

VISTA 201

Developed for AmeriCorps VISTA by [Education Northwest](#)

This orientation is designed to walk you through the process of applying to become an AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsor. The first step is to [contact your CNCS State Office](#) to get yourself on the right track.

This orientation is divided into four main sections:

1. **Initial Planning:** The more work you do upfront, the smoother your application process will be.
2. **Concept Paper:** Focus on how your proposed project will meet community needs.
3. **Project Application:** If your paper is accepted, you'll be asked to complete the application and fill in the details.
4. **Looking Ahead:** While waiting for final approval, familiarize yourself with critical VISTA project tasks.

Within each section, you will have the opportunity to explore various subtopics. These contain essential information about the application process and often include learning activities, worksheets, and opportunities to learn more.

It should take around two hours for you to cover the key learning in VISTA 201 and longer if you explore additional resources. Because the VISTA sponsor application involves several phases, you might want to come back at various times during the application process.

At the end of this document, you will also find the following additional resources:

- An Application Timeline listing the main tasks described in this orientation, and the relative level of effort of each, for easy reference.
- A Glossary of terms.
- Information about contacting your CNCS State Office, and an explanation of the types of questions the State Office is best able to assist you with.

Section 1 - Initial Planning

Initial Planning: Overview

You've made the decision to apply for a VISTA project. Now what? This section will help you get ready to prepare the strongest possible application.

This section will take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Initial Planning: What VISTA Expects

The success of an application depends on two key aspects:

- Aligning your community need and project goals to VISTA's mission to break the cycle of poverty
- Your vision for how VISTA members will build the capacity of your organization and community

The Concept Paper and Project Application instructions include an additional list of items necessary for approval consideration. Highlights include:

- Description of anticipated self-sufficiency of anti-poverty efforts after the VISTA project is complete
- Internal consistency across the written elements of the application
- Involvement of participants from the beneficiary community in planning and implementation
- Management and technical capability
- Plans to train, supervise, and support VISTA members

What is the difference between applying for a VISTA and applying for a grant?

Applying for VISTAs vs. Applying for a Grant

While applying for a VISTA project is much like a writing a grant application, there are important differences.

People power

A grant application is typically a request for funding. Grants often provide resources for building physical infrastructure or to defray operational costs. A VISTA project does

not usually provide funding but rather provides the services of one or more full-time VISTA members over a specific period.

This presents a shift in the grant-writing perspective. Rather than creating a plan for what money can do for your organization, a VISTA project application focuses on what tasks a VISTA member can reasonably accomplish over a year, while also planning for multiple VISTAs over multiple years.

What you give back

Grants are given for specific purposes. Once you receive a grant, you report back on the difference the grant made.

A VISTA project, on the other hand, requires dedicated and ongoing involvement from your organization. Your organization will need to identify a supervisor to be substantially involved with the VISTA project members. In addition to workspace and equipment, you will need to provide your new VISTAs an orientation to your organization and the community as well as ongoing training, coaching, and supervision

Aligning with VISTA's mission and goals

Each year, VISTA identifies programming priorities to invest resources in support of its anti-poverty mission.

When you write your Concept Paper, you'll be asked which of the current priorities your project will address. The annually updated [AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance for Current and Potential Project Sponsors](#) provides background you'll need to make this decision. You don't need to read this whole document now, but this is a key resource that you will want to download and save for reference

Initial Planning: Project Goal Setting

As you begin the application, you'll benefit from defining the goal your project intends to meet, as well as the key activities VISTA members can perform to achieve your goal. You'll refer to these items several times throughout the process.

Keep in mind your goal must focus on poverty. The way you express your goal can evolve throughout the application process; what's most important early on is to identify the problem your project will solve.

Example of a VISTA project goal:

To ensure that children and youth of incarcerated parents in our community receive the social and emotional support they need to help them escape the cycle of poverty, the project will build the capacity of our program/organization/community through the development of a sustainable volunteer recruitment program and management system for the mentoring center

VISTA members carry out major and minor tasks that address your goal and build the capacity of your organization and/or the community to continue the anti-poverty work after the VISTA project ends. Again, you can expand upon and adapt your VISTA member activities as you progress through the application process.

Examples of VISTA member activities (related to developing volunteer recruitment and management systems):

- Help stakeholders recognize need for and use of volunteers
- Help clarify volunteer roles
- Develop volunteer generation plan
- Develop partnerships for recruiting volunteers
- Develop volunteer unit, volunteer manual/training/curriculum
- Recruit volunteers
- Develop/pilot volunteer training
- Develop volunteer intake/tracking/recognition system
- Train staff to manage volunteer plan
- Resource plan for ongoing support of systems (recognition, training, supervision)

Initial Planning: Planning for Sustainability**Achieving sustainability through capacity-building**

VISTA members engage in an array of capacity-building activities with the ultimate aim of helping your anti-poverty programming achieve sustainability. In other words, a VISTA project should lead to an ability to maintain enhanced or increased services after the VISTA resource is gone.

To promote sustainability through capacity building, VISTA members work in these broad goal areas:

- Scale/reach: You aim to increase your organization's or program's ability to serve more people, serve new groups of people, or provide new or expanded types of services.
- Effectiveness: You aim to increase your organization's or program's ability to achieve better outcomes for beneficiaries.
- Efficiency: You aim to increase your organization's or program's ability to provide improved outcomes for beneficiaries with the same level of resources, or to improve or maintain consistent quality of services with fewer resources.
- Leveraged Resources: You aim to increase your organization's or program's ability to generate additional resources or assets, such as funding, volunteers, in-kind support, and partnerships

Initial Planning: Engaging the Community

Involving the community in your project is integral to a successful application. VISTA requires that you incorporate input from the low-income community in all phases of your project.

Community involvement often takes the form of an advisory group, also known as an advisory council, board, committee, or task force. You can also meet the requirement with significant representation from the low-income community on your board of directors.

