



DATE: November 12, 2014

SUBJECT: Request for Concept Papers for AmeriCorps VISTA Projects in Connecticut-Due December 23, 2014

SUMMARY: The Corporation for National and Community Service Connecticut State Program Office seeks concept papers for the AmeriCorps VISTA program from innovative, high-performing and outcome-driven organizations that share the VISTA mission to provide long term solutions to poverty. This Request for Concept Papers is for placement of VISTA members in 2015 or 2016.

AGENCY DESCRIPTION: The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) (www.nationalservice.gov) is a federal government agency that engages more than five million Americans in service through its core programs: the Social Innovation Fund, Senior Corps, and AmeriCorps. As the nation's largest grant-maker for service and volunteering, CNCS plays a critical role in strengthening America's nonprofit sector and addressing our nation's challenges through service. The mission of CNCS is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION: AmeriCorps VISTA is a highly professional and rigorous volunteer service program, through which national service members serve with organizations full time for one year. VISTA projects focus on building permanent capacity and infrastructure in nonprofit and other organizations to help more effectively bring individuals and communities out of poverty. For more information, visit: www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameri-corps/ameri-corps-vista/sponsor-vista-project

The AmeriCorps VISTA program places VISTA members at sponsoring organizations that absorb most of the costs related to project supervision and logistical support. VISTA provides a small living allowance and certain benefits for members. Investment by the sponsoring organization and the community is fundamental to the VISTA program, as the VISTA resources are intended to be short-term.

To achieve its program purpose, VISTA operates under the following core principles:

Anti-Poverty Focus – The purpose of VISTA is to support efforts to fight poverty. Any nonprofit organization, educational institution, tribal, or public agency with a program that is poverty-related in scope may be considered for VISTA project sponsorship. The project should address helping individuals and communities out of poverty, not simply making poverty more tolerable through short-term services.

Community Empowerment – Sponsoring organizations ensure that the VISTA project engages residents of low-income communities in planning, developing, and implementing the project. The project must be responsive and relevant to the lives of the community residents, and should tap into inherent community assets, strengths, and resources.

Capacity Building – VISTA members do not provide direct services to low-income individuals; rather, they work to increase the capacity of organizations to fight poverty. Through activities such as fundraising, establishment of community volunteer recruitment and management systems, community outreach, and collaborative development, VISTA members mobilize local resources to achieve lasting solutions to poverty. Projects focus on achieving impactful outcomes on the community and/or beneficiary population.

Sustainable Solutions – VISTA members provide short-term human resources to build long-term sustainability of anti-poverty programs. All VISTA projects should be developed with the goal to phase out the need for VISTA members and strengthen the ability of the project to continue indefinitely.

ELIGIBLE SPONSORS: Public organizations such as state and local government organizations, Indian Tribes, and nonprofit private organizations may apply to be AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsors. Please note that eligible nonprofit private organizations are not limited to those with IRS 501(c) (3) status, but rather all organizations with IRS 501(c) status that focus on anti-poverty community development. Organizations that focus solely on advocacy and lobbying are not eligible.

VISTA project sponsors must be able to direct the project, recruit and supervise the VISTA members, and provide necessary administrative support to complete the goals of the VISTA project. Project sponsors develop and manage projects with the involvement of the communities that will be served. The beneficiary of any VISTA initiative is the poverty community. The goal for every VISTA project is for the sponsoring organization to sustain the VISTA member's outcomes beyond the service term. Organizations that have previously sponsored VISTA projects may apply only with a new project and program emphasis and must demonstrate a prior successful record in project management and achieving results.

AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBERS: VISTA members come from diverse race, age, geographic, and economic backgrounds. They live and serve in some of our nation's poorest areas. Each VISTA member makes a year-long, full-time commitment to serve on a specific project with a sponsor. VISTA members receive a modest living allowance and health benefits during their service and have the option of receiving a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or an end-of-service cash stipend following successful completion of one term of service.

AmeriCorps VISTA members are not permitted to work outside of their VISTA duties during their year of service. VISTA members are national service professionals who build organizational capacity. VISTA members focus on capacity-building activities in one of four strategic plan focus areas: education, economic opportunity, healthy futures, and veterans and military families. Members do NOT perform direct service, which primarily includes activities that address individual clients' immediate needs. Furthermore, VISTAs may NOT engage in activities that would supplant the tasks of, or displace, paid staff, contractors, or existing volunteers. This prohibition includes activities related to the application to and the management of other CNCS grants and programs.

