



Important Information and Facts About AmeriCorps*VISTA (What You Should Know Before You Serve)

Term and Condition of Service

- Each VISTA Position is a one year commitment (12 months) For example, if you start on July 18th, 2005, your last day of service will be July 17th, 2006.
- The job is not your typical 9 to 5. While you will spend a good deal of time in an office setting, you will also be out in the community, and will need to attend meetings that occur outside of normal business hours. Evening and weekend meetings/events do occur, and as part of your scope of work, you are expected to participate in them. In other words, you are expected to be available for the needs of your community and project at all times.
- Volunteers are not permitted to hold any outside full-or part-time employment, or attend school while participating in their year of service. (Enrollment in school may be permitted to maintain Pell Grant eligibility – contact State Office for more details).
- VISTAs may not receive any compensation from sponsors or community members for their service in VISTA, however sponsors may arrange for housing assistance (see below) and creatively support their VISTAs in other ways (see next page).
- Volunteers MAY have INCOME from other sources, such as Social Security, child support, retirement pay, public assistance, etc., but may not have work, school, or other full-time voluntary obligations which require significant amounts of their time and attendance.

Subsistence Allowance (a.k.a. Living Allowance)

- It is paid every 2 weeks. (\$865/month)
- It is meant to cover basic living expenses.
- It is set at approximately the poverty level of a single individual and varies based on where the member serves.
- Sponsoring Organizations may NOT supplement your subsistence allowance.

Relocation Allowance

- A modest relocation allowance is provided to the AmeriCorps*VISTA member if they must relocate in order to serve for a one-year term of service.
- The relocation allowance is intended to cover initial moving-in expenses (security deposit, utility deposit, etc.)
- The relocation allowance will not exceed \$550.00 and is based on availability.
- AmeriCorps*VISTA members are also authorized a baggage allowance for shipment of personal effects between home of record and your project site, both on initial assignment and on termination.
- The baggage allowance, based on the direct mileage between two points, is \$25 per 100 miles, rounded to the nearest hundred, with a maximum of \$500.

Personal / Medical / Emergency Leave

- Personal Leave = 10 workdays of personal leave during each full year of service
- Medical Leave = up to 10 workdays of medical leave during each full year of service. If the need for additional medical leave arises, cases will be reviewed and handled individually with the State Office.
- Emergency Leave = up to 7 workday of emergency leave during each full year of service if a member of the volunteer's immediate family becomes critically ill or dies.

Health Coverage

- Health Coverage begins on the AmeriCorps*VISTA trainee first day and ends on the midnight of their termination date. Coverage is continuous during the member's service.
- Coverage includes payment for most medical and surgical costs, hospitalization, prescription drugs, and certain emergency dental, vision, and maternity care.
- Some medical costs NOT covered include:
 - o Routine physicals
 - o Dental exams
 - o Eye exams
 - o Medical costs associated with pre-existing conditions (except prescription medicines)
 - o Chiropractic visits and procedures
 - o Substance abuse
 - o Allergy tests
- Coverage applies to the AmeriCorps*VISTA member only, dependents are not covered.

Worker's Compensation

- If an AmeriCorps*VISTA member is injured while performing service, they are eligible to apply for Workmen's Compensation – under the Federal Employees Compensation Act (FECA) NOT the member's state – after their service ends.
- Benefits include lost wages and medical bills.
- The Department of Labor determines the validity of claims, and whether payments for a claim will be approved.
- An AmeriCorps*VISTA member will NOT be covered by FECA if the injury or disability results from misconduct, intoxication, or willful intent to ring about injury or death to yourself or others.

Income Exclusion from Public Assistance Calculations

- Persons receiving assistance or service under any federal, state, or local governmental program **before** joining AmeriCorps*VISTA should not lose those benefits, or have benefits reduced, as a result of service. This includes the following:
 - o Food Stamps/MIC
 - o Social Security Insurance
 - o TANF (replaced AFDC)
 - o Assisted Housing
 - o Veterans Assistance
- If AmeriCorps*VISTA members did not receive food stamps prior to their service, but wish to apply once they become a member, their subsistence allowance would be counted in determining their eligibility.

Termination from Service

- An AmeriCorps*VISTA member may be terminated from service for failure to perform assigned duties, unauthorized absences from their work site and project, and failure to follow AmeriCorps*VISTA policies and procedures.
- Only the Corporation State Office can terminate or suspend an AmeriCorps*VISTA member. The sponsor can request that the member be removed from their project.

