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MCSC AmeriCorps VISTA Program



MCSC AMERICORPS VISTA HANDBOOK

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Michigan Community Service Commission (MCSC) AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) members coordinate organization resources, encourage community volunteerism, inspire youth to have a voice in their community, remove barriers to ensure access to careers and health services, support success in school, and provide resources to organizations. VISTA members serving at host sites promote and strengthen community-building initiatives focused on health, education, economic opportunity, and climate change. VISTA members assist with enhancing or developing systems to recruit and engage volunteers for programs that support resilience in the community.

Michigan Community Service Commission

Established in 1991, the Michigan Community Service Commission is the state's lead agency on volunteerism. The Commission works to leverage and catalyze innovation and the volunteer power of Michiganders to strengthen their communities, grow the ethic of civic engagement, and build a stronger Michigan. Fundamentally, the Michigan Community Service Commission views service as a strategy for community change.

Alongside federal efforts, the MCSC and its community partners have engaged tens of thousands of volunteers of all ages, supported hundreds of community-based projects, and leveraged well over \$200 million dollars for issues such as disaster response, education, the environment, veteran services, health, housing foreclosure, and many other pressing issues around the state. The Michigan Community Service Commission utilizes service as a strategy to address the state's most pressing issues and empowers volunteers to strengthen communities. In addition to the overarching view of utilizing service as a strategy, there are three methods that guide MCSC's work and how it engages both Michigan communities and program partners: as a convener, connector and resource generator.

AmeriCorps

The federal agency formerly known as Corporation for National and Community Service

Established in 1993, AmeriCorps is a federal agency that engages more than five million Americans in service through its core programs – AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors. It has as its mission to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. As the nation's largest grant maker for service and volunteering, AmeriCorps plays a critical role in strengthening America's nonprofit sector and addressing our nation's challenges through service. AmeriCorps harnesses America's most powerful resource – the energy and talents of our citizens – to solve problems. From grade school through retirement, AmeriCorps empowers Americans and fosters a lifetime of service. It invests in thousands of nonprofit and faith-based groups that are making a difference across the country. Serving at more than 50,000 locations across the country, AmeriCorps delivers result-driven service where it's needed most.

The AmeriCorps Midwest Regional Office is located in Columbus, OH. The Senior Portfolio Manager is Abdihakim Abdi. The Midwest Regional Office has oversight of the MCSC VISTA Program when it comes to: reporting approval, approving VISTA candidates, budgeting and program design approval, exiting members from service (early or otherwise), and determining the start and end dates for VISTA members, including Pre-Service Orientation dates.



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VOLUNTEERS IN SERVICE TO AMERICA (VISTA)

AmeriCorps VISTA is the national service program designed to expand the ability of organizations to fight poverty. Rather than providing services to low-income individuals and communities, VISTA is a Federal resource that shall be used to strengthen and support organizations by building infrastructure, expanding community partnerships, securing long-term resources, and numerous other activities that strengthen anti-poverty efforts. All activities shall comply with applicable AmeriCorps regulations, policies, procedures, and program guidance in this handbook. Organizations should develop a long-term sustainability plan beginning in year one of the project's existence, showing the eventual phase-out of the VISTA resource.

HISTORY OF VISTA

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy envisioned a national service corps “to help provide urgently needed services in urban and rural poverty areas.” Less than two years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson realized Kennedy's dream by launching the “War on Poverty.” Johnson welcomed the first group of 20 VISTA volunteers saying, “Your pay will be low; the conditions of your labor often will be difficult. But you will have the satisfaction of leading a great national effort and you will have the ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their fellow man.”

In the 1970s, VISTA merged with Peace Corps and the National Senior Service programs, and the ACTION agency was born. As experience with poverty issues grew, VISTA recruited professionals trained in specific skills. Doctors helped develop new health care facilities, architects helped renovate and build low-income housing, and lawyers encouraged housing and health care reform. In the 1980s, the program placed a strong focus on literacy, substance abuse prevention and treatment, citizen participation, and community self-help.

The 1990s saw a resurgence of national service. In 1990, President George H. W. Bush developed the Commission on National and Community Service. With the signing of the National Community Service Trust Act in 1993, President William Clinton expanded national service to create AmeriCorps, and VISTA became part of AmeriCorps. The legislation created the Corporation for National and Community Service and three AMERICORPS administered programs (Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America) with the responsibility of mobilizing Americans into service.

AmeriCorps VISTA is open to all U.S. citizens, nationals, or lawful permanent resident aliens age 18 and older. Members receive a modest living allowance, and those who serve for a year also receive health coverage, childcare, and other benefits. After successful completion of a term of service, members can choose to receive a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or post-service stipend.

Members make a year-long, full-time commitment to serve on a specific project at a nonprofit organization or public agency. They focus their efforts on building the organizational, administrative, and financial capacity of organizations that fight illiteracy, improve health services, foster economic development, and otherwise assist low-income communities.



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CAPACITY BUILDING AND SUSTAINABILITY

One of the key differences between AmeriCorps State/National programs and AmeriCorps VISTA is that VISTA members build capacity of organizations rather than provide direct service to individuals. One VISTA Program Manager has found it helpful to use the example of a school playground that needs to be repaired or renovated:

“If you are AmeriCorps [state or national], you can pick up the hammer and you can fix the fence; you can pick up the paintbrush and you can paint the swing set. If you are a VISTA, you can help reach out for the funds to fund doing this renovation; you can do the volunteer outreach to line up the people to do it; you can do the media coverage outreach for it.”

VISTA members tend to work behind-the-scenes to help programs and organizations do their work better. They are also focused on sustainable solutions – the VISTA tries to put enough systems and resources in place that the work will continue even after the VISTA completes service. Instead of mentoring K-12 students, the VISTA recruits and trains mentors to volunteer with students, as well as setting up a volunteer management system, developing materials and resources for the mentors to use in perpetuity, and writing a grant to provide stable funding for the next few years of the program.

There are a few limited circumstances in which direct service is acceptable for VISTAs:

- A brief period of direct service is necessary to understand the service elements of the organization.
- Direct service is incidental to the time and effort in carrying out the primary responsibilities of the member assignment.
- Direct service is necessary to train service providers.

PROGRAM GOALS

AmeriCorps has identified six priority areas on which VISTA programs should focus: Disaster Services, Economic Opportunity, Education, Environmental Stewardship, Healthy Futures, and Veterans and Military Families. Local VISTA projects, like the MCSC VISTA Program, choose from among these priority areas, and their corresponding goals, to shape the work of VISTAs in the field.

The MCSC VISTA project has selected to prioritize Education and Economic Opportunity as its focus including the goals:

- Student Engagement: Develop mechanisms for youth, parents, and youth serving organizations to access resources that enhance the skill sets of youth and assist them with being successful in school and/or work.
- Removal of Barriers: Assist with developing solutions to decrease the opportunity gaps faced by youth, in particular young men and women of color.



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ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Within the MCSC VISTA Program, there are many people with a vested interest in the service provided by the VISTA members and who are dedicated to providing a positive experience for these members during your service term.

VISTA PROGRAM MANAGER – TYESHA TURNER

The VISTA Program Manager is ultimately responsible for the program. The Program Manager is a full-time staff member of MCSC who oversees all aspects of the program and works collaboratively with participating host sites to support VISTA members across the state. The Program Manager is the primary point of contact for host sites and VISTA supervisors.

DIRECTOR OF YOUTH INITIATIVES – DAVID MARTUS

Dave directs and manages MCSC's Mentor Michigan program along with statewide youth initiative efforts as the Director of Youth Initiatives. His additional roles include developing and overseeing mentoring and volunteer recruitment efforts, coordinating training and technical assistance, and maintaining outreach efforts.

HOST SITE SUPERVISORS

Your host site supervisor is your main point of contact for all host site-related questions, issues or concerns. They should be available for regular check-ins, guidance in navigating the organization and implementing projects, and training and professional development. Your site supervisor will provide you with an on-site orientation to your specific host site and will serve as your liaison to the rest of the organization and community partner staff. The supervisor should be available and responsive to MCSC VISTA Program personnel for member check-ins, site visits and questions. In order to help prepare supervisors to successfully receive VISTA members, the MCSC VISTA Program provides a Site Supervisor Orientation prior to the start of each year.

As outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding between MCSC and each host site, your supervisor's responsibilities include:

- Meet with the VISTA member regularly, ideally once per week or otherwise as needed.
- Provide the MCSC VISTA Assignment Description (VAD), On-Site Orientation plan or Virtual Organization Orientation plan as applicable, and a detailed work-plan that is developed from the VAD.
- Accommodate and participate in one or two program site visits or virtual calls, regular check-in calls, and any additional webinars/conference calls that will be scheduled by the Program Manager.
- Provide regular on-site supervision and check-ins with the VISTA member(s) placed at the organization, as well as support to complete the program goals and objectives outlined in VAD.
- Verify and approve the VISTA member(s) progress reports, timesheets, and other paperwork by required deadlines. The site supervisor will be expected to review reports for accuracy and completion prior to submission. The host site must notify MCSC when allotted sick/vacation days are used for tracking purposes.
- Support the VISTA member(s) in meeting his/her mandatory training requirements. This includes participation in trainings, conferences, monthly calls/webinars and any other in-person sessions required by the MCSC VISTA Program.
- Model a positive attitude about AmeriCorps VISTA and the program's goals and objectives.