Advisory groups meet periodically to provide input on the project, including:

- Identification of emerging community needs
- Instant reactions to new ideas
- Recommendations for actions
- Diverse perspectives
- Problem-solving
- Suggestions for improvement and innovations
- Feedback on past efforts

While advisory groups are often effective, VISTA project sponsors have developed additional ways to engage the community, such as:

- Hosting community input meetings focused on generating ideas or reacting to a proposed project
- Creating ad hoc committees that exist for a very specific, short-term purpose
- Distributing surveys and/or other activities that gather input

Initial Planning: Choosing a Supervisor and Other Roles

Sponsoring a VISTA project requires a significant level of involvement from your organization. There are multiple roles that staff members play when applying for and serving as a VISTA sponsor. Several roles may be held by the same person, or may be distributed among people depending on the resources of the organization.

Grantee administrator

The grantee administrator is the staff member who has set up your eGrants account and has the ability to assign eGrants roles. If your organization has partnered with CNCS in the past and already has an account, you will need to work with your existing eGrants system administrator to add new roles to complete the application.

Authorized representative/Certifying official

This person is an administrative official -- often a manager or executive director -- with the authority to commit resources at your organization. The authorized representative may or may not be involved in the day-to-day operation of the VISTA project, but is the signatory official over the life of the project.

VISTA supervisor/Project manager

On your application, you'll be asked to submit a resume for the staff member dedicated to serving as a VISTA supervisor. This person will manage the project and provide daily supervision to your VISTAs.

When identifying a supervisor, look for someone with adequate time to provide a significant level of supervision, as well as the interpersonal skills needed to support your VISTAs. Successful VISTA supervisors have excellent coaching, communication, and multi-tasking skills.

Responsibilities and skill sets include:

- Recruiting, interviewing, and selecting candidates
- Providing training opportunities for the VISTAs
- Providing day-to-day supervision and support of VISTAs
- Coordinating aspects of the project beyond the scope of the VISTAs' work

- Submitting regular progress reports to the CNCS State Office

Sub-site supervisors

If you are planning to place any VISTAs outside your organization, there will also need to be a supervisor at each site

Initial Planning: Setting up an eGrants Account

eGrants is the online platform you'll use to submit your VISTA sponsor application and manage your VISTA project once you are up and running.

Enrolling in eGrants is not as simple as signing up for a typical online account.

Important! If your organization has applied for CNCS resources in the past, your eGrants administrator will need to activate your account and assign roles to you so you can complete your application. Contact the National Service Hotline at (800) 942-2677 if you need assistance

When you're ready to create your account, [sign up here](#)

Getting Help

The eGrants Help Desk provides technical support. There are three ways to get help:

- Contact the National Service Hotline at (800) 942-2677
- [Submit a question online](#)
- Click the Contact Help Desk link found at the bottom left-hand corner of the page when you are logged into eGrants

If your organization has applied for CNCS resources in the past, then you probably already have an eGrants account. You'll need to work with the eGrants administrator for that account to get the necessary permissions so you can create a log-in for yourself and add elements to your application. Do not create a duplicate account

VISTA project applicants sometimes find that their organization already has an account but do not know who is the administrative official who controls the account. This can be a greater challenge in multi-affiliate organizations. If this is the case, contact the National Service Hotline at (800) 942-2677 for assistance.

VISTA provides two online tools for sponsors and members. As a VISTA sponsor, you'll mostly use eGrants, but it's helpful to understand how these two tools are related to each other. Though separate, these systems do interact.

- eGrants is the system that VISTA sponsors (and other organizations that receive CNCS resources) use to apply for and manage grants and submit documents to the CNCS State Office for approval.
- My AmeriCorps (also known as the Portal) is a system that prospective, current, and former AmeriCorps and VISTA members use to apply for positions and manage their post-service education benefits. VISTA sponsors will access the administrative side of My AmeriCorps through eGrants to post service opportunities to recruit new VISTAs

Initial Planning: Gathering Documents

In the final stages of the process, you'll be asked to attach a number of documents to your electronic application. Start gathering these documents now to save time later

- Copy of most recent financial audit (if available)
- List of advisory group members and their written comments about the application (not applicable if 51 percent or more of the persons on your board of directors' are of the low-income community).
- Copy of Articles of Incorporation (not applicable to public entities).
- List of board of directors, or governing body (not applicable to public entities) and their written comments about the application (comments not applicable if you created a separate advisory group that will submit written comments)
- Organizational chart of the applying body
- Tax exempt status: either IRS determination or copy of application to IRS for exemption (not applicable to public entities)
- Copy of Supervisor's résumé and job description. For multi-site projects, a list of organizations where members will be placed, organization addresses, contact persons and contact information, copy of site supervisor's résumé and job description, and a letter of commitment from the board of directors of each organization
- Negotiated Indirect Cost Agreement (if applicable)
- Letters of support for the proposed project from other organizations in your community. If the organization is a project partner, the letter should describe the type of support and/or resources the partner organization will contribute

- Budget worksheet submitted for your project, depending on the type and level of resources you are required to provide (based on your conversation with your CNCS State Office)

Initial Planning: Summary

In this section, you learned what to expect from the application process as well as what VISTA expects in a successful application. Covered topics included goal setting, planning for sustainability, community engagement, supervisory and other organizational roles, eGrants, and documents to gather.

These items can give you a head start before you embark on the application and begin working on your Concept Paper.

Next steps

- Download the [Concept Paper](#) and [Project Application](#) instructions.
- Read the [AmeriCorps VISTA Guidance for Current and Potential Project Sponsors](#) document to learn more about what VISTA expects (with an emphasis on the types of projects VISTA is prioritizing and VISTA's data collection requirements).
- [Set up an eGrants account](#) (or ask your organization's eGrants administrator to set up a role for you that allows you to create your application).

