

AmeriCorps Programs and Public Housing Authorities

Consider AmeriCorps

Since 1991, and perhaps even earlier, public housing authorities (PHAs) and PHA-assisted communities have benefited from the work of VISTAs (Volunteers in Service to America) and other AmeriCorps members. The efforts and dedication of AmeriCorps members have enabled PHAs across the country to strengthen programs and develop innovative projects for low-income communities. At the same time, the AmeriCorps members working for PHAs have gained confidence, job skills, work experience, and increased motivation to continue serving their communities.

AmeriCorps is a program of the federal government that is administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The program provides grants to non-profit organizations and local governments to help recruit and support volunteers that work towards meeting community needs.

Opportunities for PHAs to develop and expand AmeriCorps projects arguably have never been better.

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, signed by President Obama on April 21, 2009, supports the continued growth of national service programs over the next decade. As the result of the Serve America Act, the annual number of AmeriCorps members sponsored is expected to increase from 75,000 to 250,000 by 2017. In addition, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 has allocated \$201 million for CNCS to put an estimated 13,000 additional AmeriCorps members to work immediately.

This brief gives an overview of AmeriCorps programs and describes the findings from a recent HUD study that looked at the AmeriCorps projects of 11 PHAs. In addition, recommendations are given for the development of new AmeriCorps projects by housing agencies.



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Existing AmeriCorps Projects of PHAs

The exact number of PHAs that sponsor AmeriCorps members is unknown; however, the number is estimated to be around 50. HUD is working with CNCS to gather more detailed information about the AmeriCorps projects of PHAs around the country.

The HUD study focused on the AmeriCorps projects of PHAs located in North Carolina, Ohio, Minnesota, Washington,

Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Nevada and Oklahoma.

Although numerous funding streams are administered by CNCS, the PHAs studied have secured mainly direct or indirect grants from AmeriCorps State and VISTA. Members have carried out activities that range from the organization of fundraising events, to teaching art classes for the youth and seniors

of housing developments, to building the capacities of resident councils.

Much can be learned from the experiences of PHAs that have sponsored AmeriCorps members. More details regarding the projects studied can be found on page 5 of this brief.

Data on existing projects:

- An estimated 50 PHAs currently sponsor AmeriCorps members.
- Interviewed PHAs sponsor an average of 9.6 members per year.
- At least 30% of members sponsored by the majority of interviewed PHAs are public housing residents or voucher holders.

More on the Programs of CNCS

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) administers grants through three primary program tracks: Senior Corps, Learn and Serve America, and AmeriCorps. The programs within each track all aim to engage Americans in serving their communities, but the objectives and administrative processes of each program type differ significantly.

Senior Corps programs seek to

draw on the skills and experiences of retired adults, while Learn and Serve America programs focus on developing service-learning opportunities for students of all ages. AmeriCorps programs are more general, providing the means for public and non-profit organizations to strengthen their capacities through assistance and expertise provided by service

corps members.

At a local level, AmeriCorps State grants are administered by governor-appointed State Service Commissions, while AmeriCorps VISTA grants are administered through CNCS State Offices. For both types of grants, PHAs may receive funding through the intermediary organizations that exist in many states.

Intermediaries provide support to smaller organizations in the sponsoring of AmeriCorps members.

PHAs might also consider AmeriCorps' Education Award Program (EAP). Project participants receive only education awards for their efforts, and therefore less time is required of project sponsors for the completion paperwork and other administrative tasks.

"What I didn't know is how it was going to benefit me so much.... When I joined AmeriCorps, I was going through a divorce. The project helped me to keep my mind off my own problems by helping others. I've gained self assurance and am prepared for the next challenge." – An AmeriCorps Member for the Tulsa Housing Authority

AmeriCorps State versus AmeriCorps VISTA

One of the primary differences between State and VISTA involves the focus and intended outcomes of each program. State grants are more general in scope, calling for members to assist non-profit organizations, schools, and other entities in providing services to communities. VISTA, on the other hand, has four core principles: anti-poverty, community empowerment, capacity building, and sustainable solutions. VISTA members do not provide direct service, but rather work

with organizations to find sustainable ways to bring individuals and communities out of poverty.