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- Designate the AmeriCorps VISTA member(s) serving as an “AmeriCorps VISTA member” on all communication and media. Do **NOT** identify the VISTA member as a staff, intern, volunteer, service-learning coordinator, or research assistant, etc..
- Communicate with the Program Manager about program activities and any issues or concerns related to or impacting the AmeriCorps VISTA member(s), such as arrests, hospitalization, absence without leave, etc.
- Educate and inform the community partner organization(s) about AmeriCorps VISTA and the project, as well as assist the Program Manager in communicating guidelines and expectations.

VISTA MEMBERS

MCSC VISTA members are placed at host sites to serve at least one year to build capacity at the organization, strengthening community initiatives, and fight poverty. AmeriCorps VISTA members are expected to attend key events that occur during their year of service. All VISTA members take the oath of office (or service) when they successfully complete Virtual Member Orientation. They participate in on-going training and development throughout the year, and upon successful completion of the year, become members of the network of VISTA Alums.

Responsibilities of the VISTA members include:

- Keep your supervisor and VISTA Leader apprised of issues, questions or concerns related to VISTA service
- Attend all trainings, participate in webinars/calls and site-visits, and respond in a timely manner to all emails/calls from the Program Manager and VISTA Leader
- Submit all timesheets, expense reports, progress reports, and other program documents, with supervisor approval
- Carry out the mission of VISTA to fight poverty and build capacity
- Recruit and/or manage volunteers, including youth volunteers
- Make resources accessible to assist youth with being successful in school and/or work
- Model a positive attitude about AmeriCorps VISTA and the program’s goals and objectives
- Share necessary accommodations needed to perform tasks related to service.

VISTAS vs. EMPLOYEES

While VISTAs serve at host sites for a year, they are **NOT** employees, interns, or volunteers. They are a classification all their own of national service members. Here are some key differences:

- Potential need for greater support and coaching: VISTA members hope to gain professional development during their year and may need more support than a full-time employee; many VISTAs are just entering the workforce or are switching to a new career path.
- Compensation: VISTAs do not receive a salary or hourly wages; rather, they receive a living stipend at a rate that is set and administered by AMERICORPS via direct deposit twice a month.
- Tenure in position: VISTA members serve for one full year (365 days) with the option to re-enroll for additional years if the host site, supervisor and Program Manager agree to keep the member on; most members serve one term.



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- Responsibilities: VISTA responsibilities are clearly laid out in the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD); they are assigned to work on a specific, poverty-fighting project, and will not participate in the day-to-day operations of an organization as might a full-time employee.
- Regional and national implications: VISTA members must report to the Michigan Community Service Commission, who in turn reports to the AmeriCorps – in addition to keeping the host site informed of activities, challenges and progress; VISTA members are part of a network of national service members, and their commitment to VISTA comes above any commitments to MCSC or the host site.
- Ability to terminate: VISTA members may not be fired like a full-time employee; before termination, the VISTA and supervisor will go through a conflict resolution process with the Program Manager; if issues still cannot be resolved, the matter will go to the AMERICORPS regional office who will ultimately be responsible for removing the member from the host site; depending on the circumstances, the member may have the opportunity to transfer to another host site.

VISTA CONDITIONS AND BENEFITS

VISTA CONDITIONS/RESTRICTIONS

The difference between VISTA members and employees, or VISTA members and other AmeriCorps members, stems from some of the conditions or restrictions that are placed on VISTA service. These conditions/restrictions are outlined by the AmeriCorps and are an important part of the VISTA experience.

EMPLOYMENT RESTRICTIONS

While serving, VISTAs may work to supplement their living allowance with the approval of their site supervisor. Commitment to one's assigned project must remain the paramount focus of all AmeriCorps VISTA members, regardless of whether a VISTA member is working outside of his/her VISTA service assignment. Any outside employment must not conflict with the VISTA member's training, service, or service hours as assigned by AMERICORPS or the sponsor. To the maximum extent practicable, VISTA members must remain available for service without regard to regular working hours. The VISTA project's needs supersede any requirements of outside employment.

If a VISTA pursues outside employment while in VISTA service, the VISTA is not, under any circumstances, permitted to be an employee of or contractor for the sponsor, sub-recipient, or other project-related organization to which the VISTA is assigned to serve. While in VISTA service, the VISTA may only accept outside employment for positions that are:

- Legal
- Part-time
- Do not conflict at all with the VISTA's service or service hours
- Do not violate any applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations
- Do not conflict with any AmeriCorps VISTA program requirements or policies

Before accepting such outside employment, the VISTA must speak with and obtain the written approval of their supervisor to do so. To approve outside employment, their supervisor must ensure there is no conflict between the employment and the VISTA's service or service hours. Both the VISTA and their supervisor need to sign the Outside Employment Request Form and send it to the Program Manager and VISTA Leader. The Outside Employment Request Form can be found on the AmeriCorps website:

[2021 05 25 Member Outside Employment Request Form VISTA.pdf \(americorps.gov\)](#)



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RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES RESTRICTION

VISTAs cannot participate in religious activities while on duty or perceived to be on duty as a VISTA. A VISTA cannot:

- Provide religious instruction
- Conduct worship services
- Proselytize
- Be admitted to a VISTA program based directly or indirectly on religious affiliation
- Induce others to participate in religious activities

EDUCATION RESTRICTIONS

- VISTAs are allowed to attend class(es) as long as their studies do not interfere with the VISTA responsibilities. Supervisors and VISTAs will need to determine whether or not the class(es) will detract from the commitment to the VISTA project.
- If VISTAs are enrolled in a class(es) before s/he becomes a VISTA, it is still important to discuss a study plan right away and make sure that the class(es) will not interfere with the project.
- If a VISTA's class(es) interferes with his/her VISTA responsibilities, supervisors and VISTAs will discuss in the hopes of coming to a joint decision about how to make the VISTA project the focus. If this does not work, contact the VISTA Leader.

POLITICAL RESTRICTIONS

Participating in prohibited political activities during the VISTA term of service is cause for termination.

- The Hatch Act applies to VISTA members at all times during their service, including certain activities during their off-duty hours.
- VISTAs cannot engage in any political activity (either partisan or nonpartisan) that would result in identifying the VISTA program with the activity.
- While on duty or perceived to be identified with the VISTA program, VISTA members cannot show partisanship or work to direct resources (financial or human) to influence elections or legislation (e.g., lobby), engage in voter registration, or provide voter transportation to the polls.

Specific examples of activities VISTAs **CANNOT** participate in as a VISTA, either on or off duty:

- Soliciting or accepting from others monetary contributions for a partisan political candidate
- Pro-labor or anti-labor organizing
- Running for a partisan elected office

HATCH ACT LIMITATIONS ON VISTA POLITICAL ACTIVITIES. **Taken from VISTA Campus*

No appropriated funds of the Corporation for AmeriCorps shall be used to finance, directly or indirectly, any activity designed to influence the outcome of an election to federal, state, or local office or a voter registration activity, or pay the salary of a AMERICORPS employee who engages in such activity.

In addition, VISTA programs are prohibited from using funds or personnel in a matter supporting or resulting in the identification of such programs with partisan or nonpartisan election activities, in voter registration activities, and in providing transportation to the polls. Additionally, no VISTA member or employee of a sponsoring organization may take any action with respect to a partisan or nonpartisan political activity that would result in the identification or apparent identification of the AmeriCorps VISTA program with such activity (see 42 U.S.C. § 5043 for additional restrictions and prohibitions).



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VISTA programs also are prohibited from any activity intended to influence the passage or defeat of legislation or proposals by initiative petition (see 42 U.S.C. § 5043 (c) for additional restrictions and prohibitions). You may participate in political activities allowed under the Hatch Act. The Domestic Volunteer Service Act at 42 U.S.C. § 5055 applies the restrictions of the Hatch Act, Title V, United States Code, Chapter 73, to VISTA members. The Hatch Act applies to you at all times during your service, including off duty hours. Permissible activities under the Hatch Act apply to VISTA members unless these activities are prohibited by other statutory authority when the members are on authorized leave or are not perceived to be performing as a VISTA member (e.g., while not engaged in performing service, or on service time).

You have the right to register and vote as you choose, express opinions about candidates and issues in a nonpublic context, contribute money to political organizations, and attend political meetings. You also may join and be a member of a political party or club, and sign nominating petitions if you do not identify these activities with VISTA or your sponsoring organization.

