



# AmeriCorps VISTA

## CONCEPT PAPER INSTRUCTIONS

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## IMPORTANT NOTICE

These Concept Paper instructions conform to the Corporation for National and Community Service's (CNCS) online grant application system, eGrants. The eGrants system is designed to serve CNCS's applicants and grantees. All CNCS funding announcements are posted on our web site [www.nationalservice.gov](http://www.nationalservice.gov) and at [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov).

**Public Burden Statement:** The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 requires CNCS to inform all potential persons who are to respond to this collection of information that such persons are not required to respond unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number. (See 5 CFR 1320.5(b)(2)(i)).

**Time Burden:** The time required to complete this collection of information is estimated to average 10 hours per Concept Paper submission, including the time to review instructions; search existing data resources; gather the data needed; and complete and review the information collection before submitting.

**Purposes and Uses:** The information requested is collected for the purposes of reviewing project applications and granting funding requests.

**Routine Uses:** Routine uses may include disclosure of the information to federal, state, or local agencies pursuant to lawfully authorized requests. In some programs, the information may also be provided to federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies to determine the existence of any prior criminal convictions. The information may also be provided to appropriate federal agencies and Department contractors that have a need to know the information for the purpose of assisting the Department's efforts to respond to a suspected or confirmed breach of the security or confidentiality or information maintained in this system of records, and the information disclosed is relevant and unnecessary for the assistance. The information will not otherwise be disclosed to entities outside of the Corporation for National and Community Service without prior written permission.

**Effects of Nondisclosure:** The information requested is mandatory in order to receive benefits.

**Privacy Act:** Information provided for this collection may be shared with federal, state, and local agencies for law enforcement purposes.

**Universal Identifier:** When registering your organization, you are required to provide a [Dun and Bradstreet Data Universal Numbering System](#) (DUNS) number and register with the federal System for Award [Management](#) (SAM). All project sponsors are required to maintain a valid registration, which must be renewed annually.

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## About AmeriCorps VISTA

AmeriCorps VISTA is the national service program designed specifically to fight poverty. VISTA supports efforts to alleviate poverty by encouraging individuals from all walks of life to engage in a year of full-time service with a sponsoring organization to create or expand programs designed to bring individuals and communities out of poverty.

Rather than providing cash grants, the VISTA program places individual VISTAs, Summer Associates, and Leaders with sponsoring organizations. Resources are provided to sponsors on an annual basis. In very limited circumstances, small grants may be available at the discretion of the CNCS State Office.

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

## Process for New Concept Papers

Organizations interested in becoming a VISTA sponsor should contact the CNCS State Office in their state and visit the [AmeriCorps VISTA website](#). CNCS State Offices are staffed by federal employees. They conduct public outreach and program support and are directly responsible for approving and overseeing all VISTA projects within their state. **CNCS State Offices are available to provide technical assistance.** A directory of CNCS State Offices is available on our [website](#). CNCS also recommends that you view the [technical assistance materials](#) on Performance Measurement.

To apply for VISTA resources, organizations complete a two-step process:

### **Step 1 – AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper**

Organizations submit an AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper to CNCS. The Concept Paper is a preliminary screening tool that CNCS uses to evaluate whether the organization would be an appropriate sponsor.

### **Step 2 – AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application**

If CNCS approves the Concept Paper, the organization submits an AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application based on the approved Concept Paper. CNCS provides Project Application materials following approval of a Concept Paper.

## Submission in eGrants

You must submit Concept Papers electronically via the CNCS web-based application system, [eGrants](#).

Contact the National Service Hotline at 800-942-2677 or [https://questions.nationalservice.gov/app/ask\\_eg](https://questions.nationalservice.gov/app/ask_eg), if a problem arises while submitting a Concept Paper. National Service Hotline hours are Monday through Thursday: 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. ET. Be prepared to provide the Concept Paper ID, organization's name, and the NOFO to which the organization is applying.

If extenuating circumstances make the use of eGrants impossible, you may send a hard copy of the Concept Paper to the CNCS State Office, via overnight carrier. Please use a non-U.S. Postal Service because of security-related delays in receiving mail from the U.S. Postal Service. All requirements in these Concept Paper Instructions apply to hard copy applications. Prior to submission of the hard copy Concept Paper, you must contact the CNCS State Office and request a Standard Form 424 for the Concept Paper. Hard copy submissions must include a cover letter detailing the circumstances that make it impossible to submit via eGrants. CNCS does not accept Concept Papers submitted via fax or e-mail.

