



DATE: October 21, 2015

FROM: Corporation for National and Community Service - Connecticut Office

SUBJECT: Request for Concept Papers (RFCP) for New AmeriCorps VISTA Projects in Connecticut – Concept Papers Due November 30, 2015

INTRODUCTION

The Connecticut Office of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) announces an opportunity, subject to availability of resources, to develop new AmeriCorps VISTA projects in Connecticut. This Request for Concept Papers is open to organizations that are **NOT** current VISTA sponsors. Please share this notice with your networks, and contact the CNCS Connecticut Office at CT@cns.gov with any questions.

AGENCY DESCRIPTION

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.

ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

Public organizations such as state and local government, Indian Tribes, and non-profit private organizations can apply to be VISTA sponsors. Please note that eligible non-profit 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.

CORE VISTA PRINCIPLES

All prospective applicants must review the AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance for Current and Potential Project Sponsors:

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/AmeriCorps%20VISTA%20Program%20Guidance%20Fiscal%20Year%202016.pdf>

VISTA projects must meet 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.

PROGRAM FOCUS AREAS

Concept Papers should address one or more of the following focus areas from the CNCS 2011-2015 Strategic Plan (<http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/strategic-plan>):

Economic Opportunity: Improving or creating job skills training programs, connecting families and individuals to emergency housing and transitional services, providing affordable permanent housing, improving access to financial literacy programs, and/or empowering individuals and low-income communities to take advantage of financial opportunities and build wealth that will ultimately lead to an exit from poverty.

Education: Developing or expanding programs that promote school readiness, educational achievement and engagement, and/or post-secondary success among economically disadvantaged children, youth, and adults, particularly in communities that have underperforming schools participating in the U.S. Department of Education’s Title I School Improvement Grant program.

Healthy Futures: Reducing obesity rates, increasing health and wellness for low income individuals, with a focus on food security and access to health care.

Veterans and Military Families: Engaging veterans in service and/or serving low-income veterans and military families under one or more of the Economic Opportunity, Education, and Healthy Future focus areas.

Environmental Stewardship: Decreasing energy and water consumption; green jobs; youth development through conservation activities which have a strong connection to lifting people out of poverty.

Disaster Services: Providing post-disaster community development to support long term recovery efforts, such as job placement projects that help place local workers in disaster response positions. A proposed VISTA project with a focus on preparedness and mitigation activities must be designed to lift people out of poverty.

The following additional priority programming areas are of specific interest for 2016:

- Education programs focused on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics);
- Community college partnerships;
- Hunger initiatives that partner with the U.S. Department of Agriculture;
- Inter-generational food security programs;
- Access to health care;
- Programs focusing on opportunity youth and meeting goals of the White House initiative, My Brother's Keeper;
- Rural community development efforts; and
- Programs addressing immigrant and refugee integration.

Further details on focus areas, including 2016 priorities, can be found in the AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance for Current and Potential Project Sponsors:

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/AmeriCorps%20VISTA%20Program%20Guidance%20Fiscal%20Year%202016.pdf>

STATE SPECIFIC PRIORITIES

The CNCS Connecticut Office specifically is seeking applications from individual organizations or collaborating organizations that can support a minimum of three to five VISTA members. Furthermore, the CNCS Connecticut Office seeks organizations meeting one or more of the following criteria:

- 1) Organizations that serve low-income residents in one or more of the following geographic areas: eastern Connecticut, Waterbury, or Fairfield County.
- 2) 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;
 - Meeting economic and food security challenges in Hartford or Bridgeport;
 - Addressing food justice issues with residents of low-income communities statewide (geographic preference for organizations based in the western part of Connecticut but open to organizations based in other parts of the state).
 - Developing children and youth education efforts through partnerships with institutions of higher education.

COST SHARE OF AMERICORPS VISTA MEMBERS

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 should indicate this in their concept paper.

The goal of the CNCS Connecticut 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 \$11,796-16,716).

SCOPE OF PROJECT

Subject to availability of resources, up to 10 AmeriCorps VISTA positions statewide may be awarded on a full-time basis for one year of service to new VISTA sponsoring organizations. The initial award would cover a period not to exceed one year, with the potential for continuation for a total project period of three to five years. VISTA members would likely begin service during the summer of 2016.