Additional Resources

On the Campus

- [Core Competencies of a Supervisor tutorial](#)

On The Web

- [Performance Measurement Core Curriculum](#)
- [Best Evidence Encyclopedia](#)
- [Building an Effective Advisory Committee](#)
- [Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy](#)
- [eGrants/My AmeriCorps support team](#)
- [eGrants resources on the National Service Knowledge Network](#)
- [Frequently asked questions about My AmeriCorps and eGrants](#)
- [Getting a D-U-N-S number](#)

- [PerformWell](#)
- [What Works Clearinghouse from the Department of Education](#)

Section 2 - Concept Paper

Concept Paper: Overview

When you have thought through the project you want to propose, it's time to get started writing. Before you can submit an application to VISTA, you need to submit a Concept Paper for approval. This section will provide you with what you need to create a successful Concept Paper.

Before you begin, download and review the [Concept Paper Instructions](#).

This section will take approximately 40 minutes to complete.

Concept Paper: The Parts of the Concept Paper

The Concept Paper consists of two information sections and several narratives. Following is an overview of everything that needs a response. Click each item for more information.

Applicant information

This includes basic project and contact information as well as [EIN](#) and [D-U-N-S](#) numbers.

Application information

This includes information about the specific format of your project, financial information, and proposed project start and end dates. [Your CNCS State Office](#) can provide guidance on these items.

Need statement

This is where you describe your organization's anti-poverty programming needs and how your project will strengthen the community and bring individuals out of poverty. You must provide data to support your statement.

Strengthening communities statement

Here you will detail how your project will complement or expand current efforts and achieve sustainability.

Organizational capacity statement

In this section, you'll show that your organization has the capacity to manage the project, including how you will recruit and supervise VISTA members and what community partners you will engage.

Intermediary justification statement

This section is required only if you are applying to be an intermediary sponsor, or an organization that helps deliver resources to other organizations

Concept Paper: What Does the State Office Look For?

When evaluating your Concept Paper, the CNCS State Office staff looks at the resources available, the strength of your proposed project, and your ability to describe it clearly. The work you do at this stage of the process will lay the foundation for the application and your VISTA project.

A Strong Concept Paper:

- Establishes a clear link among:
 - a poverty-related community need
 - the proposed project and its clearly defined goal
 - the long-term impact on the beneficiaries
- Addresses one of the current VISTA programming priorities
- Uses strong, direct language
- Includes current, objective, and local data
- Follows any state-specific guidelines for narrative length (check with your CNCS State Office)
- Includes responses to all required questions and has been submitted through eGrants

A Weak Concept Paper:

- Does not clearly identify the community need, goal, and project impact
- Includes little or no community involvement or sustainable planning
- Does not justify the reason for the VISTA members
- Uses outdated, overly general, or uncited data
- Does not demonstrate a strong connection between the organization's current work and the proposed project
- Provides vague language such as, "We hope this works"
- Proposes a project that could cause job displacement (VISTAs cannot replace existing staff, contracts or volunteers) or lists inappropriate activities for the VISTAs (for example, lobbying, direct service, administrative work)

Concept Paper: Writing a Powerful Need Statement

This narrative includes more than the need your project intends to address. It also introduces the interventions, or in other words, the strategy, your program will employ to meet that need. And finally, the narrative presents the intended outcomes of the intervention on the economically disadvantaged individuals and communities you have targeted.

Your need statement must demonstrate:

1. That your project is directly related to the VISTA mission to eliminate or alleviate the effects of poverty.
2. That the need you've identified is valid.
 - For example, if your program focuses on job-skills training for young veterans, you must document the high unemployment rate within the population you intend to serve, reflect that the reason certain young veterans are unemployed is due to a lack of education, training credentials, and professional experience, rather than some other cause.
3. That your intervention has a likelihood of success.
 - In the veterans' example, you might cite evidence for the connection between completion of job training programs and securing employment, and therefore propose a project that connects veterans with appropriate training opportunities. As this example indicates, the intervention as a program strategy is distinct from the organizational capacity-building activities that your VISTA member will undertake in support of your program strategy.
4. That the outcome(s) you aim to achieve is (are) meaningful and realistic, and that there is a strong and clear connection between the need, intervention, and outcome.
 - In the veterans' example, increased enrollment in training programs would lead to an increase in employment among the veterans you are serving.

The work you do on your need statement will apply directly to your performance measures, which you will complete near the end of the application process

[The CNCS Performance Measurement Core Curriculum](#) has a Theory of Change tutorial that addresses how to connect the need, interventions, and outcomes in more detail. You'll also find resources on evidence and data collection

Using data to show a need exists

When providing evidence of a poverty-related need, look for data that include these attributes:

- **Current:** The more recent the data, the better.
- **Objective:** Seek out primary resources, such as government data and reports from credible institutes, foundations, and universities. It can include data your organization has generated based on a valid data-collection methodology.
- **Local:** While national and state data paint a general picture of a problem, look for data that get as close to the source as possible -- to the county, municipal, school district, or even neighborhood level.

Informing your intervention with evidence

Your need statement must demonstrate that you have chosen an intervention (also known as a program strategy) that will address the need and is likely to lead to the intended outcome. One way to demonstrate that your program strategy is appropriate is to provide evidence that it has been effective under similar conditions. Here are samples of appropriate evidence sources:

- **Past performance:** What approaches have worked for your organization in the past?
- **Results from credible research:** What does unbiased, peer-reviewed research say about your approach?
- **Results from a similar, successful program:** What approaches developed by others can you replicate? (This is particularly applicable to newer programs)

Zeroing in on your goals

When writing your need statement, be sure to carefully consider and directly address your intended outcome. As mentioned above in the veterans' job training example, the outcome should be meaningful, achievable, and logically connected to the need and planned intervention in a clear and compelling way.

A meaningful outcome:

- Aligns with the identified community need
- Represents a real change in the lives of the beneficiaries

Finally, reach out to other stakeholders in the community, to confirm that they also view your proposed outcome as important and impactful. Ensuring that the community supports your intended outcome can significantly enhance your need statement

Concept Paper: Writing the Strengthening Communities Statement

A successful strengthening communities narrative should clearly describe the elements of your project design that will lead to long-term sustainability. You should also include a discussion of how your approach will change over time.

