Virginia Housing Alliance
AmeriCorps VISTA Project
2021-2022

Project Information & How to Apply

*Letters of Interest must be submitted by December 4, 2020

Hannah Moore
VISTA Program Manager
hmoore@vahousingalliance.org 910-258-2420
Introduction to the VHA AmeriCorps VISTA Project

Seven years ago, VHA launched its AmeriCorps VISTA Project (under the Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness) designed to provide Continuums of Care (CoCs) and homeless service providers with a package of on-going technical assistance and a well-trained VISTA Member to implement community capacity building initiatives.

VHA is excited to continue to provide this resource package to affordable housing and services organizations. The project will provide VHA Members in Virginia a VISTA Member who will receive training and ongoing support from VHA and partners to assist your local community and agency in meeting our shared goals:

- Engaging current and new stakeholders in the expansion of affordable housing and homeless response systems,
- Developing resources to increase development capacity and organizational sustainability,
- Using data to articulate need and progress and make data-driven decisions (and therefore be more competitive in garnering resources),
- Supporting transitions to best practice models, and
- Engaging in multi-disciplinary initiatives that integrate affordable housing.

This packet provides information on the AmeriCorps VISTA program, including VHA’s project requirements and the general activities in which a VHA AmeriCorps VISTA Member would be engaged in your community. Also outlined in this packet is the timeline and process for applying for this opportunity.

We look forward to continuing working with you to expand affordable housing opportunities in Virginia. Thank you, as always, for your commitment and dedication to this important work.

Sincerely,

Brian Koziol, Executive Director
Project Overview

AmeriCorps VISTA Program
VISTA was founded as Volunteers in Service to America in 1965 as a national service program designed specifically to fight poverty in America. In 1993, VISTA was incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of programs under the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). AmeriCorps VISTA Members make a year-long, full-time commitment to serve on a specific project at a nonprofit organization or public agency. They focus their efforts to build the organizational, administrative, and financial capacity of organizations that fight illiteracy, improve health services, foster economic development, and otherwise assist low-income communities.

VHA VISTA Project Goals
The Virginia Housing Alliance (VHA), state and national partners, and our service provider partners across Virginia are working to reduce homelessness and expand affordable housing opportunities through education, advocacy, training, and capacity building. This VISTA project provides the human capital necessary to deliver on the ground support to agencies developing, providing, or otherwise supporting homeless response systems and expanding affordable housing. VISTA Members will be placed in agencies across the state, providing key leadership, guidance, and direction to help VHA’s local partners achieve greater impact for their clients.

Specific project objectives and an overview of potential work plan activities are outlined below:

Focus areas for 2021/2022
a. Prevention: Evictions & Diversion, Racial Equity, COVID-19 Impact and Assessment on Homeless Services and Affordable Housing
b. Sustainability: Closing the Digital Divide, Expanding Inclusion, Connecting Constituents with Available Resources, Community Investment/Engagement
c. Enhancement: Improving Data Collection Systems, Strengthening Volunteer Programs

Objective 1: Develop resources to increase development capacity and enhance organizational sustainability.
Homeless Services VISTA activities examples: Provide case examples of program models that have been proven successful in other communities in Virginia and across the nation; Organize presentations and dialogues on the transition to housing first; Assist community in adopting housing-focused performance measures; Document and assess the influence of COVID-19 on disproportionately impacted communities, especially communities of color, and create planning structures and partnerships to develop strategies to eliminate such disparities; Develop housing first trainings for stakeholders; Assist providers in implementing best practices for housing-focused emergency shelter, rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing. Assess the provider’s engagement in housing-focused solutions and alignment with housing first principles; Review similar program models from other Virginia communities and across the nation and offer guidance on how to adjust program policies to
reflect best practice; Revise/develop housing first training for board member orientation and other stakeholders that highlights how the agency fits within the regional homeless services system; Develop housing first focused educational materials for community members.