Political/Religious Activities, Outside Compensation, Nepotism, and Discrimination

- AmeriCorps*VISTA members are prohibited from participating in political campaigns or voter registration drives, providing transportation to polls, lobbying and pro- or anti- labor organizing, or taking any action with respect to partisan or nonpartisan political activity while on duty or perceived to be on duty as an AmeriCorps*VISTA member. Members may participate in political activities outside of official duties.
- AmeriCorps*VISTA members may not give religious instruction, conduct worship services, proselytize, or engage in any other religious activity as part of their duties. Members may participate in religious activities outside of official duties.

End of Service Benefits

Education Award or End-of-Service Stipend

Upon **satisfactory completion of a full year** of AmeriCorps*VISTA service, members are eligible to receive a \$4,725 education award paid in the form of a voucher for educational expenses **OR** a \$1,200 cash stipend.

- If the AmeriCorps*VISTA member chooses the **Education Award**:
 - AmeriCorps*VISTA member can only receive **two** education awards in your lifetime regardless of the amount of each award.
 - Federal taxes are owed during the tax year that the education payment is made from your education award account for only the amount used in that tax year.
 - The member can receive "forbearance" on their loan based on national service.
 - Interest continues to accrue. The Trust will pay interest on your behalf upon completion of service. The interest payment is not deducted from your Education Award.
 - The Education Award must be used within seven years of the date you finished your service.
- If the AmeriCorps*VISTA member chooses the **Stipend**:
 - If the AmeriCorps*VISTA member chooses the stipend, it provides the member with a payment of \$1,200 at the end for 12 months of successful service.
 - At any time prior to the end of the AmeriCorps*VISTA member's 10th month of service, they may switch from the stipend to the Education Award.
- The member may be eligible for loan deferment based on criteria such as economic hardship – at the discretion of the lender. The type of deferment will depend on the type and date of the loan.

Civil Service Benefit

- Volunteers who have completed a full year of service will have "non-competitive eligibility" for federal civil service jobs, meaning that if otherwise qualified, the volunteer will not have to compete with general public applicants for jobs.
- If hired, VISTA service is credited for purposes of retirement and determining seniority in Federal Civil Service.

Creative Ways that Sponsor Organizations Support their VISTAs

You, the potential AmeriCorps*VISTA member, will do a great deal of work in your community, and for your sponsoring agency or organization. And as you know, you'll be trying to sustain yourself on a shoe-string budget. You may be wondering what sort of support your organization, or the community where you are serving, will be able to offer. An important thing to know is that your sponsoring organization and its staff are there to help you out, and not just when it comes to your "work." There are always little ways to make an AmeriCorps*VISTA member's life a little bit better. Here are some suggestions/ideas on things that sponsoring organizations have done to support VISTA(s) during their year of service. Not all of these ideas are feasible for each organization, it is intended to provide you, the potential AmeriCorps*VISTA, with an understanding of ways in which your sponsoring organization may be able to provide support during your year of service.

- Help VISTA(s) find cheap, appropriate housing or possibly pay their housing in part or in full.
- If there are multiple VISTA(s) that will be serving at the Volunteer Center - get them in touch with each other (prior to their service) to pool resources and possibly get housing together.
- Find out if staff members or friends of staff members would be willing to host a VISTA(s) member (if they have an extra room or a basement apartment).
- Provide public transportation credit to get the VISTA(s) to and from work and project sites. (Example: in Washington, D.C paying for metro pass cards to use the train/bus system.)
- Set up a car pool system with agency/organization staff so the VISTA(s) have a way to and from work everyday that is free.
- Gym benefits
- Create a list of cheap and inexpensive activities for the VISTA(s) to do in the community.
- Acquire tickets/passes for community events like shows/performances/concerts for the VISTA(s).
- Create a list of cheap grocery stores and other stores so that the VISTA(s) do not over-pay for anything. Also, let the VISTA(s) know of cheap Laundromats to do their laundry.
- Assist VISTA(s) in learning how to budget their finances during their service year.
- Educate your VISTA(s) on how to eat nutritious food on a small budget.
- Have staff potlucks so that the VISTA(s) can save money on food and enjoy some good homecookin'.
- Make sure the community knows that the VISTA(s) are there and what they are doing so the community can choose to show their gratitude by cooking dinner for them.
- Phone cards
- Allow VISTA(s) to have first grabs on any leftover food from office/conference meetings that take place at or through your agency/organization.
- And finally, always give encouragement and appreciation to your VISTA(s), whether it is verbal or little tokens on Valentines Day, Halloween, etc.