This is also the section of the application process that asks you to determine how many VISTAs you'll need to make your project a success. Since there isn't a formula to determine this number, work closely with your CNCS State Office to decide how many VISTAs are needed for the project to succeed.

Here is a sampling of VISTA member capacity-building activities that relate to sustainability.

- Focus on systems: VISTAs often assist their organizations in creating systems for purposes such as tracking donors and volunteers. Once these systems are up and running, they can enhance your ability to meet community needs long after your VISTA project ends.
- Create programs for community volunteers: Community members are often dedicated to making the area where they live better. People support what they help create. Successful projects involve the community in every phase. VISTA have a long history of working with community volunteers to create anti-poverty programs that attract committed, long-term, volunteers who carry on the work long after the VISTAs have gone.
- Improve visibility and outreach: VISTAs often create communications templates and build partnerships with local media that can increase your stature in the community, draw crowds to your fundraising events, and attract community members to your volunteer projects.
- Build partnerships: While performing a variety of capacity-building activities, VISTAs help facilitate mutually beneficial and lasting partnerships between you and other like-minded regional and national organizations

Concept Paper: The Final Narratives

The last two narratives in the Concept Paper are the organizational capacity and intermediary justification statements.

Organizational capacity

Showing that you can successfully manage a federal national service program is an important component of your application.

To get a head start, seek out examples of your organization's previous experience in anti-poverty programming and brainstorm a list of community partners you intend to engage in your VISTA project.

If applicable, research your organization's current and/or past experiences sponsoring AmeriCorps programs including VISTA. In particular, gather descriptions of national service activities. You may also want to sketch out a plan describing how you will manage the VISTA project, including the recruitment and supervision of VISTA members. You'll get a chance to elaborate on these items later in the Project Application

Intermediary justification

This section is required only if you are applying to be an intermediary sponsor, or an organization that helps deliver resources to other organizations. Consult your CNCS State Office for more information.

If you are filling out this section, you'll need to provide data to substantiate the need in all of the geographic areas you will serve, along with additional details about how you will manage your sites.

Concept Paper: Summary

In this section, you learned about creating a strong Concept Paper, from describing and substantiating the poverty-related need your project will address, to developing a sustainable program that will build capacity and strengthen your community long after the VISTA resources are gone.

As you've noticed, the Concept Paper will take significant effort in time and research, and it's your "foot-in-the-door" to move to the application process. With a clear vision, good data, and excellent planning, you are well on your way.

Next steps

1. Download the [VISTA Concept Paper Instructions](#) if you haven't already.
2. [Contact your CNCS State Office](#) to ask questions about the process specific to your state. If you need additional assistance, ask if there are existing VISTA sponsors in your area who might lend you a hand.
3. Draft your Concept Paper.

4. Complete and submit your Concept Paper using eGrants

Additional Resources

On The Campus

- [Life as a Supervisor](#)

On The Web

- [The CNCS Performance Measurement Core Curriculum](#)
- [Apply for an Employer Identification Number \(EIN\) Online](#)
- [Best Evidence Encyclopedia](#)
- [Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy](#)
- [D&B D-U-N-S Numbers for U.S. Government Contractors & Grantees](#)
- [PerformWell](#)
- [What Works Clearinghouse, Department of Education](#)

Section 3 – Project Application

Project Application: Overview

After your Concept Paper is accepted, you are invited to complete the Project Application and fill in the specifics on how your project will address the needs you identified earlier. Like before, you will submit your application through eGrants.

This section walks through the remaining narratives and the performance measurement component of the Project Application.

Before you begin, download and review [the Project Application instructions](#) if you haven't already.

This section will take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Project Application: Project Management

The following information will help you write the project management narrative

Supervision

VISTA places a high value on the quality of supervision that sponsors provide to VISTA members. This part of the narrative provides you a chance to describe your supervisory strategies.

Provide the name of the staff member who will supervise your VISTAs, and identify the strategies you'll use to prepare members for their assignments (for example, mandatory orientations and early trainings) and for ongoing supervision (for example, check-ins where the supervisor will coach, provide feedback, and guide the VISTA members).

This is your only opportunity in the application to make a strong case for your ability to supervise members

Project sites

If your proposal includes multiple sites, your application will need to include a description of your organization's relationship with your proposed sites and your plans for coordinating supervision of the VISTA members placed at sites.

The VISTA Campus includes [a resource on working with sub-sites](#) that can help you learn about the responsibilities involved in managing multiple sites.

Community involvement

VISTA requires that you incorporate input from the low-income community into the planning and implementation of your project. This can include significant representation of the low-income community on your board of directors or the use of an advisory group.

More strategies and guidance on meeting the community engagement requirement for VISTA sponsors can be found in the Initial Planning section of this tutorial.

Project assessment

The performance measurement section of the application will ask you to apply specific methods and tools for collecting data on different aspects of your project. At this stage in the process, you are asked to describe the tools and methods you'll employ.

Your organization might have past experience in data-collection tools and methods, but if this topic is new to you, you can learn more about it from resources on [data collection and instruments](#) on the CNCS Performance Measurement Core Curriculum page

Collaborations with other CNCS programs (optional)

You might amplify your project's anti-poverty efforts by enlisting other national service programs to help support your efforts. If interested, you can contact your CNCS State Office for a list of other national service programs in your area.

Project Application: VISTA Assignment

While you visualize your VISTA project, you will often come back to your goals (what you intend your VISTA project to accomplish) and major activities (what VISTA members can do to help you achieve your goal).

When you write this narrative, you'll need to include a summary of the key objectives of your proposed project and the major activities your VISTA members will perform. You've touched upon this earlier in the Concept Paper.

Determining VISTA members' activities will also help you create future documents for use in recruiting and providing support for VISTA members. An example would be the VISTA Assignment Description, or VAD, which is essentially a position description.