AmeriCorps regulations that prohibit electoral and lobbying activities are contained in 45 CFR Part 1226. The approach of the regulations is twofold: 1) Restrictions on the assignment of VISTA members to, or restrictions on the receipt of AMERICORPS funds by, certain organizations because of the nature of the organizations or their activities; and 2) Restrictions on member assignments and activities. The organizational restrictions are based on the premise that the assignment of members or the receipt of AMERICORPS funds by certain organizations (regardless of the proposed assignment or activity of the member) is precluded because of the organization’s stated purpose or the nature of its activities.

The restrictions on member assignments and activities contain four basic areas of prohibited activities: 1) Electoral; 2) Voter registration, except that programs assisted under this Act may make voter registration information available to the public on the premises of such programs; 3) Voter transportation to the polls; and 4) Efforts of influence legislation. The prohibitions are directed to the use of AMERICORPS funds, the assignments of members, and any other activities supported by AMERICORPS funds.

The Domestic Volunteer Service Act provides two exceptions to the prohibitions on efforts to influence legislation: 1) At the request of a legislative body, committee, or member of a legislative body, and 2)

Regarding an authorization or appropriation measure directly affecting the operation of the project or program. The regulation, found at 45 CFR Part 1226, describes the conditions under which activities pursuant to these exceptions were once undertaken. The regulation also describes the applicability of the restrictions to sponsoring

HATCH ACT LIMITATIONS ON VISTA POLITICAL ACTIVITIES - *continued*

organization employees and the obligations of sponsoring organizations to ensure observance of the regulation. Appropriation laws have restricted these exceptions and activities permitted in 45 CFR Part 1226. Consequently, you must contact your AMERICORPS State Office before you engage in any political or lobbying activity.

VISTA LEAVE OF ABSENCE

VISTAs get personal, medical and holiday leave. They may also receive emergency leave, if appropriate:

- **Personal:** Ten (10) personal days for vacation, personal days off, or for religious observances not given as holidays by your sponsoring organization.
- **Medical:** Ten (10) days of medical leave for illness, injury, or medical appointments.
- **Emergency:** Up to five (5) work days of emergency leave for death or critical illness of an immediate family member or if the VISTA is serving in an area where there has been a natural disaster and s/he must



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leave the area temporarily. Emergency leave is granted by the sponsoring organization with agreement of the regional office.

- **Extended Medical Leave:** The AMERICORPS regional office may approve an additional 5 service days for a total of 15 medical service days in a full year of service, in cases that require extended recuperation.
- **Holiday:** VISTAs receive any holidays recognized by their host site organization. If a federal holiday is not recognized by your host site organization, such as Veteran’s Day, a VISTA can request use of personal leave.
- **Getting approval for leave:** Supervisors are responsible for approving personal leave for VISTAs. VISTAs should request approval in advance for personal leave and provide notice when possible of medical and emergency leave requests.

VISTA BASIC BENEFITS

These benefits are provided to all VISTA members, should they choose to take advantage of them. Host sites may choose to provide additional benefits, as long as they are non-monetary benefits.

VISTA LIVING STIPEND - \$24,4892

- Covers basic needs – housing, food, utilities
- Varies in amount, depending on location – the rate is based on poverty guidelines for a single individual in your area
- Is paid twice monthly via direct deposit from the AMERICORPS
- Is taxable. Federal taxes are withheld, though state and local taxes, and Social Security are not – VISTAs are responsible for paying these
- Does not qualify VISTAs to collect unemployment compensation after service
- Is the only monetary compensation VISTAs can receive
- If a VISTA has questions about the living stipend, s/he should contact the Program Manager.

Healthy Michigan Plan

Many VISTA members will be eligible for the Healthy Michigan Plan, a low-income option that stipulates that the applicant’s income be below 138% of the Federal Poverty Line. Basic information on this plan can be found at www.healthymichiganplan.org.

VISTA HEALTH BENEFIT – UP TO \$7,900

All AmeriCorps VISTA members are eligible to participate in one of two plans under the Health Benefit Program. The Health Care Benefit is set up to pay for the out of pocket costs associated with healthcare up to \$7,900.

Examples include:

- Annual deductible
- Coinsurance
- Copayments
- Other charges for qualified medical expenses, such as vision and dental

The benefit cannot be used to purchase insurance or be used for non-essential health expenses or charges associated with dependents or other individuals covered under the healthcare plan.

If you already have Qualifying Health Coverage, you are eligible for the **AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance**. Examples of Qualifying Health Coverage:

- Family health insurance: if you are 26 or younger and on your parents’ plan, or married and covered by your spouse’s plan
- Health Insurance purchased through the Health Insurance Marketplace



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- Medicaid, Medicare, or military healthcare benefits
- Coverage available to individuals in the US territories or who belong to a federally recognized tribe

If you do not have other insurance and need limited benefits only for accidents and injuries that occur during your VISTA service term, you are eligible for the **AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefit Plan**. For more information, please visit: www.vistacampus.gov/healthcare.

International Medical Group (IMG) is the administrator of the AmeriCorps VISTA Healthcare Allowance and the AmeriCorps VISTA Health Benefit Plan. For details about either benefit, visit: <https://americorpsvista.imglobal.com/>.

You must enroll within the first 60 days of your year of service to access these benefits.

Health Benefits - *continued*

In addition to an elected health benefit, AmeriCorps VISTA members can access telehealth, i.e. virtual healthcare, at no cost. Telehealth allows members to promptly consult with board certified physicians, psychologist, social workers, and professional counselors 24/7/365 via phone or video chat at no cost to the member. For more information and to access this benefit visit:

<https://americorpsvista.imglobal.com/my-benefits/connect-with-a-telehealth-provider>.

Special Enrollment Period

If you would like to purchase insurance through the Health Insurance Marketplace, you can take advantage of the special enrollment period for all AmeriCorps members. This gives you an opportunity to purchase health insurance outside the public open enrollment period. You have 60 days from your service start date (as well as your exit date) to sign up for healthcare coverage through the marketplace. Learn more at www.Healthcare.gov or call 1-800-318-2596.

Healthcare.gov

VISTA members have been granted special permission to use the Healthcare.gov Marketplace to shop for health care coverage at the beginning and end of your service year. Most VISTA members are eligible to receive a tax credit to help pay for a monthly health care plan.

VISTA OPTIONAL BENEFITS

Relocation Allowances

If you are moving more than 50 miles from your home to a new community to serve, VISTA offers relocation travel assistance and a settling-in allowance.

Relocation Travel Allowance - Up to \$1,000

This allowance is based on the direct mileage between your home address and your VISTA service site. The allowance is calculated at \$0.40 per mile regardless of the mode of transportation used and is paid eight to ten weeks after you submit a relocation voucher. Be aware that this allowance may not cover all expenses that you incur. Once a relocation request has been approved, VISTAs will arrange their own mode of travel from home to the service site. The dates of travel must be approved by the VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU). VISTAs should NOT book any travel until they get an email from the VMSU with approved routing and reimbursement.

Settling in Allowance - Up to \$750



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This benefit is intended to help you with initial settling in expenses, such as deposits and utilities. The allowance is \$750 and will be included with your first living allowance payment. Federal taxes will be withheld at the time of payment.

Close of Service Travel

VISTA also provides a travel allowance for travel from your project site back to your home when you complete your service.

SERVICE-RELATED TRANSPORTATION AND REIMBURSEMENT

- If VISTAs need to use a personal vehicle for service-related activities (other than the daily commute) VISTAs will be reimbursed by the host site, per the MOU, unless prior arrangements have been made. The VISTA should be reimbursed at the organization's standard mileage rate. If the organization has no standard rate, the VISTA will receive the standard state mileage reimbursement rate, which is .340 cents per mile for 2020.
- If VISTAs are being reimbursed by their host site, they will complete the appropriate forms as required by the host site.
- If a VISTA is without a vehicle and needs to travel for an MCSC training or activity outside of his/her normal service region, MCSC will work with the VISTA to make arrangements.
- MCSC will reimburse the VISTA for mileage and parking for any training provided at MCSC.

CHILD CARE BENEFIT

- VISTAs may be eligible for a childcare benefit. Qualifying children must be under 13. Eligibility is based on income guidelines.
- Childcare benefits are not provided by MCSC or AMERICORPS. They are handled by an outside provider, GAP Solutions. As such, all questions about childcare benefits need to be directed to GAP Solutions.
- VISTAs can find more information by visiting: <https://www.americorpschildcare.com/>.
- The AmeriCorps Member Online Application for Gap Solutions can be found here: <https://www.americorpschildcare.com/index.cfm?applyMember>
- Income of all family unit members living in the household is counted to determine eligibility. This includes any wages, SSI, TANF, public assistance, unemployment, child support or alimony, worker's compensation, retirement benefits, and self-employment earnings.
- VISTAs cannot receive childcare benefits from any other source if s/he is receiving VISTA childcare subsidies.
- Each state has set income limits. If a VISTA's family unit income is above the limit, s/he cannot receive childcare benefits.
- In Michigan, eligible childcare providers include licensed childcare providers, family, and group homes, license exempt establishments such as church, public schools, or YMCAs, and unlicensed relatives or friends must complete a 7 hour Great Start to Quality course.