**Affordable Housing VISTA activities examples:** Identify grant opportunities. Write grants. Support LIHTC, New Market, and other tax credit application preparation. Create tools to assist with compliance. Build strategic partnerships. Establish fundraising database to develop, track, and strengthen relationships with supporters. Organize fundraising events. Develop and implement an annual fundraising campaign calendar. Coordinate evaluation of potential building sites and assist in presenting findings to local officials, agency leaders, and other local housing partners.

**Objective 2: Enhance community engagement expanding affordable housing and/or improving homelessness services efforts.**

**Homeless Services VISTA activities examples:** Schedule/prepare agendas for CoC-wide meetings and committee meetings; Assess current participation in CoC efforts; Assist in creation and approval process for policy, procedure, and agreement documentation related to governance, committee. Expand participation in CoC/LPG efforts and engage in committees and working groups at the systems level; Develop and implement a volunteer recruitment and management strategy; Create a community outreach plan to engage landlords, business leaders, and similar stakeholders in the agency’s housing-focused mission.

**Affordable Housing VISTA activities examples:** Convene stakeholders to advance local affordable housing policy conversations. Prepare and give community presentations. Build or enhance strategic partnerships (ex: with local non-profits). Recruit volunteers. Identify advocates. Develop or enhance agency/project website. Research and implement outreach strategies. Strengthen resident councils through relationship building and leadership development.

**Objective 3: Improve the quality of data collection and use in decision-making.**

**Homeless Services VISTA activities examples:** Assist with data collection, entry, and aggregation; Review/design strategies to improve bed coverage and data quality; Conduct outreach to agencies to discuss benefits of HMIS participation; Conduct community assessments; Create report templates; Implement a process for data-informed decision-making. Educate the community on HUD’s System Performance Measures and how to use them to guide systems planning. Assess the extent of the provider’s HMIS usage and the quality of the entered data; Review/design strategies to improve data quality; Assist with data collection, entry, aggregation, and reporting; Benchmark provider’s project outcomes against community-wide System Performance Measures; Explore ways to improve project outcomes and offer best practice guidance to partner agencies to do the same; Explore opportunities to expand HMIS access to volunteers and train accordingly.
Affordable Housing VISTA activities examples: Complete affordable housing needs assessments, market studies, etc. Assist with initial data entry to populate new systems. Improve and create new tracking tools. Assist with data collection and run reports. Research data systems that integrate multi-disciplinary data.

Objective 4: Promote best practices in affordable housing development and/or homelessness services.

Homeless Services VISTA activities examples: Assess the community’s involvement in initiatives to sustain the end of veteran homelessness and to end homelessness among chronic, youth and families with children; Research best practices to make equity driven changes to Coordinated Entry Prioritization; Assist in coordinating by-name lists, outreaching to key stakeholders, organizing case conferencing meetings, and logging and reporting housing placements; Determine where the CoC/LPG can integrate these practices in its approach to assisting all subpopulations and work with initiative partners and CoC/LPG leadership to expand their use; Enhance coordination across sectors to address gaps and develop collaborative strategies to end homelessness among all subpopulations. Assess the provider’s involvement in initiatives to sustain the end to veteran homelessness and to end homelessness among chronic, youth and families with children and ensure its active engagement in and alignment with CoC/LPG efforts; Educate volunteers to veteran, chronic, youth, and families initiatives and direct their set a path to ending homelessness among all subpopulations; Educate the agency’s board to importance of supporting these initiatives, and their greater application in achieving the agency’s mission; Work with agency leadership to define specific housing placement goals and regularly brief volunteers, staff, the board, and external stakeholders to the agency’s progress in meeting its targets; Strengthen interagency and inter-sector collaboration to end homelessness among all subpopulations.

Affordable Housing VISTA activities examples: Research best practice models and prepare presentations to board and other stakeholders. Identify racially equitable procedures and policies to reduce discrimination in housing. Create board training materials. Improve internal procedures. Update and enhance policy and procedure manuals. Provide support for community housing campaigns that trace connections between housing affordability and community/economic development efforts (education, jobs, transportation, etc.). Assist in replicating or scaling up pilot projects. Assist in developing best practice policies for community development partners.
Project Details

The following questions might help in determining if this project would be appropriate for you and your organization. This information will also be helpful in completing the Letter of Interest application.