For more information, visit "What can VISTA members do for you?" in [VISTA 101: Understanding VISTA](#).

Also check out [Creating Effective VADs](#) on the VISTA Campus for a structured approach to identify VISTA member activities

Project Application: Recruitment and Development

If your project is awarded VISTAs, you are expected to recruit for all the positions according to the timeline set out by your CNCS State Office. This means, you'll need to have a recruitment plan and the time to complete all the steps.

Recruitment

When you wrote your organizational capacity narrative, you described your plans for managing the project as well as recruiting and supervising VISTAs. Now it's time to elaborate on your organization's methods of recruiting qualified candidates. It can take a long time to get the right VISTAs on board, and you may have a short time period in which to do it, so preparation is important.

When you write this section of your application, you'll need to outline your organization's recruitment strategies. You'll also need to identify the skills your VISTAs should bring to their positions. You can draw from what you wrote in your VISTA assignment narrative.

In the Looking Ahead section of this tutorial, we'll cover responsibilities related to recruiting your VISTAs. You can also find resources in the [Recruiting section of the VISTA Campus](#)

Reasonable accommodations

By law, VISTA sponsors need to be ready to make reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities who serve as VISTAs. In this section of the narrative, you'll need to create a description of how your organization would provide reasonable accommodation to VISTAs with disabilities. You'll also need to determine whether your agency has ever conducted an evaluation of its compliance with disability access. Evaluation is commonly known as a Section 504 self-evaluation (from the Rehabilitation Act of 1973).

For more information visit, the [Disability Inclusion page](#) on the National Service Knowledge Network.

Service-related travel

If your VISTAs will need to travel on service-related duty (for example, site visits or community meetings), you are required to reimburse them out of the project budget. Make sure to plan for this in your project budget.

When you work on this part of the application, you'll need to describe the monthly service-related travel needs of your VISTA members (outside of a daily commute). You'll also need to determine if your VISTAs will need privately owned vehicles and describe briefly your organization's travel reimbursement process.

Housing assistance

VISTAs will often move to new locations from other parts of the country to take their positions. Though it's not required, sponsors often provide housing assistance. You'll need to find out if your organization has the capacity to provide incentives. If so, you can add a few sentences to your narrative describing what you can offer. You cannot give VISTA members direct cash assistance; however, in certain cases, you can pay a landlord directly to help cover a VISTA's rent.

Orientation & ongoing professional development

Creating a successful VISTA member experience takes work up front on the part of the sponsor. While the national VISTA program brings candidates together for a Pre-Service Orientation (PSO) immediately before VISTA members begin service, it is the responsibility of the sponsor to provide an orientation to their sponsoring organization, site, and community at the start of service. If your project is accepted, your CNCS State Office will need to approve your onsite orientation and training (OSOT) plan.

Data show that structured learning opportunities have the greatest impact on VISTA members. Opportunities to receive feedback, raise questions, and seek guidance deeply influence productivity and satisfaction.

When you reach this section of the narrative, sketch a plan for VISTA member on-site orientation to occur within the first month of service. Also, identify potential ongoing training opportunities and consider how to leverage the resources available through the Campus to develop your VISTA members.

You can gain insight into what your members will need in the [Orienting Your VISTA](#) and [Ongoing Training](#) sections of the VISTA Campus.

Project Application: Executive Summary

The executive summary provides a brief recap of your project. It is generally 4-6 sentences and the Project Application instructions provide a template.

Here's a list of what you'll need to include in your summary:

- Your organization's mission
- CNCS programming priority area that aligns with your project
- Project goal
- Number of VISTAs (and VISTA Leaders, if applicable) that you are requesting
- Estimated length of time your project will take to complete

How long will my project take?

On average projects last three years. However under special circumstances projects may be extended. As with estimating the number of VISTAs to request, there isn't a scientific formula to determine project length, but looking closely at your project goals and major activities required to meet those goals might help. You might want to include your best guess now, and then after completing the performance measurement section of the application (which requires you to think through your goals and activities more closely), you might have a better sense of how long your project might take and can revise your executive summary.

For guidance on determining how long your project will take, consult your CNCS State Office

Project Application: Performance Measurement

Performance measurement is a results-oriented, data-driven approach to defining and applying your project goals.

When you reach this stage of the process, you'll add performance measures in eGrants for each site where your project builds capacity. Your entries will form the basis for future progress reports.

Learn more about [the framework for VISTA performance measures](#).

[The Knowledge Network's Performance Measurement Core Curriculum](#) offers an array of learning materials and instruments to prepare you for this module.

This tutorial provides a walk-through of [how to enter your performance measures in eGrants](#).

All CNCS programs, including VISTA, use performance measurement as a way to prioritize the allocation of program resource and to coherently present the national service story. On a project level, collecting data through performance measurement:

- Reflects progress toward goals
- Offers evidence to support project management
- Holds the VISTA program and its projects accountable

What is performance measurement?

In brief, performance measurement is the ongoing and systematic process of tracking outputs (the amount of service provided presented as quantitative data) and outcomes (the difference those service activities make).

Gather these pieces of information to use in your performance measures

- The VISTA programming priority/focus area you indicated in your Concept Paper
- Names of site(s) where prospective VISTAs will serve (either your home office or the multiple sites you identified in your intermediary justification)
- Notes on the anti-poverty performance measures that align to your project
- List of service activities in which VISTAs will engage, based on the VISTA assignment narrative you prepared earlier
- Capacity-building outputs that align to your program. Outputs include data sources that quantify the amount of service provided
- List of data collection instruments you described in your project management narrative

Project Application: Summary

The Project Application section covered several strategies and plans that round out your proposal. Major topic areas included:

- Project management
- VISTA assignment
- Recruitment & development
- Executive summary
- Performance measurement

You can return to this section when you are ready to complete your application.

Assurances and certifications

Each organization has an authorized representative (often a manager or executive director - with the authority to commit resources at your organization) who reviews and signs a list of assurances and certifications before submitting the final application.

