

Improving Lives and Communities: Perspectives on 40 Years of VISTA Service



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Senior Corps, the network of programs that helps Americans age 55 and older use their skills and experience in service opportunities that address the needs of their communities. Senior Corps includes the RSVP, Foster Grandparent Program, and Senior Companion Program;

AmeriCorps, whose members serve with local and national organizations to meet community needs, mobilize volunteers, and build the capacity of nonprofit organizations to address today's most pressing challenges;

Learn and Serve America, which helps link community service and learning objectives for youth from kindergarten through college as well as youth in community-based organizations.

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Executive Summary

VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) is the longest-running national domestic service program in the United States. The VISTA program's mission is to support low-income communities by strengthening local agencies and organizations that serve those communities, encouraging volunteer service, and generating the commitment of private sector resources. For over 40 years, VISTA has provided members to serve in non-profit, faith-based and other community organizations and public agencies across the nation to create and expand programs that bring low-income individuals and communities out of poverty.

Improving Lives and Communities: Perspectives on 40 Years of Service provides insights into the experiences of VISTA members, starting with the program's inception in 1965 until VISTA merged with AmeriCorps and became the AmeriCorps VISTA program in 1993. The report focuses on VISTA members' experiences and their civic engagement, education, employment, and the intergenerational transfer of values following their service in VISTA.

KEY FINDINGS

VISTA members demonstrated a sustained commitment to volunteering beyond their participation in VISTA.

- ❑ More than 95 percent of VISTA members continued to participate in volunteer activities in 2006, compared with the national average of 26.7 percent.
- ❑ African-American and Hispanic respondents were much more likely than Whites to report that their VISTA experience has strongly influenced the amount or kind of volunteering they have performed since leaving VISTA.
- ❑ Women were also more likely than men to say that their VISTA experience has strongly influenced the amount or kind of volunteering they have performed since leaving VISTA.

VISTA members are more likely to pass on the value of volunteering to future generations.

- ❑ VISTA members were more likely to report that their children regularly volunteer. They were also less likely to report that their children never participate in volunteer activities.
- ❑ VISTA members were more likely to report that their children accompanied them on volunteer activities, and were less likely to report that they have never had their children accompany them on volunteer activities.

- ❑ Research shows that youth with at least one parent who volunteers are much more likely to be regular volunteers than youth from non-volunteer families. In the study, a higher percentage of VISTA members (43%) reported that their children accompanied them on volunteer activities than respondents in the comparison group (35%). Moreover, respondents in the comparison group were much more likely than VISTA members to report that they have never had their children accompany them on volunteer activities.

Many VISTA members reported positive life changing experiences through service.

- ❑ When asked to describe the influence that VISTA had on them, many respondents felt that VISTA had changed them in important ways.
- ❑ Three-quarters of VISTA members reported that their VISTA experience made them re-examine their beliefs and attitudes about themselves.
- ❑ VISTA members were also more likely to be employed and reported higher levels of income, especially those that served between 1973 and 1980.

Results show strong voting activity among VISTA members, especially for African-Americans and Hispanics.

- ❑ Overall, 96 percent of VISTA members reported that they voted in a Presidential election or in a state or local election since leaving VISTA.
- ❑ Ten years after leaving the VISTA program, African-American and Hispanic VISTA members were more likely to have voted in a national or local election.

STUDY DESIGN

Improving Lives and Communities: Perspectives on 40 Years of VISTA Service is a retrospective study of VISTA members' experiences serving between 1965 and 1993. To provide a point of reference, the experiences and outcomes of VISTA members were compared to those of similar individuals who applied for VISTA, completed a portion of the pre-service training, but ultimately did not serve. Report data were collected from two sources: 1) a telephone survey administered to 1,539 respondents designed to provide information on the breadth of VISTA's effects; and 2) a series of in-depth personal interviews with 64 participants, providing highly detailed insights into the experiences of a smaller sample of VISTA members. Both data collection components were structured to gather feedback from three distinct generations of members defined by major program and policy shifts that have shaped the evolution of VISTA over its 40-year history. The study was conducted by Abt Associates Inc., an independent social policy and research firm, under contract to the Corporation for National and Community Service.

VISTA Timeline

The timeline below reflects events in the United States during the span of VISTA's 40 year history. Along side these events are snapshots of program policy at certain points in the VISTA Program.

VISTA Organization	Program Features/Policies		Social/Political	Presidents
				President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969)
The VISTA Program is formed in 1965 under the Office of Economic Opportunity	VISTA provided funding through grants to national and local sponsoring agencies Membership recruitment takes place on a national scale with extended residential training lasting 5-6 weeks	1965	War on Poverty and Great Society Programs Escalation of Vietnam War Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King	Election of President Richard M. Nixon (1969-1974)
	VISTA members' placement focuses on local and county government as well as non-profit agencies Restrictions established on national grants and involvement in voter registration and union organizing Transfer of VISTA to newly formed ACTION agency emphasizing volunteerism	1970	Resignation of President Nixon	Election of President Gerald Ford (1974-1977)
	VISTA focuses on recruiting volunteers with professional backgrounds Resumption of national grants VISTA utilizes a balance of national and local member recruitment and placement efforts	1975	End of Vietnam War Energy "crisis" and return of American hostages held in Iran	Election of President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981)
	Significant funding cuts resulting in reduced preservice training VISTA utilizes membership recruitment and placement exclusively at the community level VISTA service emphasizes adult education and literacy	1980	Introduction of IBM PC	Election of President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989)
	Increase in VISTA volunteer training to 3 days plus some "in-service" activities during first month	1985	Iran-Contra Affair NASA Challenger disaster Economic "crash" of 1987 Fall of Berlin Wall	Election of President George H. W. Bush (1989-1993)
VISTA becomes part of the new AmeriCorps program and is housed under a new federal agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service		1990		Election of President William Clinton (1993-2001)



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