



CREATING A MEANINGFUL
YEAR OF SERVICE
THROUGH CAPACITY
BUILDING:
A RESOURCE FOR NEW VISTA SUPERVISORS

CREATED BY
CHELSEA CHRISTIANSEN | EILEEN KELLY | MEGHAN BERKA
NICOLE JUSTIAN | PHILIP ARMSTRONG

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section	Pg.
Introduction	3
Acknowledgements	3
Background	4
The Need	4
Vision, Mission, Goal	5
Meet Our Team	6
Bios	6
How Our Supervisors Helped Us Succeed	7
How to Use this Resource	9
Defining Capacity Building	10
Recruitment and Selection	11
Writing the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD)	11
Interviewing and Selecting the VISTA	12
Before VISTA Starts On-site	13
Anticipate your VISTA's needs	13
Understand and Set Realistic Expectations	15
When VISTA Starts On-Site	16
On-Site Orientation	16
Building a Relationship	17
Change in Supervisor	18
Throughout the Service Year	19
Ongoing Supervision/Communications	19
Coaching your Member for Success	20
Close of Service Transition	21
Life after VISTA	21
Program Sustainability	23
Appendix A: Summary of Resources	25
Appendix B: Guide for Unexpected Supervision Transition	28
Appendix C: Top Ten Ideas	30

INTRODUCTION

Acknowledgements

The Action Learning Challenge team of five VISTA Leaders from around the country dedicated their time and talents to create this resource through collaboration over online platforms and conference calls. We mutually thank each other for being open to the process, for being actively engaged, and for clear communication.

We want to thank Kapila Wewegama for his leadership and coaching. His insights were extremely valuable to the team. We appreciate that he acknowledged our strengths and helped us each to grow both personally and professionally. We would also like to thank the Corporation for National and Community Service for this opportunity, and most especially, Andy King, whose valuable input helped us to shape this toolkit.

We would also like to thank the VISTA Leaders and VISTA Members who took the time to respond to our survey. Their valuable insights have helped us shape this resource.

Finally, we would like to thank our sponsoring organizations and supervisors for their support over the past couple of months. We recognize Michigan Nonprofit Association and Program Manager Maggie Harris, Catholic Charities New Hampshire and Project Coordinator Renée Perreault, United Way Worldwide and Manager of Volunteerism Jeff Brady, Virginia Housing Alliance and Program Manager Regan Alloway, and Volunteer Houston and VISTA Intermediary Program Manager Kasey Smith.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) has limited resources, and therefore, not every supervisor is able to attend formal training by CNCS. With training of sub-site supervisors left to the intermediary organizations instead, some VISTA supervisors enter their role with less knowledge of what makes a VISTA different from other AmeriCorps members. This conflation of separate AmeriCorps programs can mean that some supervisors emphasize the service aspect of the program, without adequate knowledge of the underlying principles of VISTA. In addition, many nonprofits are understaffed and/or experience high staff turnover, which often means some supervisors are thrown into the middle of a VISTA project without enough background on its purpose. However, to be truly effective in allowing their VISTAs to have a meaningful experience, the VISTA supervisors need to have a deep understanding of the VISTA's capacity building role in order to provide appropriate direction to guide and support their VISTAs throughout their service.

In March 2016, five VISTA Leaders came together in an Action Learning Challenge Team to address the following question: *"How can new VISTA Supervisors effectively use their VISTA Members and Leaders for capacity-building and create a meaningful and worthwhile service experience?"* The team has spent the past three and a half months collaborating to create a vision, mission and goal for this resource, which offers concrete direction for supervisors to ensure that their members have a meaningful and worthwhile service experience, and brings together a Summary of Resources from the VISTA Campus. The team conducted research and explored both their own experiences and those of VISTA members around the country and, through this process, has highlighted the key areas where a supervisor can provide support to the VISTA member(s) at their site.