Next steps

1. Download the [Project Application instructions](#) if you haven't already.
2. After your Concept Paper has been approved, go into eGrants. Your Concept Paper automatically creates the application.
3. Complete the remaining narratives and your performance measures.
4. Attach electronic versions or mail ALL required documents
5. Develop a budget. Get guidance from your CNCS State Office if you are unsure which type of budget to prepare.
6. Review, authorize and submit your entire application using eGrants.

Additional Resources

On the Campus

- [Ongoing Training](#)
- [Orienting Your VISTA](#)
- [Recruiting](#)
- [Relocating to Serve fact sheet](#)
- [Selecting a Candidate](#)
- [VISTA Terms and Conditions Course](#)
- [Working with Sub-sites](#)

On the Web

- [AmeriCorps VISTA performance measures](#)
- [AmeriCorps VISTA progress report form](#)
- [CNCS Performance Measurement Core Curriculum](#)
- [Disability Inclusion page on the National Service Knowledge Network](#)
- [eGrants Performance Measures Module](#)

Section 4 – Looking Ahead

Looking Ahead: Overview

During the time between completing your application and waiting for approval, you can set your project up for success by familiarizing yourself with key start-up tasks. In many cases, these tasks will require a quick turnaround (for example, bringing on board top candidates for your VISTA positions).

The main ideas of this section are to give you

1. A high-level overview of next steps and
2. Links to where you can learn more.

This section will take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Looking Ahead: Supervisors Orientation

At some events where VISTA candidates are brought together for their Pre-Service Orientation, VISTA also provides a Supervisors Orientation. Ideally, new supervisors receive their training three months prior to the arrival of their VISTAs on site. The orientation and costs for travel and lodging are provided by the national VISTA program.

The goal of Supervisors Orientation is to introduce new VISTA supervisors to:

- The VISTA program
- The supervisors' role in recruitment, member development, and supervision of VISTA members
- Effective VISTA project management

It's the responsibility of VISTA supervisors from sponsoring (or "prime") organizations who attend Supervisors Orientation to train their sub-site supervisors who do not. The VISTA program supports sponsors in training their sub-site supervisors with resources on the VISTA Campus as well as guidance and support from state offices.

[Working with Sub-sites](#), a course on the VISTA Campus, includes learning and performance support resources for prime and sub-site supervisors.

Looking Ahead: VISTA Member Terms, Conditions, and Benefits

You don't need to gain mastery over these items now, but once your project launches, the terms, conditions, and benefits that apply to VISTA members become central to your role as a VISTA supervisor. Once your project is established, you will be responsible for enforcing the terms and conditions in coordination with your CNCS State Office.

Key Terms, Conditions & Benefits

- VISTA service is a full-time, 365-day commitment. VISTAs are not considered employees. They receive a small living allowance that makes VISTA a poverty-immersion experience.
- Members receive a significant level of training and professional development. Much of this is provided by the sponsoring organization but can also include self-directed learning by the VISTA from a wide range of resources (including the VISTA Campus). More information on VISTA training appears later in this section of VISTA 201.
- VISTAs may attend classes as well as have outside employment, with approval from the supervisor, understanding that neither school nor work will conflict with the VISTA member's service or service hours as assigned by the sponsor.
- VISTAs are not allowed to promote their religious or political beliefs while on duty.
- In addition to a living allowance, VISTAs receive basic health coverage, optional life insurance and child care benefits, and a limited number of personal and sick days.
- VISTA members may also be eligible to receive financial assistance to help them relocate to their site.
- They can also receive reimbursement for service-related travel from their sponsor.
- Following service, VISTAs are eligible to receive a cash stipend of \$1,200 or the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, which provides more than \$5,000 to use toward attending school or repaying student loans. VISTAs are also potentially eligible for other student loan relief programs, including Public Service Loan Forgiveness and Income-Based Repayment.
- Upon completion of service, VISTAs receive one year of non-competitive eligibility (an advantage when it comes to applying for federal jobs).

For a deeper look at these topics, check out the [VISTA Terms and Conditions Course](#).

Looking Ahead: Recruit, Screen, Select and Onboard

It takes several steps to bring new VISTAs on board. In most cases, recruitment begins quickly after your project is approved. Since finding the people best suited to fill your VISTA positions takes thought and care, it's worth considering now what the process entails.

Recruitment

Create position announcements on the My AmerCorps Portal.

Once you are officially a sponsor, you can use eGrants to access your My AmeriCorps account, and from there, your Recruitment workbasket. Here, you can create snappy and accurate position announcements (including desired skills and abilities) that will be seen by prospective VISTAs from around the country.

Conduct a local recruitment campaign.

Use your organization's website, local job boards, word of mouth, job fairs, and any other resources that you identified in your sponsor application recruitment plan. Consider asking current volunteers and community members to suggest candidates and/or outreach methods.

When you recruit VISTAs through the My AmeriCorps portal, your position announcements have a wide reach. While there are benefits in attracting applicants from across the country, there are also advantages to focusing your recruiting efforts locally through classified ads, job boards, job fairs, and local online employment resources.

The recommended approach is to combine local and national recruitment. A team blending national and local recruits maximizes the strengths individuals bring to the project. Whether your recruits are traveling from near or far, you'll need applicants to use the My AmeriCorps portal to apply for your program.

Additional factors to consider

- VISTAs who move to take on an assignment can receive a relocation reimbursement. After accepting an offer, VISTA candidates can learn more about this benefit by calling the National Service Hotline at 800.942-2677.
- While VISTA provides support for new members to move, sponsors often help VISTA members locate affordable housing in their new communities.

This ["Relocating to Serve" fact sheet](#) is designed to help members understand how to request relocation reimbursement.

The [VISTA Campus Recruiting section](#) features resources on marketing your VISTA positions, including an [Outreach Tip Sheet](#) and [Web Resources for Recruiting](#)

Implementing screening & selection

Once people are interested in applying for your VISTA positions, what comes next?