PROTECTION OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

- If VISTA and/or VISTA's family are receiving assistance or services under any federal, state, or local governmental program before entering AmeriCorps VISTA service, they will not lose or have benefits reduced by serving as a VISTA. This includes WIC/SNAP (replaced food stamps), TANF (replaced AFDC), Social Security Disability (SSI) payments, Veteran's Benefits, subsidized housing programs, and any childcare subsidy provided by VISTA.



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- If a VISTA becomes eligible for assistance while serving (such as turning 65), his/her living allowance income will not be counted in determining eligibility for, or the level of, Social Security retirement benefits.
- If a VISTA was NOT receiving SNAP before joining VISTA, his/her living allowance WILL count as income in determining SNAP eligibility. The living allowance could decrease his/her SNAP allotment.
- More Information about Public Assistance in Michigan can be found in the appendix (see Section 12B)

MICHIGAN BRIDGE CARD OPTION

VISTA members may choose to apply for a Bridge card to assist with food assistance. Each person's experience with applying for a Bridge Card may be different, depending on your personal situation. However, these are the basic steps for applying for food assistance in Michigan.

Bridge Card Application 101

1. Visit: <https://www.mibridges.michigan.gov/access/>
2. Click the center circle that says: Apply for Benefits
3. Select: Start a new application
4. Create an account
5. Select which benefits you would like to apply for (Food Assistance Program)
6. Provide all of your information regarding housing situation, income, bank accounts, bills, etc. Complete the entire application. **IMPORTANT:** Apply for food benefits in the county where you live, not the county where you work, if they are different.
7. After submitting the application, you will also be asked to submit hard copies (or scans) of:
 - a. Proof of housing and utilities (like your lease and/or rental agreement if you have roommates, bill from utilities)
 - b. Proof of all bank accounts (you can print a bank statement online or ask the bank to provide these—they must include your name, bank name, date and account balance)
 - c. Proof of enrollment in VISTA (you can provide a letter from the Program Manager, or your service letter found on AmeriCorps portal) and the VISTA Social Security Income Disregard letter (this just says that VISTA stipends don't count as income and can't exclude you from benefits; also available on AmeriCorps portal)
 - d. Proof of income (letter from the Program Manager or recent pay stub)
8. Complete a phone interview with a case worker from DHHS. You will probably receive a letter in the mail with a scheduled appointment for this interview. If you do not, call your local DHS. The phone interview is usually brief and just asks you to confirm the documents you have submitted. Submit any additional documentation that the case worker requests.
9. A short time after that (several days to a few weeks) you will receive notification in the mail that you have been accepted or denied for food assistance. If accepted, you will receive a Bridge Card in the mail.

*VISTA stipends are excluded by federal law from being counted towards food stamps requirements. Any VISTA should be able to get food stamps, provided his/her savings/assets are under the federal limit of \$2000.



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*As VISTAs, your process should be quick and easy. You should not be asked to submit additional paperwork like the value of your car or proof of car ownership. If you are asked for this documentation, ask to speak with a manager.

*It is OK to call or email your DHHS caseworker to check the status of your application, and often, more proactive VISTAs get their food assistance benefits in a timely manner.

*The application process varies for every person based on his/her case worker and living/financial situation. The process outlined above is general, but individual experiences may vary.

END OF SERVICE BENEFITS

VISTAs have the choice to receive *either* an Education Award or a Stipend if they successfully complete a term of VISTA service (365 days and in good standing).

SEGAL EDUCATION AWARD

- \$7,395 for successfully completing a full year of service.
- May be used to pay educational expenses at eligible post-secondary education institutions, including many technical schools, or to repay qualified student loans.
- Education awards can be used up to 7 years after your VISTA service completion date.
- All payments made using the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award are subject to federal tax in the year each payment is made.
- A person can receive no more than the value of two full-time education awards in a lifetime.
- If the education award was initially selected, a VISTA can switch to the stipend before the end of her/his 10th month of service.

END-OF-SERVICE CASH STIPEND

- \$1,800 cash stipend is paid to the VISTA in their last two living allowance payments.
- Some taxes are deducted when the payment is made.
- It can be used however a VISTA wants.
- If the stipend was initially selected, the VISTA can NOT switch to the education award.

Each VISTA will select the education award or end-of-service cash stipend on the “End of Service Option” form in My AmeriCorps. Members who initially elect the stipend cannot switch to the Education Award, but members who initially select the Education Award have until their 10th month of service to switch to the stipend.

STUDENT LOAN FORBEARANCE & DEFERMENT

For the duration of their term of service, VISTA members with outstanding qualified student loans may choose to have the loans deferred or put into forbearance. Note: you can make these requests in the My AmeriCorps portal under the ‘My Education Award’ tab. Regardless of which route VISTAs takes for student loans during their year of service, they should **contact their lenders ahead of time** to make sure the type of loans they have are eligible for forbearance or deferment and get details about what that means financially.

Forbearance (pair with Education Award)

- Individuals in approved AmeriCorps positions are eligible for forbearance for most federally guaranteed student loans.
- Only the loan holder can determine your loan’s eligibility and approve your request for forbearance. AMERICORPS only verifies that you are serving in an approved national service position.
- Although interest continues to accrue during forbearance, when the VISTA successfully completes their year of service, they can request to have the National Service Trust pay the interest that accrued during their VISTA service.
- Interest payments are a separate benefit and are made in addition to your education award.



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- Interest accrual payments are considered taxable income, so you will have to pay taxes on the amount of interest paid by the National Service Trust.

Deferment (pair with stipend)

- The VISTA's lender decides if student loans can be deferred during the year of service; VISTAs will need to obtain forms from their lenders.
- Reason for deferment is "economic hardship."
- For subsidized loans, accrued interest will automatically be paid by the Department of Education if the loan is deferred.
- Cancellation of part of a Federal Perkins Loan may be an option.

NON-COMPETITIVE ELIGIBILITY (NCE)

- Non-Competitive Eligibility allows a VISTA who meets the minimum qualifications for a federal job to be hired by a federal agency, without having to compete with the general public.
- If a VISTA satisfactorily completes one full year of service, s/he earns one year of non-competitive eligibility status from the day of the completed assignment.
- NCE can be extended two additional years if an individual is in the military, Peace Corps, attending college, or engaged in another activity a hiring agency believes warrants an extension.
- A federal agency is not required to hire a VISTA alumnus, and VISTAs are not guaranteed a federal civil service job. There must be a vacancy and s/he must have the necessary skills.
- VISTAs should go to the My AmeriCorps portal at the end of their service year to print a statement of their non-competitive eligibility to include with any federal job applications.

PERSONNEL INFORMATION

Although MCSC VISTA members spend their time serving in host sites in communities around Michigan, personnel issues tend to be handled by the MCSC VISTA Program Staff and/or the AMERICORPS Office, with input from the host site supervisor. VISTAs must uphold standards of professionalism at their host site and community partners, as well as out in the community. The following information is laid out so that expectations are clear, and VISTAs may be set up for success in their service.

MCSC VISTA PROGRAM EXPECTATIONS

In addition to the terms and conditions outlined by AMERICORPS, AmeriCorps VISTA, the host site and the community partner, each MCSC VISTA is **required** to:

- Attend and be engaged in all MCSC VISTA trainings, conference calls and webinars.
- Submit to appropriate MCSC program staff on-time **monthly** progress report, timesheets, surveys, evaluations, and any other documentation that is requested of the VISTA member by MCSC program staff.
- Participate in at least one site visit a year by MCSC program staff and assist with site visit scheduling when relevant.
- Maintain open channels of communication with the site supervisor and appropriate MCSC program staff regarding all problems or concerns, as well as successes or highlights.
- Meet all deadlines laid out by the host site, community partner, and MCSC affiliate organization.
- Uphold standards of professionalism at all times.

Consistent failure to meet these expectations may be grounds for initiating the Disciplinary Protocol.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

VISTA Members are required to attend and actively participate in all MCSC VISTA trainings, webinars/calls, site visits, cohort meetings and other events deemed mandatory by the program. If a VISTA will not be at his/her



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service site (whether for sick leave or vacation/personal leave), s/he must notify the host site supervisor in a way that is consistent with the policies of the host site.

If a host site is closed for more than 5 service days (for example, during winter holiday break), the VISTA must make alternate arrangements. Per AmeriCorps guidance, if a host site is closed for more than 5 days, the affected VISTA members should plan to serve off-site and fill out a Time Off-Site Request Form. This should be submitted to the Program Manager before the host site closes for an extended period of time. This does not pertain to summer holidays, as the VISTA term is year-round and does not recognize a summer holiday.