**How many VISTA Members can I apply for?**
One VISTA Member will be placed with each host site.

**How big is VHA’s VISTA project?**
Currently, VHA has 7 VISTA Members at host sites focused on ending homelessness across the state, 7 VISTA Members at host sites focused on expanding affordable housing.

**Where do VISTA Members work?**
VISTA Members work on-site at VHA VISTA host agencies to build capacity. One VISTA Leader serves on-site at VHA and is dedicated to statewide and VISTA Project capacity building.

**How does the program work during the COVID-19 pandemic?**
At this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, CNCS has determined that providing VISTA members the option to teleserve, up to and including full time, as needed, is necessary and appropriate support. Thus, until further notice from CNCS, AmeriCorps VISTA members may teleserve, up to and including full time, as needed and until it is appropriate to return to site full time. The VISTA member and the host site can create a teleservice plan that reflects the host site’s COVID-19 protocol with the understanding that the VISTA is permitted to telework.

**What does VHA provide?**
- Peer exchange opportunities through facilitated forums and connections with other programs and housing leaders across the state.
- VHA will serve as an intermediary for the VISTA program and as such, will coordinate all grants and said responsibilities with CNCS on behalf of the Members and their Host Sites.
- In-person, orientation and training in affordable housing and homeless response systems, including state and federal housing policy. This includes training provided by key housing partners and VHA members.
- Ongoing VISTA mentoring, support and professional development, including quarterly in-person trainings and monthly conference calls.
- One site visit, within the first two months, focused on project planning, and additional site visits as needed to address host site technical assistance needs and review project progress.
- Access to VHA resources, educational materials, and learning opportunities.
- Overall project administration related to the federally funded VISTA program – including reporting and compliance requirements.
Who will employ the VISTA?
The VISTA Member is a volunteer receiving a living stipend through a federal agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The VISTA is regarded as a federal employee for limited purposes. The VISTA is affiliated with Virginia Housing Alliance, the host site, and the AmeriCorps VISTA Program. This VISTA will carry the title of VHA AmeriCorps VISTA Member and indicate that s/he is serving with your agency.

Do VISTA Members work full-time?
Yes. VISTA Members must work a full 40 hours each week and commit to serving for a one-year period. VISTAs have leave benefits, including 80 hours of personal time, 80 hours of sick time and national holidays observed by the host site.

How will the VISTA Members be recruited?
VISTA Members will be recruited in a collaborative fashion. Host sites will recruit locally for VISTA applicants through their own networks. VHA will recruit through statewide networks. VHA works with CNCS to post the official AmeriCorps position listing for nationwide recruitment. All VISTA applicants must fill out an official online AmeriCorps application to be considered for the position. VISTA Members are most often recruited from two distinct populations: recent college graduates and baby boomers/career changers.

How can we ensure that the VISTA is qualified to assist our community/agency?
The VISTA applicants are screened and interviewed by both the host site and VHA. VISTA Members need to be approved by the host site, VHA, and CNCS. CNCS will provide an initial orientation focused on poverty and capacity building. VHA staff will provide an initial training focused on affordable housing at the federal and state level and the VISTA work plans. The host site will orient the VISTA to the host site and local community during the VISTA’s first few weeks of service.

Who supervises the VISTA Members?
Each host site must declare a site supervisor who supervises the VISTA’s day-to-day activities and provides the VISTA with project guidance. The VISTA Program Manager acts as the VISTA Project Supervisor and monitors overall project progress and needs. VISTAs send monthly updates to the VISTA Program Manager/Leader.

What training do VISTA Members receive?
VISTA Members attend a two-day in-person and on-line Virtual Member Orientation focused on poverty issues and run by CNCS. During the VISTAs’ first few weeks of service, VHA hosts them in Richmond for a two-day orientation/training focused on homelessness services and affordable housing topics and our VISTA project goals. The host site must provide each Member with an On-Site Orientation/Training to their specific agency and community. On-going project-specific training is held in Richmond that are mandatorily hosted by VHA and will be announced throughout the year. VHA staff work with VISTAs to identify additional areas of needed support and arrange one-on-one calls with VISTA Members and sites, project-wide conference calls, and
other venues to support VISTA Member on-going professional and subject matter development. AmeriCorps VISTA provides free professional development webinars for VISTA Members throughout the year.