Develop a screening and selection plan.

Organizations often adapt their existing hiring processes and materials for these purposes. Consider paying your efforts forward by referring quality candidates that you didn't have space for to other organizations in your network or other local AmeriCorps programs.

Potential VISTAs apply online through their individual My AmeriCorps member portal accounts.

You'll receive notification when someone applies to your program. No matter how they heard about your program and position, they must apply through the member portal.

Conduct interviews.

You'll need to decide who will be involved in interviewing, what format you will use, and what questions will you ask. You should include questions on citizenship status and criminal history.

The [Selecting a Candidate](#) section of the VISTA Campus provides background on topics such as interviewing, criminal history checks, relocation reimbursement, and others.

Make an offer to your top applicant in My AmeriCorps.

After making a decision, you'll invite your strongest candidate through a message on the portal. After your invitation and your applicant's acceptance, the application moves to the CNCS State Office.

The CNCS State Office reviews the application, citizenship status and criminal history checks, and makes the final determination.

The offer takes place through the My AmeriCorps portal and must occur a minimum of 45 days before the start of the PSO.

Onboarding

After your VISTA candidate receives two thumbs up, what happens next?

Candidate attends PSO.

This event introduces the candidate to VISTA's history, mission, and initiatives. It also includes the final screening of the candidate. After successful completion of PSO, the person is sworn in as a VISTA.

VISTA member arrives on site and begins service.

This occurs immediately after PSO. Set up a workspace with equipment and communications access ahead of time.

On-Site Orientation and Training.

You are expected to on-board your VISTA with a formal and comprehensive orientation to your organization, the community you serve, and training on the specific tasks your VISTA will carry out.

Looking Ahead: Member Training and Development

It is important to provide VISTA members with training opportunities and frequent coaching throughout their service term. Formal member training and development consists of:

Pre-Service Orientation

This training is provided by VISTA and occurs prior to the arrival of VISTAs at the project site. The PSO focuses on VISTA's anti-poverty mission, the capacity-building focus, and individual assignments. PSO also delves into other topics such as fundraising and managing volunteers.

On-Site Orientation and Training

This training is facilitated by you, the sponsor, and takes place shortly after the VISTA arrives on site. It provides a comprehensive introduction to the organization and community.

In-Service Training

Sponsors facilitate regular trainings throughout the year to help the VISTA develop professionally. Training may be as formal as workshop sessions organized by sponsoring organizations or as informal as self-initiated evening study at the local library.

Visit the VISTA Campus for several resources designed for supervisors who train VISTAs, including those in the [Orienting Your VISTA](#) and [Ongoing Training](#) sections. The VISTA Campus also provides training resources and webinars. During coaching sessions, you can help your VISTA write up a professional development plan and encourage them to set time aside in their workplan.

Looking Ahead: Reporting Systems

Managing a VISTA project includes submitting Project Progress Reports (PPR), which provide data on required performance measures, and financial reports (if you are a grantee). Supervisors are required to create their own record-keeping systems to track the data. Reports are submitted through eGrants.

The purpose of the Project Progress Report (PPR) includes documenting progress and data collected, serving as a self-assessment tool for continuous improvement, and identifying technical assistance needs. New sponsors file the PPR quarterly for the first year of a project, and less often after that.

Financial reporting is also required but the type of report you submit depends on the project type you are awarded. Your CNCS State Office can provide guidance on these reports.

To learn more about reporting, [download the current PPR form](#)

Additionally, VISTA sponsors are expected to track and report progress on Goal 3/capacity-building performance measures. For more information, visit the [VISTA Performance Measures page](#)

Looking Ahead: Summary

Congratulations! You have completed VISTA 201

Whether your project has already been accepted or whether you're still waiting to hear the final word, it's not too early to begin thinking ahead, because once you sign your

Memorandum of Agreement, everything moves quickly. Your CNCS State Office can often give you a sense of whether your project will be approved or not before it becomes official.

To recap, learning more about these topics can help you get off to a good start:

- Supervisors Orientation
- VISTA terms, conditions and benefits
- The process of recruiting, screening, selecting, onboarding VISTA members
- Member training and development
- Reporting systems

Additional Resources

On the Campus

- [Ongoing Training](#)
- [Orienting Your VISTA](#)
- [Recruiting](#)
- [Relocating to Serve fact sheet](#)
- [Selecting a Candidate](#)
- [VISTA Terms and Conditions Course](#)
- [Working with Sub-sites](#)

On the Web

- [AmeriCorps VISTA performance measures](#)
- [AmeriCorps VISTA progress report form](#)
- [Disability Inclusion page on the National Service Knowledge Network](#)

Application Timeline

Key:

- **Light Tasks** can be done in a matter of minutes or hours, and usually by one staff member.
- **Moderate Tasks** may take one or more days, and involve coordinating input from multiple staff.
- **Heavy Tasks** can span weeks or months, and involve active participation from a group.
- **Review:** VISTA will be looking at your application materials. Contact your CNCS State Office for an estimate on how long these review periods will take.