SERVICE HOURS

The actual daily hours that a VISTA will serve at a host site is determined by the host site. All MCSC members are required to log a minimum of 37.5 service hours per week. This breaks down to a requirement of roughly 7.5 hours of service each day. If evening or weekend programming is required, the VISTA service hours can be adjusted accordingly.

At the beginning of the service term, the VISTA and the host site supervisor will agree upon hours that are appropriate for the VISTA service project. If a member serves a considerable number of hours over 40 hours one week, his/her supervisor may choose to flex an appropriate amount of time in the VISTA's schedule the next week. If there are questions about this, please contact the Program Manager.

Reporting Service Hours

VISTA members are required to document their daily hours and attendance in two ways.

Timesheets: Host sites are required to utilize the MCSC provided physical timesheets to record daily hours and attendance. These will serve as your local record keeping of all time served. Timesheets are due biweekly and must be submitted to the supervisor for approval and to the Program Manager for program records. After one month in service, the member will be transferred to OnCorps, an online time management platform. The Program Manager will send the supervisor and the member login information and user instructions. OnCorps will automatically notify the supervisor when the VISTA has submitted their timesheet for approval. Please begin your service year by completing the timesheet provided by MCSC to track your attendance.

The Project Manager will send the VISTA member a reminder if their time is not reported. If the VISTA member misses two consecutive time periods, then the Program Manager will warn them that AmeriCorps will be notified about their non-compliance to the attendance policy if they do not report the missing time.

MILEAGE REIMBURSEMENT

The host site will reimburse for mileage incurred while traveling to required sites beyond the host site office or provide a transportation option for this service. VISTAs should follow the policies and procedures of the host site for mileage reimbursement. MCSC will reimburse VISTA members for any trainings or meetings MCSC requires they attend.

DRESS CODE

Like the daily service hours, the VISTA dress code will be dependent on the culture of the host site and the community partner organization. At the beginning of the service term, the VISTA and the host site supervisor should agree upon a dress code that is consistent with the policies of the host site organization and is appropriate for the VISTA service.

A good rule of thumb is to dress more professional when there are dignitaries visiting the host site or when attending meetings where the dress is professional. When attending events hosted by MCSC, request the level of



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professionalism that is expected. Professional dress and behavior can ensure that the VISTA's identity as a qualified, competent member of the community is made clear.

CODE OF ETHICS AND CONFIDENTIALITY

In the course of service, VISTA members may be exposed to a wide range of information about students, families and low-income individuals in communities. All such information which is shared with VISTA members is to be maintained as confidential. Members are to discuss this information only with their supervisor. Throughout the service term, VISTAs and supervisors are expected to maintain the highest standards of ethics. Harassment of any kind will not be tolerated. Members and supervisors are expected to be honest, trustworthy and strive to do the "right thing," as they may find themselves in positions to positively or negatively impact people's lives.

CYBER PROTECTION

In the course of service, VISTA members may be exposed to a wide range of electronic information about students, families, organizations and other confidential data. VISTA Members shall abide by the organization policy regarding keeping electronic data and equipment safe from viruses and hackers. VISTA members shall not download any identity data onto personal computers or external storage drives such as USB ports. All members will receive a computer acknowledgement form to ensure that they understand computer policies set in place by their host site and sponsoring organizations.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Should a conflict arise between a site supervisor and a VISTA member, all efforts should be made to resolve the conflict internally. Site supervisors are encouraged to develop their own system for handling conflict with a VISTA member, and to keep in mind that every conflict is an opportunity for professional development for a VISTA member. As a last resort, MCSC program officials (Program Manager and VISTA Leaders) are available for conflict mediation between the member and the supervisor. However, program officials will maintain a neutral position and refrain from taking sides.

DISCIPLINARY PROTOCOL

For violating any of the terms and conditions of AMERICORPS, AmeriCorps VISTA, MCSC, the host site, and/or the community partner site, an MCSC VISTA member may be subject to the following Disciplinary Protocol:

- An appropriate program official (site supervisor or MCSC Program Manager) will issue a verbal and/or written warning to the member clearly outlining the problem; this will be documented in the member's file; the program official and VISTA member may also be required to complete a Performance Improvement Plan that must be signed and submitted to the site supervisor and VISTA Program Manager;
- An appropriate period of time will be given for the Performance Improvement Plan to be implemented.
- If, after the third written or verbal warning/conversation and implementation of the Performance Improvement Plan, problems still persist, further steps will be taken.
- The Program Manager may recommend that the AMERICORPS regional office remove the member from the site or from service entirely.

AMERICORPS *will* immediately remove a member from the site who has committed certain acts during the term of service including, but not limited to:

- Being charged with or convicted of a violent felony.
- Possession, sale or distribution of a controlled substance.
- Any other activity that is deemed serious enough to hinder the member's continued service effectiveness.

If the disciplinary process has been initiated by the host site, the Program Manager must be notified within 24



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hours of the incident leading to discipline.

RELEASE FROM SERVICE

The member may be released from service for the following reasons:

- For cause, as explained above; or
- For compelling personal circumstances, as defined below.

The program may release a member from the term of service *for compelling personal circumstances* if the member demonstrates that:

- The member has a disability or serious illness that makes completing his/her term impossible.
- There is a serious injury, illness, or death of a family member which makes completing the term unreasonably difficult or impossible for the member.
- The member has military service obligations.
- Some other unforeseeable circumstance beyond the member's control that makes it impossible or unreasonably difficult for the member to complete the term of service, such as a natural disaster, a strike, relocation of a spouse, or the non-renewal or premature closing of a project or program.

If a member discontinues his/her term of service for any reason other than a *release for compelling personal circumstances* as described above, the member will cease to receive program benefits, and will not receive any portion of the Segal Education Award, end-of-service cash stipend, or interest accrual payments on student loans placed in forbearance.

The member shall give supervisor and Program Manager a letter of resignation indicating the reason and the effective last date to end service. The Program Manager will forward this letter to AmeriCorps that will initiate a formal dismissal. The member shall issue a two week notice to supervisor when ending service for non-compelling circumstances.

GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE

All the following information about the grievance procedure comes directly from the VISTA Member Handbook provided by AMERICORPS.

DEFINITION OF GRIEVANCE

Grievance means a matter arising out of, and directly affecting, the volunteer's work situation, or a violation of those regulations governing the terms and conditions of service resulting in the denial or infringement of a right or benefit to the grieving volunteer.

EXAMPLES OF GRIEVANCE ISSUES

The following are examples of grievance issues:

- (i) A VISTA is assigned to an area of harsh climate where special clothing is necessary and not already possessed by the volunteer. A request for a special allowance for such clothing is arbitrarily refused.
- (ii) A VISTA submits a request for reimbursement for transportation costs incurred while on authorized emergency leave which is denied.
- (iii) The project sponsor fails to provide adequate support to the VISTA necessary to perform the assigned work, such as the sponsor's failure to provide materials to the volunteer which is necessary for the performance of the volunteer's work.

INFORMAL GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE

For the complete language on the informal grievance procedure, please refer to the AMERICORPS VISTA Member Handbook. The following is a summary:



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(a) *Initiation of grievance*

- i. A VISTA may initiate a grievance within 15 calendar days after the event giving rise to the grievance occurs, or within 15 calendar days after becoming aware of the event
- ii. A grievance arising out of a continuing condition or practice that individually affects the VISTA may be brought at any time.
- iii. A VISTA initiates a grievance by presenting it in writing to the chief executive officer of the sponsor, or the representative designated to receive grievances from VISTA. The designated representative may not be the immediate supervisor of VISTA assigned to the supervisor.
- iv. The chief executive officer of the sponsor or the designated representative shall respond in writing to the grievance within five (5) working days after receipt.

(b) *Consideration by State Director or designee*

- i. If the matter is not resolved to the VISTA's satisfaction by the sponsor's chief executive officer, the VISTA may submit the grievance in writing to the AMERICORPS State Director or designee within five (5) working days after receipt of the decision of the sponsor's chief executive officer.
- ii. The State Director or designee may not refuse to receive a complaint, even if he or she believes it does not constitute a grievance and shall respond to it in writing within five (5) working days after receipt.

(c) *Discussion*

- i. All parties to the informal grievance procedure must be prepared to participate in full discussion of the grievance, and to permit the participation of others who may have knowledge of the circumstances of the grievance in the discussion.
- ii. State Program Officers and other AMERICORPS employees may participate in discussions and provide guidance with respect to AMERICORPS policies and procedures, at the request of any party, even prior to submission of a grievance to them.