The Need

While there are four core principles of the VISTA program (including anti-poverty focus, community empowerment, capacity building, and sustainable solutions), supervisors and projects have varying knowledge of these principles. When there is incomplete knowledge of these principles, it can lead to VISTA members not being fully utilized in the way CNCS or the VISTA members expected to be on-site. In particular, a lack of understanding of how VISTAs are able to build capacity of a program or project can have an impact on the VISTA's ability to fully embrace their role. However, achieving a common understanding and greater clarity on the VISTA's purpose helps supervisors and VISTAs to be more effective in their roles. If the supervisor fully understands the purpose and intricacies of the VISTA's capacity building role, the supervisor can be empowered to provide more consistent supervision and support.

INTRODUCTION

The Need (continued)

At any site where a VISTA supervisor has not previously worked with a VISTA project or has served as a supervisor and yet has incomplete knowledge on the role of a VISTA member, it could be beneficial to strengthen the supervisor's understanding of capacity building and the VISTA's role in it. When the VISTA supervisor is not the same person who applied for the VISTA resources, this gap in understanding can be even greater.

If this need is not addressed, there is a greater risk that sites do not utilize their VISTA appropriately and that VISTA supervisors and VISTAs have mismatched expectations, including mismatched ideas of what level of supervision is needed by the VISTA. These risks or challenges can directly and indirectly lead to problems with VISTA effectiveness, retention, and both VISTA member and organization satisfaction with the program. In addition, the benefit to the community can be less in the long-run if supervisors do not fully take advantage of the VISTA's role as a capacity builder.

Vision, Mission, Goal

➤ VISION:

- The VISTA supervisor understands, advocates, and embraces the VISTA's role in supporting the community's efforts to **overcome poverty**. The supervisor and VISTA work as a team with a shared understanding to accomplish their project's **capacity-building** goals, creating a productive and meaningful year of service.

➤ MISSION:

- To identify, create, compile, and facilitate educational materials for VISTA supervisors to guide and support their VISTA in their **capacity building** role, thus ensuring a meaningful and productive service year for everyone.

➤ GOAL:

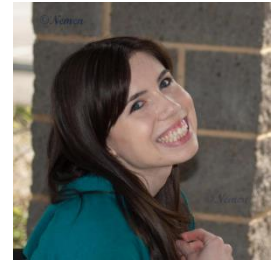
- To design a resource that defines the capacity-building role of VISTAs and offers guidance for new VISTA supervisors by identifying specific ways to provide support for VISTA members ensuring a meaningful and worthwhile experience.

MEET OUR TEAM

Bios



Chelsea Christiansen is currently serving as the VISTA Leader with Catholic Charities New Hampshire in Manchester, NH. She previously served through Catholic Charities NH with the New Hampshire Food Bank as the Volunteer Engagement VISTA. Chelsea is originally from Pennsylvania and relocated for her service.



Eileen Kelly is currently serving as the VISTA Leader at Volunteer Houston in Houston, TX. She previously served at the Houston Food Bank where she helped with SNAP (food stamp) outreach.



Meghan Berka is currently serving as the Education Project VISTA Leader at United Way Worldwide in Alexandria, VA, where she supports VISTAs at United Ways nationwide working to engage volunteers to strengthen education in their communities. In addition to serving a VISTA year with United Way, Meghan worked with students through her service at City Year Providence in Rhode Island and at Community Action Network in Ann Arbor, MI.

Nicole Justian is currently serving as the VISTA Leader with Michigan Nonprofit Association in Lansing, MI. She previously served as a VISTA member with Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky (FAKY) as the InVision Hazard Coordinator where she led a citizen group in a downtown revitalization initiative. Nicole is originally from Michigan and relocated for both of her service terms.



Philip Armstrong is the VISTA Team Leader for the Virginia Housing Alliance's AmeriCorps VISTA Project. Philip's role is to recruit and mentor VISTA Team Members, coordinate training and professional development opportunities, and provide general project support for the members. Since retiring from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Philip has served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mauritania and The Gambia in West Africa, received a Master of Planning degree from the University of Southern California, and served two other terms in AmeriCorps programs. As a VISTA Member, he served as program administrator for the Fullerton (Orange County, CA) Homeless Collaborative.

