISTA

volunteers. Older projects were far less likely to have involved VISTAs in community volunteer recruitment, training, and supervision than newer projects (20.7% versus 90.0% respectively).

Whether or not a project existed prior to receiving VISTA support did not influence sustainability rates. The study found that planning for sustainability matters and 95% of the projects in the two-year sample began continuation planning in the first year of VISTA support. In both the two-year and five-year samples, VISTA volunteers were hired by the organization following their service year (63% and 43% respectively), providing organizational stability that influenced sustainability rates.

The results of this study clearly demonstrate that VISTA supported programs are robust and sustain themselves at high rates after the VISTAs leave. The evidence points strongly to the positive and effective role that VISTAs can and do play in building the capacity of the supported programs to sustain themselves. The shift in emphasis toward sustainability and an increased role for VISTAs in organizational capacity building led to significant improvements in the survival rates of VISTA supported projects and to the more visible role of VISTA members.