PROJECT REQUIREMENTS: An AmeriCorps VISTA project may be continued for up to three years; however, projects are considered for renewal on a year-to-year basis, depending on the availability of resources, program performance, and the priorities of CNCS. Programming should be based primarily on addressing local needs. Project approval will be guided by programming that addresses VISTA's core principles, as well as CNCS strategic plan focus areas.

To be considered as a VISTA sponsoring organization, an applicant should meet all the requirements of sponsorship listed in the Concept Paper and Application for Federal Assistance:

http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/VISTA_Concept%20Paper_2014.pdf

Criteria to consider when applying for a VISTA sponsorship are to ensure that the proposed project:

- Addresses the VISTA program core principles of fighting poverty, empowering the community, building capacity, and creating sustainable solutions.
- Addresses one or more of the CNCS Strategic Plan focus areas of education, economic opportunity, healthy futures, and/or veterans and military families.
- Demonstrates an understanding of national service within the context of the VISTA program.
- Articulates clearly defined goals with measurable impact directed towards eradicating poverty and the problems of low-income communities.
- Clearly states the applicant's financial commitment towards the project.

Consideration will be given to:

- The organization's ability to demonstrate its capacity or community support by providing matching funds or the "cost share" for one or more of the living allowances of the VISTA members. The living allowance for Connecticut VISTA members ranges from \$11,796 to \$16,716 per year, depending on the county where they serve.
- The need for a geographically and programmatically diversified portfolio to benefit from VISTA resources. Existing and previous service activities and regions where members have been serving will be considered as part of the review process. This Request for Concept Papers is designed to provide new

service activities for new communities and needs, where appropriate and possible.

SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS FOR CONNECTICUT AMERICORPS VISTA

CONCEPT PAPERS: The CNCS Connecticut State Office specifically is seeking applications from organizations that focus on one or more of the following:

- 1) Organizations that provide services to low-income veterans that would serve as a project sponsor for a multi-site veterans' project addressing veterans' needs such as housing, health care, employment or continuing education.
- 2) Organizations that are geographically based in Bridgeport and/or Fairfield County that would serve as a project sponsor for a multi-site project with a programmatic focus in one or more of these issue areas: education, economic opportunity, healthy futures, and veterans.
- 3) Organizations interested in serving as host sites with one of the existing multi-site VISTA projects that focus on:
 - Expanding educational opportunities or resources for low-income youth in the greater New Haven area;
 - Economic and food security issues in Hartford;
 - Youth leadership programming for low-income youth around food security and food justice issues (geographic preference for organizations based in the western part of Connecticut but open to organizations based in other parts of the state).
 - Youth education efforts conducted through partnerships with college campuses.

PROGRAMMATIC FOCUS AREAS: Applicants should address one or more of the following programmatic focus areas of education, economic opportunity, healthy futures, or veterans. Additional details are provided below.

Education

K-12 Success: Educational and behavioral outcomes of students in low-achieving elementary, middle, and high schools.

Post-secondary Success: Preparation for and prospects of success in post-secondary education institutions for economically disadvantaged students.

Economic Opportunity

Financial Literacy: Improving access to services and benefits aimed at contributing to enhanced financial literacy.

Housing: Transitioning individuals into or helping them remain in safe, healthy, affordable housing.

Employment: Improving employability that leads to increased success in becoming employed.

Healthy Futures

Obesity and Food (Food Resources): Improving access to nutritious food.

Veterans

VISTA will support projects that focus specifically on low-income veterans as beneficiaries, or enhance existing projects to begin or better serve low-income veterans. Project activities should focus on:

Economic Opportunity (Financial literacy, Housing, Employment),
Education (School Readiness, K-12 Success, Post-secondary Success), and/or
Healthy Futures (Obesity and Food, Access to Health Care).

The VISTA program encourages all projects to recruit veterans to serve as VISTA members, particularly projects that serve veterans and military families.

See the 2014 AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance for more details on these focus areas (please note that the 2015 program guidance is not yet available):

www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/2014_VISTA_Program_Guidance.pdf

Cost Share of AmeriCorps VISTA members in Connecticut

While VISTA regulations do not require a non-federal match, the Corporation for National and Community Service looks to VISTA sponsors to help pay the member living allowance for some of the project's VISTA members. This allows CNCS to maximize federal resources and to keep the federal cost of VISTA members to a minimum. Currently, the living allowances for Connecticut VISTA members range from \$11,796 to \$16,716 per year. Organizations that are able to financially support a VISTA member's living allowance will receive priority consideration. It is expected that in years 2 and 3 of VISTA programming, the number of cost share VISTA members will increase.