The HUD study found that sponsoring VISTA members is a great way for PHAs to bring on creative, energetic individuals that can help agencies expand services and apply new ideas to existing projects. Alternatively, sponsoring AmeriCorps State members is helpful for agencies that are more in need of assistance with direct service activities and less

interested in expansion and innovation.

Both types of activities benefit members as opportunities to develop job skills, work experience, and leadership capabilities. Although being more of a byproduct of AmeriCorps projects, rather than a key focus, the job skills and experience gained through AmeriCorps are particularly valuable for residents that serve as members.

The table below outlines additional differences between the two programs.

	State	VISTA
Focus	Assisting organizations in serving local communities	Building the capacities of organizations to develop sustainable means for bringing communities out of poverty
Activities	Working directly with community members, such as through tutoring, construction, administering trainings, etc.	Developing the long-term financial resources and human capital for organizations to carry out new activities, such as through fundraising, community organizing, volunteer recruitment, etc.
Cost-share	Generally required, amount depends on the state and the type of award.	Not required, although encouraged if organization applies for funding for more than 3 years
Project time limits	None, but cost-share requirements may increase over time.	3 years, more if cost share is provided
Benefits and services covered	Depends on the state. Can be more or less than VISTA due to differences in a state's budget priorities.	Benefits and services include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$4,725 education award or \$1,200 post-service stipend. • Health coverage for all members assigned to your project - approximately \$2,700 per member. • Payroll services: Members receive their paychecks directly from AmeriCorps VISTA. • Training in project management and leadership for members and project supervisor. • Travel costs associated with training. Moving allowance for members relocating to serve. • Childcare for income-eligible members.

Getting Started

Interviewees emphasized that the development of a successful AmeriCorps project depends on the degree to which goal setting and planning activities are carried out prior to submitting a grant application. As noted by Sidney Campbell at the CNCS office in Minnesota, many organizations applying for funding “haven’t fully researched their project and what they want to accomplish; sometimes their goals are too big, and it doesn’t work out.”

PHAs should first check out online information regarding the programs at www.nationalservice.gov and

www.americorps.gov.

Agencies then may contact the local CNCS State Office regarding VISTA sponsorship and/or their State Service Commission to sponsor AmeriCorps State members. Contacting the appropriate office enables potential sponsors to discuss ideas, receive applications, and learn about deadlines and other program information.

After gaining a better understanding of the different types of programs, CNCS recommends carrying out a community needs

assessment.

PHAs then can begin making plans, setting goals, and writing the grant proposal. CNCS staff recommend that AmeriCorps positions be well-planned and specific, clearly corresponding with project goals and expected outcomes. AmeriCorps members should have a good understanding of responsibilities and expectations from the very beginning. Good planning, training and ongoing support for members helps to ensure that members’ terms of service

are beneficial for all involved. A low member completion rate puts at risk a sponsoring organization’s ability to secure AmeriCorps funding in the future.

Recruitment strategies are also critical to a project’s success. PHAs should aim to recruit individuals that not only can work hard and make significant contributions, but also those that would truly benefit from the experience and are passionate about the work.

Residents as Members

Most interviewees agreed that bringing on residents as AmeriCorps members is an approach that can uniquely benefit all involved. Both PHAs and assisted families benefit significantly from residents working as AmeriCorps members, largely due to the resident member’s commitment to and understanding of their own community. Residents are able to serve as liaisons between service providers, PHA staff, and community members.

Key to the success of such an

approach is ensuring the residents’ understanding that serving as AmeriCorps members is the equivalent in many ways to working as professional, full-time employees of the PHA. One way to ensure that resident AmeriCorps members understand that they are staff members is by including them in regular staff meetings.

Giving resident members opportunities to represent their community and work on an equal level as other PHA



staff raises their confidence and self-esteem. In addition, resident members gain valuable work experience and job skills.

The challenges of bringing on residents to serve as members have outweighed the benefits

for a number of PHAs interviewed. The potential challenges, such as the extra time and personal attention needed by resident members, should be taken into consideration before assuming this approach.

Managing a Successful Project

Discussions with PHAs and grant administrators revealed the degree to which a good project manager can make or break a project. The paperwork and other administrative tasks involved in managing an AmeriCorps project are extensive. Site visits and monitoring of project activities are critical, and most AmeriCorps project managers also hold weekly or bi-weekly

group meetings to discuss members’ successes and challenges faced.