Programming should be primarily based on addressing local needs, and the CNCS Connecticut Office will be guided by locally-driven programming. Each VISTA project must be developed in accordance with the programmatic focus areas discussed earlier in this document and within the core VISTA principles (Anti-Poverty Focus, Community Empowerment, Capacity Building and Sustainable Solutions), as well as within parameters defined by law and federal regulations:

http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/dvsa_dec99.pdf

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/legislation/edward-m-kennedy-serve-america-act>

CONCEPT PAPER SUBMISSION

CNCS requires that all applicants submit applications electronically via the CNCS web-based application system, **eGrants**. For VISTA applications this is a two-step process which includes a concept paper application and a full application. If your organization has not used the CNCS eGrants system before, you will need to create an account:

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/egrants/>

Download a copy of the Concept Paper application and instructions at:

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

Then to apply, go to: <https://egrants.cns.gov/espan/main/login.jsp>

In eGrants select the **2016 AmeriCorps VISTA STATE** for the Concept Paper.

Applicants experiencing technical issues with eGrants should contact the National Service Hotline by phone at 1-800-942-2677 or by submitting a Web form at:

<https://questions.nationalservice.gov/app/ask>

CRITERIA FOR APPROVAL

Criteria for approval are based on whether the proposed project does the following:

- Clearly documents how the proposed project fits with one or more of the CNCS 2011-2015 strategic plan focus areas.
- Addresses the needs of low-income communities.
- Leads to building organizational capacity so that the project can continue once VISTA resources are withdrawn.
- Involves beneficiaries of the service and the low-income community in project development and implementation. This is required and must be noted in the Concept Paper in the Strengthening Communities section. If the organization's board of directors does not consist of at least 51% of the low-income beneficiary community, the sponsor must create an Advisory Council with a composition of at least 51% of its members from the low-income community. The board or advisory council must review and provide written comments concerning the project application prior to submission. A copy of these comments will be a required attachment of any full application submitted.
- Is designed to generate public and/or private-sector resources.
- Promotes local volunteer service.
- Complies with the provisions of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended; 2009 Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, VISTA regulations; and VISTA policies.

Further criteria for determining approval are based on whether the applicant meets the following:

- Is a local or state government agency, Tribe, or a private organization designated as a non-profit by the Internal Revenue Service.
- Has resources available for VISTAs to perform their activities, such as space, supplies, and on-the-job transportation, and is able to provide emergency cash advances when needed.
- Has the management capacity and commitment to recruit, train, supervise, and otherwise support VISTAs recruited locally and nationally.
- Understands and is committed to promoting national and community service.
- Has the capacity to build community partnerships and collaborative efforts to achieve project self-sufficiency.

TIMELINE

October 21, 2015: Request for Concept Papers issued.

October 28, 2015: Interested applicants send email to CT@cns.gov to RSVP for technical assistance Webinar.

November 4, 2015: Technical assistance Webinar for interested applicants.

November 30, 2015: Deadline for submitting concept papers.

December 21, 2015: CNCS 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.

January 29, 2016: Deadline for organizations with approved concept papers to submit a full project application via eGrants. All supporting documents are also due on January 29.

February 29, 2016: CNCS staff will notify organizations of decisions on applications and proceed with final approval processing of accepted applications.

March 2015: Application approvals completed and Memoranda of Agreement issued.

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

May - June, 2015: Projects screen and interview VISTA candidates.

June 2015: Deadline to submit VISTA candidates to CNCS for final approval.

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

August 2016: VISTA candidates attend pre-service orientation and start service.

RESOURCES

Successful applicants will demonstrate familiarity with the following resources:

2016 AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance for Current and Potential Project Sponsors:

www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/page/AmeriCorps%20VISTA%20Program%20Guidance%20Fiscal%20Year%202016.pdf

AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper Instructions:

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:

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/performance-measurement/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:

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/ameri-corps/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, 135 High Street, Room 272, Hartford, CT 06103, 860-240-3240, CT@cns.gov