**What does VHA mean by capacity building?**
The VISTA program is focused on providing support for organizations by placing VISTA Members to create, expand, and strengthen systems, and build structure and collaboration that will allow the host site agency/community to partner with regional stakeholders and better expand affordable housing opportunities in their communities. The VISTA host site organization is making a commitment to improving its effectiveness and sustainability and to stand behind the VISTA’s capacity-building role.

**Who develops the VISTA’s work plan?**
The host site and VHA work together to create an appropriate assignment. Upon selection of participating host sites, VHA will work with the host site to assess capacity building needs and create the VISTA work plan, called the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD), for the year. The VHA VISTA Project has a VAD template that will be built upon so that each VISTA Member has a site-specific VAD. This process ensures that the activities of the VISTA meet local needs as well as overall project goals. During the first two months of the VISTA service term, the site supervisor will work with the VISTA Member to discuss and implement the VAD and begin tracking progress on the VAD activities. All VAD proposals are reviewed by CNCS and are subjected to additional changes based on the feedback provided by CNCS.

**What are the reporting requirements?**
VISTA Members complete monthly reports for VHA that will cover what activities have been accomplished and to track the VISTA members’ progress as well as weekly timesheets. Site supervisors must sign each week’s timesheet. A six-month progress report and end-of-year progress report must be completed by each site to assist with VHA’s reporting to CNCS. Site supervisors also complete a brief monthly check-in via google poll. VHA completes all other VISTA program reporting to CNCS. VHA works with sites to track outputs and outcomes of the VISTA project.

**What may VISTA Members NOT participate in?**
In compliance with the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), VISTA Members and their projects cannot:
- Displace a current employee or serve in a regular staff position. VISTA Members cannot fill staff positions.
- Focus on direct-service activities.
- Be involved with political advocacy, religious instruction, voter registration, fundraising for host site match or operating expenses, union organizing, or clerical activities as part of their duties.
- Have full-time employment outside of VISTA responsibilities or be a full-time student.
What benefits do VISTA Members receive from CNCS?
Administered by CNCS, VISTA Members receive the following benefits: living stipend, education award or end-of-service stipend, life insurance option, health benefits, loan forbearance/deferment, interest repayment, leave benefits, and, if applicable, childcare benefits and relocation reimbursement. CNCS provides free professional development webinars and further learning opportunities to VISTA Members through an AmeriCorps VISTA training team.

What must host sites provide?
● A clear and detailed work plan for their VISTA Member developed with the VHA VISTA Project Manager.
● Adequate workspace for the VISTA Member including a desk, phone, computer, internet access, and office supplies.
● A thorough on-site orientation and training (OSOT).
● Reimbursement for local work-related travel.
● The completion of all required reporting on or before the determined deadline.
● A designated Site Supervisor who will provide community orientation support, weekly supervision, and VAD action planning to the VISTA Member.
● A financial match of $15,000 for the one-year placement (*see financial match section for more details: page 8/9)
● Additionally, the host site will:
   o Actively recruit VISTA applicants.
   o Engage VISTA Member as an active member of the agency and community partnerships.
   o Participate in VISTA Member progress reporting, site visits, and technical assistance.
   o Allow VISTA Member to participate in required VHA trainings.
   o Account for site supervisor turnover and clearly communicate any transition in supervisory roles to VISTA and VHA.

Financial Match

Why is there a financial match?
In order to support the technical assistance and training package for the VISTA Member and host site, the project requires a financial match of $15,000. The financial match also covers the cost-share match VHA pays to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and helps cover the costs to administer the overall project, including reporting and ensuring compliance with this federal program provided through CNCS.

In previous years, the VHA has secured grant funding through our partnership with Virginia Housing (VH) to cover this financial match; however, that grant is not guaranteed and in the event
that the grant is not awarded, the host site is responsible for covering the $15,000 financial match.