In addition to consulting the CNCS State Office, as directed in these instructions, you may also consult the [VISTA Campus](#).

## Selection Process and Criteria

The CNCS staff uses the following criteria to select AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors and approve both new and renewal VISTA projects. Your proposal must include all of the elements listed below.

### Criteria for Sponsorship

<b>The organization must:</b>
Be a public sector organization or a private organization designated as nonprofit by the IRS.
Have resources available for VISTAs to perform their tasks, i.e., work space, consumable supplies, telephone, on-the-job transportation reimbursement; and be able to provide emergency cash advances to VISTAs when needed.
Have the capacity and commitment to recruit, orient, train, supervise, and otherwise support recruited VISTA members in appropriate capacity-building roles.
Have an understanding of the concept of, and be committed to, the mission of VISTA.
Be experienced in the issues related to the beneficiaries of service and those being addressed by the proposed project.
Have the capacity to involve the beneficiary community to achieve project sustainability.
Sign a Memorandum of Agreement with CNCS that outlines the legal responsibilities of both parties.

### Approval Considerations

<b>The Project Application must:</b>
Address the needs of low-income communities and otherwise comply with the provisions of the <a href="#">Domestic Volunteer Services Act Of 1973</a> , (DVSA) as amended (42 U.S.C. 4951 et seq.) applicable to VISTA and all applicable published regulations, guidelines, and CNCS policies.
Show how the project will lead to building organizational and/or community capacity to continue the efforts of the antipoverty project once VISTA resources are withdrawn.
Describe in measurable terms the anticipated self-sufficiency results at the conclusion of the project, including results to the sustainability of the project activities.
Clearly state how VISTAs will be trained, supervised, and supported to ensure the achievement of program goals and objectives.
Be stated logically. The problem statement that demonstrates need, the project plan, the assignment, and all other components must be related logically to each other.
Demonstrate that VISTA and community resources are sufficient to achieve project goals.

Indicate involvement of beneficiaries (as an advisory group) in project development and implementation throughout the life of the project
Demonstrate the management and technical capability of the organization to implement the project successfully.
Request an appropriate number of VISTA members to achieve the project goals; the skills and qualifications described in the application must be appropriate for the assignment(s).
Show the project sponsor will ensure resources are available for VISTAs to perform tasks; i.e., work space, consumable supplies, telephone, computer/internet access, in-service transportation reimbursement; and be able to provide emergency cash advances when needed.
Request the appropriate level of resources to achieve proposed goals and activities.
Demonstrate the project sponsor has the capacity and commitment to recruit, orient, train, supervise, and otherwise support recruited VISTA members in appropriate capacity-building roles.
Show the sponsor has the capacity to involve the beneficiary community in order to achieve project self-sufficiency.

## Concept Paper Instructions

Please use the following AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper instructions if you are a prospective sponsor interested in applying for AmeriCorps VISTA resources, or an existing sponsor seeking to create a new project that is substantially different in project scope or emphasis area from your current VISTA project. A sponsor having more than one project is rare.

Your Concept Paper consists of the following components. Please be sure to complete each component.

- I. Applicant Info
- II. Application Info
- III. Narratives
- IV. Review
- V. Authorize and Submit

To begin a VISTA project application, login to your eGrants account at:

<https://egrants.cns.gov/espan/main/login.jsp>. Before starting the Applicant Info section, you will need to:

- Select “Start a New Concept Paper”
- Select the appropriate Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO). Consult CNCS State Office with questions on the correct NOFO, if more than one is listed.
- Write down the system-generated Concept Paper ID number for later reference

### I. Applicant Info

In eGrants, complete the Applicant Info section. Some information is already in the system from when the eGrants account was created. Please take the time to verify the information is correct.

- Ensure that the information under Legal Applicant Info is correct.
- In the Project Information section, select “Create a New Project”. The title of the proposed project will default to your organization’s name. If you wish to use a different title, you may enter that instead. Do not use specific years in the title. The

title of the project should also not be the name of a particular position. Do not overuse acronyms. This title will be used in public reports. Examples of poor project names are: 2013-2014 VISTA Project; Devon CDCU Grant Writer; and VA/DC/MD B&G Clubs.