The goal of the CNCS Connecticut State Office is to have the cost of one out of every four VISTA members shared by the sponsoring organization in year one (Example: programs with four VISTA members would have one VISTA member would be a "cost share" member, with the VISTA project sponsor paying the living allowance amount of \$11,796 to \$16,716).

CNCS PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENTS:

The Corporation for National and Community Service Performance Measurement framework provides a common focal point for CNCS' work across all programs and initiatives. CNCS has a focused set of Agency-Wide Priority Measures derived from the 2011-2015 [Strategic Plan](#). Every VISTA project is expected to incorporate one or more performance measures into the full grant application. For more information, visit: www.nationalserviceresources.gov/npm/vista

HOW TO APPLY: Applying for AmeriCorps VISTA is a multi-tiered process. Organizations interested in sponsoring a VISTA project need to submit a concept paper in eGrants, the CNCS online grant application system, using these instructions: www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/VISTA_Concept%20Paper_2014.pdf

Concept papers are due by December 23, 2014. Only concept papers submitted by 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time on December 23, 2014, will be considered. The submission of a concept paper does not guarantee approval or commitment of VISTA resources. Each submission is evaluated on its merits and is subject to the availability of resources. Successful applicants will also need to demonstrate familiarity with the information contained in the resources listed at the end of this document. If the concept paper is approved, the organization will be invited to submit a full application to the CNCS State Office for review and approval.

Organizations interested in serving as host sites of an existing VISTA project may contact ct@cns.gov to discuss the option of submitting a concept paper as a Word document attached to an email message or submitting a project specific application to an existing VISTA project sponsor.

Technical Assistance: The CNCS Connecticut State Office will host a technical assistance call/webinar about this Request for Concept Papers on December 2 at 10:00 a.m. Eastern Time. If you are interested in participating, please RSVP by e-mail to ct@cns.gov to receive details.

Schedule:

November 12, 2014: Request for Concept Papers Issued.

November 21, 2014: Interested applicants e-mail letter of intent to apply (not required and non-binding).

December 2, 2014: Technical assistance call/Webinar for interested applicants. RSVP to ct@cns.gov for call details.

December 23, 2014: Deadline for submitting concept papers.

Week of January 12, 2015: CNCS Connecticut State Office staff will notify organizations if their concept paper has been approved and provide guidance on the next step of the application process to approved applicants.

February 20, 2015: Deadline for organizations with approved concept papers to submit full project application via eGrants.

March 20, 2015: CNCS Connecticut State Office staff will notify organizations of decisions on applications and proceed with final approval process of accepted applications.

April 3, 2015: Application approvals completed and Memoranda of Agreement issued.

April 20, 2015: New projects submit VISTA position postings and VISTA Assignment Descriptions in eGrants to begin recruiting.

May 25 – June 12, 2015: Projects screen and interview VISTA candidates.

June 12, 2015: Deadline to submit VISTA candidates to CNCS Connecticut State Office for final approval.

Week of June 15, 2015: VISTA Project Directors attend required supervisor training (three days out of state paid by CNCS).

Week of August 3, 2015: VISTA candidates attend pre-service orientation and start service.

RESOURCES:

Successful applicants will demonstrate familiarity with the following resources:

2014 AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance for Current and Potential Project Sponsors:
www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/2014_VISTA_Program_Guidance.pdf

AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper Guidelines:
www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/VISTA_Concept%20Paper_2014.pdf

Information on How to Become an AmeriCorps VISTA Project Sponsor:
www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameri-corps/ameri-corps-vista/sponsor-vista-project

Developing Performance Measures:
www.nationalservicerresources.gov/npm/vista

VISTA 101: Understanding VISTA (online tutorial):
www.vistacampus.gov/resources/vista-101-understanding-vista-0?id=10385

VISTA 201: How to apply for an AmeriCorps VISTA Project:
www.vistacampus.gov/resources/vista-201-0?id=13325

How to Create and Manage an eGrants Account:
www.nationalservicerresources.gov/create-and-manage-egrants-account-presentation

VISTA Campus (an online learning environment for the VISTA community; contains tutorials, interactive courses, toolkits, guides, manuals, and links to resources related to the VISTA: www.vistacampus.gov)

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Corporation for National and Community Service, Connecticut State Program Office, 135 High Street, Room 272, Hartford, CT 06103, 202-491-2911, ct@cns.gov.