**What if we are unsure of how to secure the financial match?**
We are aware that the timeline for submission of the LOI is tight. If you are unsure of how to secure the financial match by the LOI deadline, please still submit the LOI and indicate that you are still working on options for the local financial match. Submitting an LOI does not commit you to the VISTA project. If you have questions or would like to discuss further, contact Hannah Moore at 910-258-2420 or hmoorel@vahousingalliance.org. Once host sites have been secured, we will develop a payment schedule for the match in the event that the Virginia Housing grant is not available.

**Host Site Selection**

**Is my agency eligible to host a VISTA Member?**
Your agency is eligible if it is the lead entity representing a Continuum of Care (CoC) in the Commonwealth of Virginia, local planning group (LPG) that participates in the Balance of State (BOS) Continuum of Care, or a homeless services agency with a history of collaboration with its CoC/LPG. Other eligible agencies include community action agencies, nonprofit housing developers, community development financial institutions, planning district commissions, affordable housing providers, and other regional service providers. Agencies must also be current VHA members or become VHA members upon selection.

**Can my agency partner with another agency to apply for a shared VISTA Member?**
Yes! Here at VHA, we love partnerships and believe in the benefits of peer exchange and regional collaboration. Therefore, we encourage agencies to partner to apply for a shared VISTA Member and be able to share the costs of the financial match and supporting the VISTA Member.

**Can an existing/former host site apply for another year?**
Host sites can potentially have a VISTA Member on-site for up to three years. Existing or former host sites are invited to resubmit an LOI that describes how another VISTA’s work will build on the prior work of VHA/VCEH VISTA Members in the community or agency.

**How will host sites be selected?**
The VHA VISTA Advisory Council will make decisions based on the following criteria: (1) The stated commitment of the agency and relevant stakeholders to achieving the project goals and supporting the VISTA’s capacity building role; (2) The ability of the agency to support the VISTA in achieving the project goals; (3) The need of the agency for this support in order in order to improve the local system, or in the agency’s case, support for the furthering regional collaboration and/or to expand affordable housing opportunity in the community, (4) The ability to secure the financial match; (5) The need to ensure geographic diversity of the VISTA placements.
What should be my VISTA project goals?
VHA’s VISTA Project aims to develop viable communities by promoting integrated approaches that provide decent housing, a suitable living environment, and expand economic opportunities for low and moderate-income persons. Project activities should fall in alignment with CNCS core principles:

- **Anti-poverty focused:** Projects should focus on serving areas of concentrated poverty (urban and/or rural). The statutory purpose of AmeriCorps VISTA is to strengthen and support efforts to eliminate and alleviate poverty and to address poverty-related problems in the United States.

- **Capacity Building:** Creating systems that remain long after their term of service ends. VISTA projects that expand the scale, impact, and resource-leveraging ability of specific anti-poverty programs through community partnerships, securing long-term resources, and addressing specific local needs.

- **Sustainable Solutions:** Projects must be developed with a goal to phase out the need for VISTAs and have the project continue without VISTA resources.

- **Community Empowerment:** The project must be responsive and relevant to the lives of community residents and must tap into inherent community assets, strengths, and resources.

How to Apply
Letter of Interest Application Form

The Letter of Interest Form is a multi-page application that details the full scope of the proposed VISTA project. It is to provide VHA a clear overview of what activities and goals the VISTA member will be fulfilling at each host site. The Letter of Interest Form Application will be open on Monday, September 28th. To request an application, email Hannah at hmoore@vahousingalliance.org or download the application from our website after the 28th, https://www.vahousingalliance.org/americorps-vista.

VHA requests a letter of interest from each member agency that would like a VISTA Member placed in their agency. The letter of interest application form will cover the following topics:

- Organizational Information
- Organizational Overview
- Project Overview
- Capacity Building Activities

Letters of interest application must be submitted by email to Hannah Moore (hmoore@vahousingalliance.org) no later than Friday, December 4, 2020. If you have any questions, please contact Hannah Moore at hmoore@vahousingalliance.org.