- Enter your contact information into the fields that appear.
- Enter or select a Project Director. Choose “Project Director” from the drop-down menu next to corresponding field. This selection will open up a list of current and past eGrants users for your organization. If the person who will be the Project Director is not listed, click “Enter New” and input the new information into the fields that appear. The new name will appear in the Project Director list.
- If the project has a website, enter the website address into the Project Website URL field.
- Enter the estimated timespan of your project in years or months.
- Select one or more Service Act of America Focus Areas, which are Economic Opportunity, Education, Healthy Futures, Veterans and Military Families, Disaster Services, and Environmental Stewardship. After selecting a Focus Area, select one or more of the corresponding Objectives. Select “Other” for the Focus Area if your project does not fit any of the categories. If you select “Other,” please provide a brief description in the available field. Information on the Focus Areas may be found on [CNCS website](#) and the agency’s [Strategic Plan](#).
- In the “Target Population” section, select one or more of the legislated target or beneficiary populations your project intends to bring out of poverty.

Target Populations	
Low-income Native Americans, Native Alaskans & Pacific Islanders	Individuals and families experiencing homelessness
Low-income individuals with disabilities	Low-income formerly incarcerated youth
Low-income communities	Low-income formerly incarcerated adults
Unemployed individuals	Low-income veterans
Low-income adults	Low-income military families
Low-income youth	

## II. Application Info

In the Application Info section, enter the following information:

- List the areas affected by your project. List ONLY cities/towns and/or counties and states if multiple. Please indicate if area(s) is rural or urban, if applicable.
- If your organization was a former VISTA sponsor, indicate in the “Other” field the number of years and the number of members assigned to your organization in the past.
- If your organization has received other resources from CNCS programs, such as AmeriCorps State, AmeriCorps National, Senior Corps, Social Innovation Fund, etc., describe these resources, including the number of members/participants supported by those resources, if applicable.

### III. Narratives

The Narratives section of the Concept Paper is your opportunity to demonstrate to reviewers that your proposed project would be an appropriate use of VISTA resources. The Narratives section includes the following four items: Need, Strengthening Communities, Organizational Capacity, and Intermediary Justification. The first three items have questions that you must answer. The fourth item is only required for those organizations applying to be intermediary sponsors.

Be sure to:

- Include activities for the entire project period for which you are requesting resources.
- Enter data for each of the three required narrative fields in eGrants. To enter information into the field, click “View/edit narrative” next to the corresponding narrative item. Enter text into the fields that appear.
- The answers to the Narratives section are between 750–1000 words, or 3–4 pages, single spaced.

**TIP:** You may prefer to answer questions first in a word processing document and paste them into the eGrants fields. This method provides you with an offline, backup record. Avoid using special formatting or tables; eGrants does not accommodate them.

#### Need

In this section describe the unmet poverty-related community need(s) you propose to address using AmeriCorps VISTA resources. Clearly describe the poverty-related need and the local beneficiary community, as well as how the planned program strategy (i.e., intervention) will lead to the final planned outcomes for the beneficiary community.

Your narrative must describe:

- The community you plan to serve, using data that are current, objective, and specific to the community. These data should substantiate the need(s) you aim to address. Cite the data source(s).
- The specific low-income population your project intends to serve.
- Why the needs are not being met now.
- How your proposed project relates to the programming priorities outlined in the [AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance](#) of the current fiscal year. If your proposed project does not align with the current VISTA programming priorities, justify why the project should be considered.
- A summary of how your project will ultimately strengthen the community and bring individuals out of poverty. This should include a description of how the planned program strategy (i.e., intervention) will address the poverty-related need and will lead to the final planned anti-poverty outcomes. Include any evidence that suggests your approach will be successful. Evidence could include past performance, results from credible research, or results from a similar, successful program. Evidence would provide the basis for decisions about the design, frequency, and intensity of the proposed intervention.

For example: An applicant proposes to engage VISTAs to create a volunteer recruitment and management system in which recruited community volunteers will



tutor third-grade students in an impoverished area in a low-performing school for an hour a day, three days per week. The applicant believes that as a result of the tutoring, the students' academic performance will improve. To support this programming approach, the applicant would describe any evidence (e.g., an independent study from a university) that the intervention (a certain set of tutoring activities delivered to a specific target population by community volunteers for one hour, three times per week) will result in improved academic performance.