If a PHA decides to sponsor a medium to large project (more than eight to ten members), a full-time AmeriCorps manager should be hired that values and understands the benefits of community service. For smaller PHAs that are concerned about having the time to manage an

AmeriCorps project, becoming a subgrantee of an intermediary organization should be considered. Intermediary organizations work directly with CNCS and State Commissions, and they can provide support to PHAs for meeting reporting and other administrative requirements, as well as recruiting, training, and supervising members.

For more information

PHAs interested in learning more should talk to their local CNCS offices. Contact information can be found on the website, www.americorps.gov.

The full report from the HUD study on the AmeriCorps projects of PHAs can be obtained by contacting Ron Ashford at ronald.t.ashford@hud.gov.

Overview of AmeriCorps Projects Studied

PHA	Type of Program	Years	Number of members	Types of members	Types of activities
Burlington Housing Authority, NC	VISTA	1992 - present	15 at a time, plus 5 summer VISTAs, about 150 total.	Very diverse, of all ages. About 4-5 residents participate at a time, around 40 total.	Community building, leadership building for resident councils, fundraising and youth project development.
Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority, OH	VISTA	1994 - present	8 at a time, about 120 total.	All women residents.	Instructors for the HIPPY project (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youth).
Duluth Housing and Redevelopment Authority, MN	State (through intermediary, True North AmeriCorps)	2003 - present	2 at a time, about 12 total.	Mostly recent college graduates. About 5 residents have participated.	Members work for the Copland Community Center, a non-profit that serves one of the housing authority's HOPE VI developments. The activities always involve working for the afterschool and summer projects.
King County Housing Authority, WA	State and some VISTA in the past (through intermediary Washington State Service Corps)	1997 - present	12 at a time, before nearly 50 at a time. About 200 total.	Most are aged 20 to 26, some seniors. At least 2 years of college required. 6 residents have participated.	Afterschool programs, community building, environmental education, food bank support, volunteer supervision, development of community gardens, ESL classes.
Kingsport Housing and Redevelopment Authority, WA	VISTA and State (through intermediary, Tennessee Community Assistance Corporation)	1992 - present	6-8 at a time, about 35 total. Includes summer VISTAs.	Average age 33 to 55. Around 25 have been residents. Summer VISTAs are mostly college students.	Strengthening resident associations, community building, organizing volunteers, developing on-site resource centers and libraries, fundraising, organizing health fairs, developing youth and senior programs.
Mercer County Housing Authority, PA	State (through intermediary, Keystone Smiles)	1997 - present	6-10 at a time, 96 total.	All ages. Around 60 have been residents, many of whom are single parents.	Early childhood education, construction, job skills training programs.
Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, WI	National (education awards provided through the Corps Network)	1991 - present	Average of 100 per year, around 1600 total.	Young adults aged 18 to 23. All participants are Section 3 eligible (from low-income families in public housing or other housing nearby).	The Milwaukee Community Service Corps administers the project for the youth of families receiving housing assistance. Project provides work experience and job training in construction, as well as AmeriCorps education awards upon project completion.
Minneapolis Housing Authority, MN	VISTA	1995 - present	5-8 at a time, about 35 total.	All ages. All members are public housing residents or Section 8 voucher holders.	Coordination of resource room and the distribution of housing information, relationship building among resident councils and outside service providers, organization and strengthening of resident councils for the implementation of activities
Reno Housing Authority, NV	VISTA	1996 - 2002	5 at a time, around 25 total.	All ages. All members were public housing residents or Section 8 voucher holders.	Recruitment and marketing for Family Self Sufficiency program, fundraising for resident councils, strengthening of relationships with service providers, youth program development
Tacoma Housing Authority, WA	State and some VISTA in the past (through intermediary Washington State Service Corps)	2002 - present	12 at a time, previously just individual members. Around 38 total.	All ages. Had 2 residents serve in 2006.	Community outreach, volunteer management, disaster preparedness, income tax assistance, job search assistance, computer skills, ESL and basic adult education, financial literacy and homeownership classes
Tulsa Housing Authority, OK	State	1998 - present	18 at a time, over 175 total.	Mostly young adults. Around 80 residents total.	Lifeskills programming for adult residents (parenting, budgeting, health/hygiene), disaster preparedness, programming for youth and seniors