



November 2012

Is an AmeriCorps Member Right for Your Organization?

Overview of the AmeriCorps Program

AmeriCorps is a national service program that places volunteers with nonprofit organizations, public agencies and faith-based organizations to help meet the critical needs of a community. AmeriCorps volunteers, referred to as members or participants, engage in a variety of activities, including tutoring and mentoring youth, building affordable housing, cleaning parks and streams, and recruiting, training, and managing community volunteers. In return for their service, AmeriCorps members receive a monthly living allowance, health benefits, child care assistance, and a \$5,550 AmeriCorps Education Award that they can use to pay for college or to pay back qualified student loans.

A number of Alaska Food Coalition members and partners, including Joel's Place, RurAL CAP, and the Alaska Food Policy Council, have participated in the AmeriCorps program. The information presented in this whitepaper will help to determine if your organization could benefit from hosting an AmeriCorps member. In addition to providing information on pertinent AmeriCorps programs, this paper will provide resources for further information.

How Can AmeriCorps Members Help?

There are two AmeriCorps programs that may be of particular interest to nonprofit organizations in Alaska: the State program (referred to as simply the AmeriCorps program) and the VISTA program. These programs meet community needs in different ways. AmeriCorps members engage in direct service, which allows volunteers to work directly with clientele to address an immediate need, while VISTA members help build organizational capacity, which is aimed at helping an organization grow its ability to address poverty over the long-term. For example, while a VISTA member might develop a nutrition education course curriculum, an AmeriCorps member would teach the course. To further clarify this difference, here are some examples of activities that AmeriCorps and VISTA participants engage in:

AmeriCorps Member Activities

- Delivering food to clients
- Offering tutoring and other enrichment activities
- Working in a community garden
- Building projects

VISTA Member Activities

- Recruiting and coordinating volunteers
- Creating educational materials
- Writing grants and soliciting in-kind donations
- Planning fundraising activities

Key Differences between VISTA and AmeriCorps Programs

Category	VISTA Projects	AmeriCorps Programs
Minimum number of volunteers at organization	1	Usually 10, if acting as grantee
Volunteer term of service	Full-time, one year	Full or Part-time
Volunteer support costs covered by organization	None	Matching Funds
Operations support costs covered by organization	None, but it strengthens your application if you have some match such as training provided	24-50% of program costs (in cash or in kind)
Program application deadline	Rolling; start dates in January, April, July, August, and November	November or December; start planning early and contact Nita Madsen

The AmeriCorps program and the VISTA program are also administered in different ways. Organizations applying for VISTA volunteers can apply for as few or as many volunteers as they need, but it is important to note that these volunteers cannot do “grunt work” and cannot fill an existing position within an organization. VISTA volunteers are required to work full time for a one year contract and an organization may host VISTAs for up to three years. There is no cost matching requirement from organizations for this program, which makes it a great option for emerging organizations or organizations looking to start a new program. Organizations generally apply for a 3-5 volunteers, all of whom will be working on a similar focus area (i.e. education, food security, job training, etc.). Organizations can choose to host one or more volunteers themselves, then place the remaining VISTAs with partner organizations doing similar work. In this case, the grantee organization remains the program administrator. There is not a required match initially in year one and programs are generally expected to take on a “cost share” position by year two or three (approximately \$14,000) and can split the cost between themselves and their partner sites. There are no other required matching or support costs.

The AmeriCorps State program is set up a little differently. If applying as an AmeriCorps grantee, organizations generally must apply for a minimum of ten volunteers, all of whom will be working on a similar project or issue. Organizations can choose to host the volunteers themselves, or choose to place them with other organizations doing similar work. In this case, the grantee organization remains the program administrator. Organizations hosting State volunteers are required to cover their members’ stipends and to supply between 24% and 50% of the total program cost (in cash or in kind); the maximum cost per member is \$13,300 for organizations. While initially these costs could appear high, these volunteers represent a great value when considering the benefits they can bring to an organization.

Organizations that are interested in having AmeriCorps or VISTA volunteers, but don’t have the resources or desire to apply as a grantee, can contact the appropriate office for help identifying opportunities for collaboration with existing grantee organizations.

Resources for More Information

AmeriCorps Program Contact:

Nita Madsen, Director
Serve Alaska State Service Commission
907-269-4637
serve.alaska@alaska.gov
www.servealaska.alaska.gov

VISTA Program Contact:

Cat Koehn
Alaska State Office
Corporation for National & Community Service
206-607-2605
ak@cns.gov

Other Resources:

AmeriCorps main website: www.americorps.gov

How Can AmeriCorps Help Our Organization?:

http://www.americorps.gov/for_organizations/how/index.asp

Interactive AmeriCorps Program Selector for Organizations:

http://www.americorps.gov/for_organizations/how/selector.asp

VISTA 101:

http://vistacampus.org/theme/flash_activities/20120718_VISTA101/VISTA101_508.pdf

Becoming a Vista Sponsor: <http://www.americorps.gov/pdf/sponsorguide.pdf>

Copies of Alaska Food Coalition White Papers are available online:

<http://www.alaskafood.org/whitepapers.shtml>

For additional information, contact Cara Durr, Alaska Food Coalition Manager:

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