## **Strengthening Communities**

In this section, describe how your VISTA project aims to complement or expand current efforts in the community to address the need(s) described. Your response should encompass the following:

- A description of how the project will be designed to build long-term sustainability in an organization or program to ensure it continues after VISTA resources end.
- How VISTAs would be used, and how many VISTAs you are requesting.
- A discussion of how this approach will change over time as the VISTA(s) implements the project and build capacity.

## **Organizational Capability**

Detail your organization's capacity to manage a federal national service program, including information that addresses the following issues:

- What is your organization's experience operating anti-poverty programming in the identified area(s) of activity? Provide examples of past work in this area.
- What community partners will be engaged with the project and what will be their roles?
- If your organization currently sponsors or has previously sponsored AmeriCorps members (including VISTAs), please include a brief description of their assigned activities.
- Describe how you will manage the project, and recruit and supervise the VISTA member(s).
- How will other staff or volunteers be involved in the project? What resources—including office and desk space, access to computer and phone, and other supplies—will you provide to the VISTA member(s)?

## **Intermediary Justification (Optional)**

An intermediary is a VISTA sponsoring organization that helps provide CNCS resources to other eligible entities, often small organizations that otherwise might not have access to such resources. The intermediary is often, but not always, a large organization that has the organizational capacity to develop and support VISTA sites across a wide geographic area or among a group of organizations that address a common need. The intermediary provides administrative services, technical support, training, and oversight to these organizations.

If you are proposing a multi-site or intermediary project, respond to the following. (If you are not requesting to become an intermediary sponsor, please leave blank.)

- Describe current, objective, and local data and statistics that demonstrate the proposed need(s) in each geographic area you plan to serve.

- Provide information about sites and partners, if already identified; if not identified, indicate how you will ensure that selected sites will fit within the overall project goal(s) and address the poverty-related need as proposed.

**NOTE:** VISTA member(s) will not be placed at sites not included and approved in the Sites section of the Application. To add new sites, an application amendment application must be submitted and approved.

- What is your organization’s history in selecting and managing other nonprofits or eligible agencies to receive resources and training from your organization?
- How will you monitor the sites for compliance with AmeriCorps VISTA rules and regulations as required in the Memorandum of Agreement? How will you monitor and hold intermediary sites accountable for meeting program goals and providing member management information as required?
- If the programmatic focus area(s) of the sites will not be the same and will not roll up into a single set of performance measures, explain why an intermediary sponsorship is necessary. Present a compelling plan to provide assistance or support to build site capacity, both in general and as it relates to the various focus area(s).
- If sites will be required to provide funds to your organization for inclusion in the project, provide the amount(s) and its intended use.

## IV. Review

The Review section lists the information entered for the three previous sections: Applicant Info, Application Info, and Narratives. You can to these sections to review or change what you have entered, prior to submission.

You can also view and print the information as a report. The report opens as an Adobe PDF read-only file. You may print the Concept Paper in PDF format or save a copy of it onto your computer.

Because the PDF report is a read-only file, you cannot type in the report. To make changes, you must edit in the eGrants system and run the report again for the updated version. Once you submit the Concept Paper, you may not make changes unless it is returned to you.

## V. Authorize and Submit

eGrants requires that you verify your entire Concept Paper before submitting it, by completing the following sections in eGrants:

- Authorization
- Certification
- Submit

Read carefully the Authorization and Certification sections.

The person who authorizes the application must be the applicant organization’s authorized representative. This representative must have the authority to commit resources at your organization. To complete this section, the appropriate staff person should logon to eGrants and go to the Authorize and Submit section. **The Authorized Representative must have a**

**personal eGrants account.** To create an account and access the eGrants system, visit [www.nationalservice.gov/egrants/index.asp](http://www.nationalservice.gov/egrants/index.asp).

Check the entire application to make sure there are no errors before submitting it. When you verify the application, eGrants will also generate a list of errors if sections need to be corrected prior to submission.

**NOTE:** Submission of a concept paper does not assure receipt of AmeriCorps VISTA resources.