



The Role of the AmeriCorps*VISTA Member

The VISTA member's role in contributing to the solution of the nation's poverty-related problems is to mobilize community resources and increase the capacity of the community to solve its own problems. VISTA members are assigned to organizations to work at tasks determined and defined by these sponsoring organizations and the low-income communities they serve. Below are some examples of appropriate assignments for a VISTA member:

1) Neighborhood/Community Developers

Neighborhood/community developers bring people together to form working groups. They work within communities, which are defined either by geographic boundaries or through its members sharing similar life situations or problems. The neighborhood/community developer is often requested by groups which are ill defined or lack organization yet recognize their potential to work together to solve common problems. Typical job functions of a neighborhood/community developer include involving as many community members as possible and assisting them in:

- Assessing and prioritizing the actual needs of the community
- Determining which problems could best be solved by the community
- Developing plans and strategies to solve these problems
- Implementing one or more of their plans through provision of technical assistance and leadership development
- Evaluating the success of their efforts

The outcome of a successful neighborhood/community development project is not only a tangible product, but more importantly, the development of a cohesive community which has learned that its members working in concerted fashion can solve their own problems. It is anticipated that after the VISTA departs, the community will continue to employ the skills learned in solving additional or future problems.

Examples of products of successful neighborhood/community development projects are:

- ↵ A city wide, neighborhood-based crime prevention program
- ↵ A senior center through efforts of local senior citizens
- ↵ A city park/playground in a town which never had one

2) Organizational Developers

VISTA members serving as organizational developers are charged either with strengthening existing organizations or developing new organizations. Development of new organizations is approved only when it can be documented that the low-income community perceives a need for the proposed organization and had demonstrated it will be actively involved in supporting the organization.

VISTA organizational developers usually assist fledgling grassroots groups. VISTA members are often requested to help strengthen organizations that are struggling with less than adequate resources or do not have a structure adequate to maintain the services they wish to provide. Typical job functions include assisting in:

- Establishing or strengthening a Board of Directors and/or advisory groups
- Obtaining non-profit, tax-exempt status
- Setting up or refining administrative systems
- Developing funding approaches and mobilizing cash and in-kind resources
- Developing an effective volunteer program
- Establishing long range and short term goals
- Devising systems for responsive service provision
- Developing a public relations program

Depending on the situation of the organization, the VISTA member might be charged with one or all of the above functions. In either case, the VISTA should always work with a staff person, board member, or community member to ensure the organizations' capability to continue these activities after the VISTA departs.

Examples of successful organizational development projects include:

- ☞ Development of low-cost, community organizations serving victims of domestic violence in isolated rural communities
- ☞ Strengthening local food banks through development of advisory boards, refinement of administrative systems, and resource mobilization
- ☞ Development of a self-sustaining day care center for disabled senior citizens

3) Program Developers

The third type of position in which VISTA members are engaged is that of program development. Usually this type of VISTA is requested by a service-providing organization, which can demonstrate that a need in the community is not being met. The sponsoring organization proposes to develop a new program to meet this need. The program the VISTA assists in building is an arm of the sponsoring organization for purposes of development. To ensure continuation, the program may be spun-off as an independent organization, assumed by another organization, or incorporated into the ongoing services provided by the sponsor.

To meet the criteria for low-income participation set forth in VISTA guidelines the client population should be involved in planning and developing the proposed program. Convening a task force or steering committee of low-income persons is often the first responsibility of a VISTA program developer. Once the steering committee is established, the VISTA member's function could include assisting the committee in:

- Defining the goals, objectives and scope of the program
- Developing administrative systems
- Mobilizing and linking community resources with the program
- Providing oversight concerning the provision of services
- Planning and developing community and public relations
- At the earliest possible time, initiating the process to ensure the program's continuation in the community

Combinations:

Under many circumstances, a VISTA member position may overlap between two of these categories. For example, a VISTA requested to be a community developer may find the assignment becomes more that of an organizational developer in the latter months of his/her tenure. An organizational developer may be requested to do some program development at the time an organization is administratively strong enough to support programs.

There is substantial flexibility built into VISTA to enable the members to assist communities in responding to needs of low-income persons. However, VISTA is not a permanent resource, and it is crucial to the concept of local self-reliance that sponsoring organizations plan for the eventual phase out of VISTA members and for the continuation of the VISTA's functions by staff, board members or community volunteers.

VISTA develops, and coordinates, a merger of the interests, and efforts, of four groups to address the problems of poverty:

1. the low-income community
2. the sponsoring agency
3. other segments of the community
4. the volunteers themselves

The success of any given VISTA activity is directly related to well-planned and cooperative efforts of these four groups.