LOI Application Details

**Organization Information:** Provide primary contact, including name, title, address, email, and phone number. Also, list other key stakeholders who will be involved in the project. If you are applying as a partnership between more than one agency, please select a primary lead and contact person for the project.

**Organizational Overview:** Briefly describe why the agency is in need of support from VHA and the AmeriCorps VISTA program as well as describe the capacity of the lead agency to support the VISTA Member in meeting the objectives of the project including:

- The resources available to support the project (desk space, computer, internet access, telephone use, local training opportunities)
- The capacity of the lead agency to provide weekly supervision and project guidance
- Any previous experience working with AmeriCorps VISTA, national service participants, and/or community volunteers. Describe any challenges you believe your agency and the VISTA Member may face in achieving the goals listed above
- A plan for securing the local financial match

**Project Overview:** Please indicate which of the work areas your proposed VISTA member will address. Select all the needs that apply for your agency

**Program Development**: the service plans focusing on helping an organization create or develop practices or systems in the areas of program planning, management, operations and/or evaluations, and/or increase cultural competency and improve their ability to serve
their target population. The service plans can also focus on building new structures or systems and developing new initiatives and/or collaborations.

**Compliance Training** - the service plans will focus on the creation of organizational systems for providing initial orientation and training, as well as ongoing skill-building and support on emerging housing/homelessness service policies. You aim to increase your organization’s or program’s ability to provide improved outcomes for beneficiaries with the same level of resources, or to improve or maintain consistent quality of services with fewer resources.

**Scale/Reach** - the service plans will focus on expanding organizational ability to enhance and expand community partnerships to engage appropriately with and respond to the development needs of community stakeholders. You aim to increase your organization’s or program’s ability to serve more people, serve new groups of people, or provide new or expanded types of services.

**Leveraged Resources** - the service plans will focus on improving your organization’s or program’s ability to generate additional resources or assets, such as researching new funding opportunities, recruiting and retaining volunteers, securing in-kind support, and/or expanding organizational ability to enhance and expand community partnerships to engage appropriately with and respond to the development needs of community stakeholders.

**Recruitment and Marketing** - the service plans will focus on improving the organization’s communication systems for recruiting and retaining high-quality volunteers for current programs and/or increasing publicity of the agency with community members and/or potential stakeholders.

**Other** - If none of these goals represents the capacity you aim to build at this site, you may check the last box in the list and create your own capacity-building goal in the textbox.

**Capacity Building Activities:** Describe the host site’s project(s) and/or work plan for the VISTA member as they relate to the VHA VISTA Project’s overarching objectives. Briefly illustrate the commitment to building capacity and the current efforts of the agency/community to achieve the project objectives listed:

- Develop resources to increase development capacity and enhance organizational sustainability
- Enhance community engagement expanding affordable housing and/or improving homelessness services efforts.
- Improve the quality of data collection and use in decision-making
- Promote best practices in affordable housing development and/or homelessness services

**Capacity building examples are provided on pages 2-4**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Events</th>
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| January 2021  | ● Execution of Memorandum of Understanding between VHA and host site  
● VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) co-created between VHA and host site  
● Create Opportunity Listing for VISTA member recruitment |
| February 2021 | ● VISTA opportunity listings are completed  
● VISTA Assignment Descriptions (VADs) are completed |
| March 2021    | ● VISTA supervisor WebEx training (overview of the VISTA program and supervisor responsibilities)  
● On-Site Orientation/Training (OSOT) outline due to VHA |
| April 2021    | ● VISTA recruitment cycle opens in CNCS portal |
| April - July 2021 | ● Ongoing recruitment from VHA and host sites for VISTA interviews  
● VISTA Members selected and approved |
| August 2021   | ● VISTA arrives at the host site [TBD]  
● Virtual Member Orientation by CNCS  
● In-person* VHA training (2 days) [TBD]  
● On-Site Orientation/Training (OSOT) [First few weeks] |
| October-November 2021 | ● Site visits (VISTA Member, site supervisor and project manager) [TBD]  
● OSOT completed |