FORMAL GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE

For the complete language on the formal grievance procedure, please refer to the AMERICORPS VISTA Member Handbook. The following is a summary:

(a) *Submission of grievance to Regional Director*

- i. If a VISTA is dissatisfied with the response of the State Director or designee, he or she may present the grievance in writing to the Regional Director. To be eligible for the formal grievance procedure, the VISTA must have completed action under the informal procedure or have alleged that the State Director or designee exceeded the time specified for response.
- ii. *Contents of grievance*
The VISTA's grievance must be in writing, contain sufficient detail to identify the subject matter of the grievance, specify the relief requested, and be signed by the VISTA or a person designated in writing by the VISTA to be the representative for the purpose of the grievance.
- iii. *Time limit*
The VISTA must submit the grievance to the Regional Director or designee no later than 15 calendar days after receipt of the informal response by the State Director or designee. If no response is received by the VISTA 15 calendar days after the grievance is received by the State Director or designee, the VISTA may submit the grievance directly to the Regional Director or designee for consideration.
- iv. *Within 10 working days of the receipt of the grievance, the Regional Director or designee shall, in whole or in part, either decide it on its merits or reject the grievance.*
A grievance may be rejected, in whole or in part, for the following reasons:
 1. It was not filled within the time limit specified, or



2. The grievance consists of matters not contained within the definition of a grievance.
- v. *Rejection of a grievance by the Regional Director or designee may be appealed by the VISTA within 10 days of receipt of the notice to the Office of General Counsel.*
The Office shall immediately request the grievance file from the Regional Director and, within five working days of the receipt of it, determine the appropriateness of the rejection. If the grievance was properly rejected by the Regional Director, the Office shall notify the VISTA of its opinion and the reasons supporting it, and that such rejection is the final Agency decision in the matter. If the Office determines that the grievance was improperly rejected, it shall return the grievance to the Regional Director for a determination on its merits by the Regional Director. Within 10 working days of such notification and receipt of the grievance file, the Regional Director or designee shall notify the VISTA in writing of the decision on the merits and specify the grounds for the decision and the volunteer’s right to appeal.
 - vi. *Time limit*
If a VISTA is dissatisfied with the decision of the Regional Director or designee on the merits of the grievance, he or she shall notify the Regional Director within 5 calendar days from receipt of the decision and request the appointment of an examiner. If the VISTA receives no response from the Regional Director or Office of General Counsel within 5 calendar days after the prescribed time limits, the VISTA may request in writing that the Regional Director appoint a Grievance Examiner. Upon receipt of this request, the Regional Director or designee shall appoint within 5 calendar days an Examiner who shall possess the qualifications specified in Appendix A in the AMERICORPS VISTA Member Handbook.

For information about the Investigation by Grievance Examiner, Grievance file and Examiner’s report, final determination by Director of VISTA, and Disposition of grievance appeal files, see the appropriate section of the [AMERICORPS VISTA Member Handbook](#).

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY CREATED DURING SERVICE

Members have the right to copyright work that is subject to copyright, including software designs, training manuals, curricula, videotapes, and other products created while serving as a VISTA member.

Members may not sell any work that includes an AmeriCorps logo without prior written approval of AMERICORPS. By enrolling in AmeriCorps VISTA, with regard to products created while serving as a VISTA member, members agree to give AMERICORPS and MCSC/the host site organization an unlimited, royalty-free, nonexclusive, and irrevocable license to obtain, use, reproduce, publish, or disseminate products, including data produced for the sponsoring organization, and agree to authorize others to do so. AMERICORPS may distribute such products through a designated clearinghouse.

POLICY ON PERSONAL TRANSPORTATION

- VISTA members are responsible for their own transportation to and from their home and host site.
- Host sites can provide bus and parking passes for the VISTA member, but this is optional.
- For travel that the host site requires to events, the host site is responsible to provide transportation or reimburse a VISTA’s cost for travel.
- When VISTA members are REQUIRED to attend a training sponsored by MCSC, VISTA members will be reimbursed for their costs.
- If a VISTA member has an issue with securing adequate transportation, he/she must contact the MCSC at least seven days prior to request assistance with identifying an acceptable solution.



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- The MCSC VISTA Program is not responsible for finding transportation for VISTA members for travel related to VISTA service, training, and/or orientation.
- In the event that AmeriCorps VISTA members and/or site supervisors are required to attend a program function, they must make every effort to first provide their own transportation. This can include a personal vehicle, sharing a ride or public transportation.
- Parking fees will be reimbursed or paid for in advance for any trainings held in Lansing.

STARTING THE VISTA YEAR

Each member will receive a program calendar at the start of his/her service assignment detailing the scheduled member trainings and dates. Dates on the calendar are **required** components of the program and should be given top priority during the VISTA year.

VIRTUAL MEMBER ORIENTATION (VMO)

All VISTA candidates (nationwide) attend a Virtual Member Orientation (VMO) provided and facilitated by AMERICORPS staff and training consultants on the first day that VISTAs begin service. The aim of VMO and subsequent Onsite Orientation and Training is to ensure VISTA candidates embrace the mission of AmeriCorps VISTA; understand and accept the terms, conditions, and benefits of VISTA service; have a general grasp of the state of poverty in America; and can relate their project assignments to addressing poverty.

VISTAs must successfully complete their VMO in order to continue serving as a VISTA. In some cases, a VISTA may begin serving before attending a VMO; however, the decision to defer orientation, made at the discretion of AMERICORPS staff, is rare.

MCSC VISTA MEMBER ORIENTATION

MCSC will provide a virtual orientation to provide an overview of MCSC and the detailed expectations and requirements of the MCSC VISTA program. This is a mandatory orientation held on the first day of service facilitated by the Program Coordinator or Program Manager.

POST-VMO TRAINING

VISTA Campus webinars provide continuous training for the first month of service.

SUPERVISORS' ORIENTATION *(COVID-19 IMPACTED)

Prior to the start of each service term, MCSC will host a Supervisors' Orientation. This Orientation is for all supervisors, new and seasoned, to review VISTA and program policies, engage in peer learning, and build a community of supervisors from around the state who can support each other throughout the service term. Regular monthly calls will be hosted by the MCSC Program Manager to provide additional supervisor support.

ON-SITE ORIENTATION

Once VISTA members report to their host sites, supervisors and other staff will help them acclimate to the site and to their VISTA Assignment.

Supervisors will prepare an On-Site Orientation Checklist and submit to Program Manager before the first day of service. VISTAs and supervisors will complete the On-Site Orientation Checklist together. This provides a forum for the VISTA to gather useful information about office history and culture, the community, the goals of the VISTA and the supervisor's styles and preferences. During the completion of the On-Site Orientation Checklist,



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the VISTA and the supervisor should determine days and times for weekly meetings (or as regular as needed) and come to an understanding around expectations.

Throughout the first few weeks at the service site, the supervisor and other staff should introduce the VISTA to key stakeholders and relevant staff, bring the VISTA up-to-speed on progress to-date on the project, and help the VISTA get acclimated to his/her role. During this time, the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) will be particularly useful and should be referred to frequently.

At any point throughout the orientation process, which can take as long or as little time as the site and the VISTA deem necessary, both supervisors and VISTAs should reach out to the Program Manager with questions or concerns. The first few weeks are vital to the overall success of the VISTA project and to ensuring that the VISTA has a positive experience.

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING THE VISTA YEAR

A year is a long time and a very short time all at once! In order for VISTAs and supervisors to make the most of the VISTA term of service, it is important that they understand what the year is going to look like. As in most opportunities in life, VISTAs will get *out* of the VISTA year what they put *into* the VISTA year.

VISTA ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS (VAD) AND THE VISTA ACTIVITIES

VISTA supervisors are asked to develop the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) in accordance to AmeriCorps policy and guidelines. A VAD explains a project position and role assigned to a member, and includes goals, objectives, and activities a member is expected to complete in order to satisfy project needs.

Each VAD will identify one or more of the Project Goals (examples listed in Section 1E) that the VISTA will focus on for the year, as well as the activities s/he will complete to accomplish milestones towards the goal(s). VISTAs and supervisors will refer to the VAD and work plan throughout the year to track progress, stay on track, and prioritize assignments.

All activities in the VAD and work plan should be capacity building (not direct service) and align with the goals of the MCSC VISTA Program. Ideally, the steps and milestones would also be in alignment with the mission of the host site.

Throughout the year, the VISTA may be asked to do activities which are not on the VAD. This is perfectly acceptable, as long as the activities are still not direct service, are not taking the place of a staff person, and do not fall into any of the VISTA conditions/restrictions. While it may be beneficial to have VISTAs undertake other activities so that they get to know the host site and the community, VAD activities should still be prioritized.

VISTAs will also have the opportunity to select a VISTA Year Initiative, which will allow them to put their own mark on their VISTA position. For more on the VISTA Year Initiative, see Section 8.

MCSC TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT *(COVID-19 IMPACTED)

In November, VISTA members are required to attend the Michigan's AmeriCorps Member Celebration professional development event and the MCSC VISTA in-person training in Lansing. This training will allow VISTA members to develop a deeper understanding of their service year experience. A hotel room and reimbursement for travel will be provided by MCSC.