Initial Planning Tasks

- Create an eGrants Account (Light)
- Engage your organization and the community in planning (Heavy)
- Identify a project supervisor (Light)
- Determine a project goal and key VISTA activities (Moderate)

Concept Paper Tasks

- Identify local, reliable data sources supporting your project need (Moderate)
- Develop a need statement, include supporting data (Moderate)
- Create a community strengthening statement (Moderate)
- Prepare an organizational capacity statement (Moderate)
- Write an intermediate justification statement, if applicable (Moderate)
- Await results from state office review (Review)

Project Application Tasks

- Put together a project management statement (Light)
- Create a summary of key objectives and VISTA member activities (Moderate)
- Describe VISTA member recruitment and professional development plans and strategies (Light)
- Complete performance measurement module (Moderate)
- Provide supporting documents (Light)
- Develop a budget based on the project type determined by the state office (Moderate)
- Await results from state office review (Review)
- Revise Project Application based on state office feedback (Moderate)
- Receive and sign electronic Memorandum of Agreement after project approval (Moderate)

“Looking Ahead” Tasks

- Attend a mandatory VISTA Supervisor Orientation after project is awarded (Moderate)

- Create VISTA Assignment Descriptions (VADs) for each VISTA position (Moderate)
- Develop an Onsite Orientation and Training (OSOT) plan (Moderate)
- Create position descriptions and submit them for CNCS State Office approval on My AmeriCorps (Moderate)
- Await position descriptions going “live” upon CNCS State Office approval (Review)
- Recruit, interview, screen, and select VISTA candidates by PSO training window deadline (Heavy)
- Await CNCS State Office approval of your VISTA candidates (Review)
- Prepare for new VISTAs as they attend a Pre-Service Orientation or PSO (Moderate)
- Educate other staff about the VISTA project and role of the VISTA member (Moderate)

Glossary

Capacity building

A set of activities that expand the scale, reach, efficiency, or effectiveness of programs and organizations. Activities may also leverage resources for programs and/or organizations. For example, capacity-building activities may expand services, enhance delivery of services, or generate additional resources. These activities achieve lasting positive outcomes for the beneficiary populations served by CNCS-supported organizations.

CNCS State Office (CSO)

Field offices staffed by CNCS employees. They conduct public outreach and program support; they are also directly responsible for developing grants and projects and for overseeing all Senior Corps and VISTA projects within their states. [Contact your CNCS State Office.](#)

Community engagement

Ensures involvement of community residents in planning, developing, and implementing a VISTA project that is responsive and relevant to the lives of the community residents and taps into existing community strengths and resources.

Concept Paper

A phase of the application process that documents specific poverty-related community needs and the applicant's vision for creating a sustainable project that strengthens the community and its own organizational capacity to end poverty

Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)

This is the federal agency that engages more than 4 million Americans in service through Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and the Social Innovation Fund, and leads the national initiative, United We Serve.

Cost share

Sponsors pay the living allowance for some or all of its VISTA members, while the VISTA program covers the cost of some member benefits and services.

D-U-N-S Number

A D-U-N-S Number is required for organizations applying for federal contracts or grants, including VISTA projects. [Registration is free.](#)

eGrants

An [online system in which applications are submitted, assessed, approved or disapproved](#); also used by programs to track and report on their VISTA grants.

EINs Number

An Employer Identification Number (EIN) is also known as a Federal Tax Identification Number, and is used to identify a business entity. It's required for a VISTA project application. [You can learn more on the IRS site.](#)

Intermediary sponsor

A sponsor that helps deliver VISTA resources to other eligible entities, often small organizations that otherwise might not have access to those resources.

Memorandum of Agreement (MA)

A legally binding document that states the specific obligations of each party, as well as joint responsibilities of the project and the CNCS State Director.

My AmeriCorps Portal

[A site designed to help people apply to become VISTAs and AmeriCorps members and prepare for their term of service.](#) You can sign in to the sponsor side of the portal through eGrants and post open position descriptions.

On-Site Orientation (OSOT)

An extension of Pre-Service Orientation (PSO). Immediately following the PSO, sponsors and VISTA supervisors provide VISTA members a formal orientation to their assignments, sponsoring organization, and community.

Pre-Service Orientation (PSO)

An event VISTA candidates must attend prior to starting service to receive orientation to VISTA and their role as a VISTA member. PSO is only held at specific times throughout the year. PSO ends with the oath to serve as a VISTA.

Project Application

A phase of the application process that details plans and strategies for project management and the recruitment and development of VISTA members. Also includes a summary of VISTA member activities, an executive summary, and performance measures.

Sponsor

A private nonprofit organization (faith- or community-based); a federal, state or local government agency; or a government of a tribal nation that supports VISTA members placed under its program.

Sub-sites

Local affiliates or allied organizations where an intermediary sponsor places VISTA members. While VISTAs placed at sub-sites are managed through the sponsoring organization's VISTA grant, they receive day-to-day supervision from sub-site supervisors at the locations where they serve.

Sustainability

A lasting outcome of the capacity-building service activity. This may include maintaining service after the VISTA resource is gone, maintaining enhanced or increased services after the CNCS resource is gone, or both. Sustainable projects and programs have institutional procedures, resources and processes that assure the continuation of expanded or enhanced beneficiary services.

Term of service

The length of time it takes a member to complete a VISTA assignment. In most cases, the term is one year (365 days).

VISTA Assignment Description (VAD)

A description of specific activities a VISTA engages in during the service year.

VISTA Campus

[An online learning center](#) tailored to VISTA members, leaders, supervisors, and state offices with interactive tutorials and activities, forums, and rich materials to connect those in the VISTA community.

Contacting Your CNCS State Office

One goal of VISTA 201 is to answer questions about the application process. However, there are questions this orientation won't be able to answer, especially items that vary from state to state. When VISTA 201 doesn't answer your questions, [contact your CNCS State Office](#). Staff members will serve as your main point of contact during the application process.

What questions are best to find out as much as possible through VISTA 201 before calling the state office?

- What's a general timeline of the process?
- What are all the bases we need to cover?
- What does our organization need to do to meet VISTA's community engagement requirements?
- Where can I find links to resources outside VISTA 201, such as:
 - Concept Paper instructions
 - Project Application instructions
 - AmeriCorps VISTA Guidance for Current and Potential Sponsors
 - Help with eGrants
 - Help with performance measurement
 - Contact information for the National Service Hotline?

What questions are best to ask by e-mail or phone?

- When are VISTA sponsor applications being accepted in my state? How long does the application process take in our state?
- Is a cost share model (in which our organization pays more of the costs associated with a VISTA project) a good option for us?
- How many VISTAs can we bring on board?
- When might our new VISTAs start?
- Are there local, current VISTA sponsors we can contact who can help us as we plan our application?