AMERICORPS IN-SERVICE TRAINING

Throughout the VISTA Year, AMERICORPS will provide webinars and trainings which MCSC VISTAs may choose to participate in. Many trainings resources can be found on the VISTA Campus, and others may come to the



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VISTAs in email invitations. As these are facilitated and sponsored by AMERICORPS, they are designed for a national audience of VISTAs. However, MCSC VISTAs are encouraged to take advantage of as many of these development opportunities as they are able.

MONTHLY COHORT MEETINGS/WEBINARS

All MCSC VISTA members will participate in monthly cohort meetings or webinars put on by the MCSC VISTA team. These meetings or webinars provide a forum for members to connect with each other and the program, and gain professional development via guest speakers, training topics, etc. VISTA members may sometimes be called on to help facilitate the meetings or give presentations. There are no costs associated with the meetings or webinars. Each member will receive a Program Calendar detailing the monthly calls or webinars. VISTA members are expected to attend every meeting unless they have requested and received permission to not attend.

COMMUNICATION WITH VISTA LEADERS

Since MCSC VISTA members are located in different areas of the state, email is one of the primary methods of communication between program officials and the VISTAs in the field. Specifically, the VISTA Leaders will send out frequent emails to all VISTA members. These emails will include resources, upcoming deadlines and reminders, professional development opportunities, and other need-to-know information. VISTAs are expected to read the weekly emails and communicate back to the Team Leaders if there are any questions or concerns.

Our cohort will also rely on an online platform called Basecamp to communicate with members and share resources, documents, and announcements. Shortly after you begin service, you will be added to our Basecamp team through your email.

In addition, your VISTA Leader will schedule individual check-in meetings once a month with each member. These individual meetings are a great time to ask questions, share with your Leader any struggles or problems that have come up, and discuss projects that you are currently working on.

SITE VISITS *(COVID-19 IMPACTED)

MCSC VISTA program staff will conduct one or two site visits per service term with each host site. One visit is likely to be in the fall and one is likely to be in the spring, schedules and weather permitting. Member participation in site visits is a **required** component of the program. Site visits may include, but are not limited to, conversations with the VISTA member, site supervisor, and other staff members at the host site.

The site visits are a golden opportunity to connect with program staff and show off the VISTA workspace and success. The Program Manager will ask questions to gauge progress towards project goals, identify ways the member(s) and supervisor can be more supported by MCSC and determine if the project is compliant with VISTA policies.

REPORTING

The VISTA will be asked to provide a report of completed activities. VISTAs are essential to providing accurate, up-to-date information on what has been accomplished to-date.

The questions that the VISTAs will be asked to relate directly to the goals and milestones under which they are working and to which the VADs corresponds. The reporting is a great chance for the VISTAs to reflect on their service and see their impact/accomplishments on a quarterly basis.

The VISTAs should share this report with the site supervisor. Once the report has been approved by both



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the VISTA and the supervisor, the VISTA will submit the report to the Program Manager.

MCSC is required to submit a Quarterly Progress Reports (QPRs) to AmeriCorps the agency. The report will be generated from the monthly data collected and stories of impact.

PROGRESS MONITORING AND REPORTING

SITE VISITS

As referenced, VISTAs and site supervisors can expect one to two site visits a year from the MCSC VISTA team. The site visit question rubric provide outlines the questions that will be asked (subject to change) of the members and supervisors. Site visits are part of the VISTA monitoring process because they are a chance for MCSC to make sure everyone is on the same page and adhering to all VISTA policies and requirements. Additionally, site visits will allow insight into the progress the VISTA has made on VAD activities. If areas show insufficient progress, those areas will be flagged for special attention during the remainder of the service term. The site visits afford an opportunity for candid reflection and dialogue that is rarely afforded on phone calls or via email.

EVALUATIONS

The supervisor and VISTA member will be required to jointly conduct a mid-term (6-month) and end-of-term evaluation of each member's performance, focusing on such factors as:

- Whether the member has made significant progress towards, or completed, the activities outlined in the VAD.
- Whether the member has made gains in areas of professional growth and development.
- Whether the member has met other performance criteria that were outlined at the beginning of the term of service.
- What the training needs are that could help the site and how the supervisor can be more supportive of the VISTA.

The member will receive a copy of the mid-term and end-of-term evaluations. Evaluations are a formalized chance for professional development and constructive feedback. Evaluations are a time for everyone to take stock, re-evaluate, and re-focus.

Members and supervisors may complete evaluations more frequently (some find that quarterly is helpful) as needed. It is expected that members and supervisors take the evaluations seriously and use them as tools to monitor progress towards the project.

A copy of the mid- and end-of-year evaluations will be submitted to the Program Manager. If any issues arise on the evaluation that seems to warrant attention, further conversations with relevant parties will take place.



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VISTA YEAR INITIATIVE (VYI)

**Supervisors need to be aware of this at orientation and it needs to be discussed at the VISTA Training.*

Serving as a MCSC VISTA provides ample opportunities for personal and professional growth. The VISTA Year Initiative (VYI) is designed to allow VISTA members to put their unique skills, talents and interests to use through the activities of the VISTA project. While the VYI should be an activity that is not listed directly on the VAD, it should still fit in with the overall goals of the VISTA’s work at the host site or community partner.

Each VISTA will select a VISTA Year Initiative to complete over the course of their service term. The VYI should be something you are passionate about accomplishing. The topic should be chosen with the approval of the supervisor.

HOW TO SELECT A TOPIC

When thinking about where to begin, VISTAs should think about what issue they are most passionate about. What are their future life/career goals? What impact or legacy do they wish to leave at their host site and in the community? What are some hidden talents that are not being put to use at their host site or community partners?

For example, a VISTA may have a talent for photography, so they decide to do a photo documentary of the work that the host site is doing. If a VISTA sees a great need for some technological upgrading at the host site, they could develop and lead a series of workshops for staff members about useful technology tools that the organization can adopt. Perhaps a passion for children could drive a VISTA to start a mentoring program that connects the host site organization with a worthy youth development organization in the community.

Each VISTA should take a few months to get to know the needs of their host site, community partner organization, and greater community. Once a need has been identified, the VISTA can be creative in coming up with solutions, and this might just turn into a great VISTA Year Initiative.

WHAT THIS VYI WILL ENTAIL

The VISTA Year Initiative is what the VISTAs make of it. If there is something that a VISTA is really hoping to accomplish before their term as a VISTA member is complete, this is the time to formalize it and announce it to the world so that MCSC can provide the tools, resources and support to help you accomplish it. The project can be big or small. It can last the full year or be a one-day event. For VISTAs who are swamped during the school year, the summer is going to be the best time to really move forward with the VYI, but each VISTA needs to plan ahead.

TIMELINE

First quarter of service:	Brainstorm ideas to discuss with program manager and supervisor
At the end of the first quarter:	Project ideas due to Program Associate
During the service term:	Complete the project!
At the end of the service term:	Let MCSC know what was accomplished!

Your VISTA Leader will be following up with more information. See Section 11 for the idea submission form and the VYI reporting form.



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WRAPPING UP THE VISTA YEAR

FUTURE PLANS FORM

Once VISTA members near the end of their year (about 90 days before their service ends), they will be notified that a Future Plans Form has been opened in their AmeriCorps portal. This form is the official channel for communicating to AMERICORPS your future plans: end service on the 365th day as anticipated, leave service early, take a leave of absence, etc. All members are required by AMERICORPS to complete this form. Once completed, it will be sent to the Program Manager who will provide a brief evaluation of your member performance. Without completing the Future Plans Form, you will NOT be exited from the system or receive your end of service award (Education Award or Cash Stipend).

END OF YEAR PAPERWORK

In order for VISTA members to successfully complete a term of service with MCSC, certain paperwork needs to be submitted to the VISTA Program Manager. This includes:

- End of Year Evaluation to be completed with supervisor
- Program Feedback (from both the VISTA and the supervisor) so that MCSC may continually improve the program
- Final timesheet, through last day of service
- Final Quarterly Progress Report
- VISTA Year Initiative wrap-up
- Permanent address and other contact information (for tax purposes)

An email will go out to each VISTA and their supervisor about one month prior to the end of service with all of this paperwork and due dates. As the end of the year can be a busy time for many, it is important to prioritize this end of year paperwork so that it is all completed by the time the VISTA is exited from service. Failure to do so could put the VISTA's standing with the program in jeopardy.

END OF SERVICE CELEBRATION

The end of the year is not all about paperwork. It is also about celebrating VISTA members and supervisors and thanking them for a fabulous VISTA year! To this end, the MCSC Program will sponsor and plan an End of Year Celebration for all members. This celebration will be a chance to get together one last time, present the VISTAs with their certificates of completion, and have some fun. After a year of fighting poverty and serving communities, the VISTAs deserve a day of relaxation and celebration. Look for more information about the End of Year Celebration to come a few weeks or months prior to the end of service. There is only one End of Year Celebration that will occur around the time that the majority of members are wrapping up their terms. Any off-cycle members will be invited to attend the celebration as well.



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USING THE VISTA BENEFITS

Many of the VISTA benefits are contingent on the VISTAs completing a successful service term, so they cannot be accessed until after service. This includes the Education Award/cash stipend, student loan interest accrual payment, and Non-Competitive Eligibility. Remember, members who initially elect the cash stipend cannot switch to the Education Award, but members who initially select the Education Award have until their tenth month of service to switch to the stipend.

SEGAL EDUCATION AWARD

After successful service completion, a VISTA will be able to access in his/her AmeriCorps portal a link to utilize the Segal Education Award. This \$6,195 (for 2020-2021) can be utilized all at once or in smaller increments for up to seven years after service. You will use the My AmeriCorps portal to manage your Education Award including to check your award balance and value, and to request payments to an educational institution and/or loan holder(s). All payments made using the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award are subject to federal tax in the year each payment is made. It is considered taxable income regardless of whether it is used to pay current educational costs or to repay qualified student loans.

END-OF-SERVICE CASH STIPEND

Like the education award, which is handled directly by AMERICORPS and the VMSU, the End-of-Service Cash Stipend is handled by AMERICORPS. For members who have selected the stipend, it will be added on to the last two living allowance disbursement and directly deposited into the member's bank account. The stipend is also taxable. For questions about the stipend, see the Program Manager.

PAYMENT OF STUDENT LOAN INTEREST

Members who are earning a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award are uniquely eligible to have interest paid on their behalf for loans that they put into forbearance for the duration of their national service term. During this forbearance based on national service, interest continues to accrue. If VISTAs successfully complete their term of service and earn an Education Award, the National Service Trust will pay all or a portion of the interest that has accrued on qualified student loans during this period. This accrued interest paid by the National Service Trust, like the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award itself, is subject to income taxes. In order to access this benefit, VISTAs should request an interest accrual payment in their AmeriCorps portal after successful completion of their service. VISTAs and their lenders must complete the *Interest Accrued During National Service Form*, which indicates the amount of interest accrued during the service period. The loan holder sends this completed form to the Trust for payment.

NON-COMPETITIVE ELIGIBILITY (NCE)

The experience gained during a VISTA year can help members get hired by the federal government. After satisfactorily completing a full year of service, VISTA members earn non-competitive eligibility for federal jobs for one year beginning the day after completion of service. This essentially adds a few points to a candidate's application and allows federal agencies the option of directly selecting a VISTA alum for a vacant position if s/he is rated as "qualified" for the position without having to compete with the general public. Non-Competitive Eligibility does not mean that members are guaranteed a federal civil service job. To establish non-competitive status, members will need proof of eligibility. Once you've completed service, you can log onto the My AmeriCorps Portal to print off a letter of VISTA certification. This is a benefit that is not offered to other streams of national service.



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LIFE AFTER AMERICORPS

During the last few months of VISTA service, the VISTA Leader will connect with members as they begin to think about, and prepare for, their next steps. This series will include information about résumé writing, interviewing, networking, finding jobs, using the VISTA benefits, and staying connected through AmeriCorps Alums. MCSC Program Officials and other staff at MCSC will be available to review application materials for VISTAs and serve as references upon request.

The VISTA Campus, which is accessible for all VISTA members and will be talked about in-depth at VMO and Post-VMO training, also has many resources for post-AmeriCorps life. All members are encouraged to review these resources, including many helpful webinars, and take advantage of opportunities to prepare for their next steps. VISTAs should take special **note** of their last day of service to ensure that they are not applying for positions that will be filled prior to the end of their service. If VISTAs leave service early, they will not be able to access their end of year benefits, including the NCE.

AMERICORPS ALUMS

After exiting service, there are still opportunities to stay involved in national service! Around the country, AmeriCorps Alum networks provide networking, professional development, and service opportunities for individuals who have completed national service. AmeriCorps Alums is the official network for national service programs and is an enterprise of Points of Light. MCSC VISTA alumni are highly encouraged to get connected to one of these networks. MCSC might also be reaching out to alumni for input at various times.

For more information and to get connected, visit <http://www.americorpsalums.org/>.

MCSC PROGRAM VISTA ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION (VAD)

Each VISTA members will have their own VAD. Activities will be drawn from the program VAD.

The MCSC Community Resilience VISTA Program is a cohort of 50 VISTAs that serve throughout the state of Michigan in a national service role and focus on eliminating poverty in education, economic opportunity, health, and climate change. The Community Resilience VISTA Program seeks to fill up to 50 positions to serve full-time for one year, from 2023 to 2024. We are seeking candidates who want to make a difference in their communities by helping individuals access resources and have a voice in making a difference.

VISTA members will help provide individuals access to the resources they need to be successful in school and work. This will include:

- Removing barriers and increasing access to information for youth pursuing college, skilled trades training or employment opportunities.
- Assisting with developing solutions to decrease the opportunity gaps faced by underserved communities to ensure essential resources for health, employment, and education are accessible.
- Encourage youth voice by supporting youth to identify needs, challenges and avenues to solve the issues that impact youth and their communities.
- Assist with enhancing or developing programs to recruit, engage, and manage volunteers to make a difference in the communities. This will include virtual volunteer opportunities.



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- Develop corporate partnerships that engage employees in volunteering to underserved communities.
- Support youth with engaging in social justice discussions and helping to support anti-racism policies and procedures.

VISTA Member Activities

Asset and Resource Coordination

- Develop mechanisms for youth, parents, and youth serving organizations to access resources that enhance the skill sets of youth and assist them with being successful in school and/or work.
- Assist host sites with developing solutions to decrease the opportunity gaps youth and underserved communities face.
- Identify and make accessible community resources that assist youth and adults with excelling in school and pursuing future goals. Identify and make accessible resources for youth of color and underserved communities.
- Assist with identifying resources and assets available to individuals in the community and state.
- Research contact information, services provided and how to access resources.
- Assist with coordinating resources to allow more youth, adults, veterans, and older adults to be served.
- Assist with developing referral network for the organization's clients.
- Collect data that demonstrates the impact of a coordinated resource delivery network.
- Assist with supporting an intergenerational stakeholder network with the intent of supporting youth.

Recruit and Engage Volunteers

- Assist with enhancing or developing systems to recruit, engage, and manage volunteers as for programs that support underserved communities.
- Assist with enhancing or developing programs to recruit, engage, and manage youth as volunteers to make a difference in their communities, including virtual volunteer opportunities.
- Develop corporate partnerships that engage employees in volunteering to support youth in community.
- Design volunteer recruitment strategies to implement at corporate and community events.
- Support the delivery of trainings that offer best practices to engage volunteers.
- Facilitate recognition events to celebrate volunteerism and national service.
- Guide youth in knowing how to be involved in making a difference in their communities through service and sharing issues of concern.
- Assist schools and youth organizations utilize the InnerView platform to create a service resume.
- Assist with developing procedures to ensure volunteers are safe and those they serve are safe due to issues related to COVID-19.

Youth Voice

- Support youth to identify needs, challenges and avenues to solve the issues that impact youth and their communities.
- Assist youth with identifying procedures and policies that cause challenges and prevent them from accessing resources being successful.
- Gather information through surveys and meetings led by youth leaders.
- Collect, analyze and summarize data gathered to use in developing a plan of action.



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- Assist youth with planning volunteer activities to engage their peers in making a difference in their community.
- Support youth with writing goals to fund service activities and gain an understanding of their power of philanthropy.
- Support youth with being engaged in social justice discussions and helping the community to support anti-racism policies and procedures.

Access to Careers

- Promote increased access to information and removing barriers to youth pursuing college, skilled trades trainings, or youth employment opportunities.
- Provide workforce development opportunities.
- Develop or strengthen partnerships and networks that assist youth with exploring career opportunities.
- Increase the number of youths (in particular youth of color) with accessing information and obtaining internships, scholarships, and youth employment.
- Assist with supporting mentoring initiatives that help youth explore careers and access resources.
- Explore opportunities to utilize the arts and sciences to expand skills of youth.

Success in School

- Assist programs with enhancing systems that support youth with being successful in school.
- Identify mentoring programs in the community and assist with coordinating efforts to serve students.
- Support the coordination of corporate and nonprofit programs providing services to students and families.
- Assist with making data available that demonstrates the progress of students receiving services.
- Implement virtual opportunities for volunteers to support youth, including virtual mentoring and virtual tutoring.

Resource Development

- Assist with developing a fund development plan to increase resources for individuals in local community.
- Identify and apply for grants to support the initiative.
- Assist with implementing fund development events to support youth, adult, and older adult services in the community.
- Identify federal, state, and local resources to fund and support youth, adult, and older adult initiatives.

COVID-19 Support

- Support local virtual opportunities for volunteers and staff.
- Assist with developing initiatives on how adults and youth can be engaged in supporting the community to decrease the spread of COVID-19.

Access to Healthcare

- Identify gaps in service and address supplemental healthcare support for underserved communities.
- Create an outreach campaign to inform the community about free healthcare programs.