MEET OUR TEAM

How Our Supervisors Helped Us Succeed

CHELSEA: Before relocating, my supervisor invited me to be a part of a Facebook group for all national service participants in the state looking for housing and roommates which helped me find affordable housing with people I could trust. On my first day at the office, my supervisor took me around to all the different departments and introduced me to everyone and let them know why I was there and what I would be doing for the year. I found this extremely helpful because my project had me interacting with people from all departments at different points throughout the year and I learned right at the beginning who to go to for different needs. As a VISTA Leader, my supervisor has made sure to include me in various committee and project meetings. I have really appreciated this because it gives me the opportunity to meet people from all over the state and really do what interests me. My supervisor also checks-in regularly on what my goals are for after VISTA service and how I am coming along with pursuing those goals.

EILEEN: During my first year as a VISTA, my supervisor taught me about the importance of government benefit programs and introduced me to other people to teach me every aspect of food banking. My supervisor was very supportive and encouraged me to think outside the box and be creative with my projects. As a VISTA Leader, my supervisor treats me more like a partner and teammate than a volunteer. My supervisor gives me the freedom to work on projects I am passionate about.

MEGHAN: I have had the same supervisor for both my VISTA service and VISTA Leader service. The best thing about my supervisor has been his accessibility. I know I am most likely to thrive in an environment where asking questions is welcomed and where I am able to share successes (of all sizes) and receive an enthusiastic response. My supervisor has created an environment where both elements are present. Even though he is incredibly busy, he is always willing to listen to what is on my mind. Besides being especially adept at doing his best to make my work a priority when I need help, he is also exceptional at making me feel cared about a person. I think the most memorable instance of him going above and beyond was when he brought me homemade soup, when I had a cough linger for several weeks. Finally, I have been lucky enough to have a supervisor who is a national service alum, so he understands and values the impact a service experience can have on both a member and on a community.

MEET OUR TEAM

How Our Supervisors Helped Us Succeed

NICOLE: When relocating to Kentucky, I appreciated that my supervisors connected me with housing opportunities. I was able to find housing before moving to Kentucky, which helped alleviate some of the stress that comes with relocating. On my first day at the office I was able to get to know the rest of the team through a day-long retreat. My introduction to the community also included a driving tour, as well as attending various meetings in my first couple of weeks to get to know other community partners. I found this support really valuable and it helped to jumpstart many connections that I was able to deepen throughout my service year. As a VISTA Leader with Michigan Nonprofit Association, I appreciate that my supervisor and I have regular meetings to check-in and that I has been given the opportunity to learn and explore based on my interests, skills and passions.

PHILIP: My supervisor preceded me as the VISTA Leader on my project. She assisted me with locating temporary housing and with moving from the temporary housing into a permanent situation. In my role as a VISTA Leader, she has supported me by participating in weekly meetings in which we discuss ongoing activities and project guidance. When she cannot meet due to her many other obligations, she makes it a priority to be responsive via email.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource offers concrete measures for supervisors to consider in ensuring that their members have a meaningful and worthwhile service experience while it also brings together a summary of resources from the VISTA Campus and elsewhere. After defining capacity building and providing examples of capacity building activities to which VISTAs may be assigned, we divide the supervisor’s role in managing the VISTA project into the phases of the VISTA project cycle. Then, we outline some strategies for the supervisor to consider during each phase. Within the context of these strategies, we provide an overview of each phase and a set of tools and techniques which the supervisor may use in facilitating the VISTA’s capacity building role while ensuring a meaningful and productive experience service year for everyone.

In using this product, we recommend that you first read through the entire document. Once you are familiar with the basic concepts that we are identifying and their implications, wherever you find yourself in the VISTA project cycle, we recommend that you begin to consider applying to your project the tools and techniques listed in Appendix A. In addition, Appendix B provides a guide for unanticipated transitions in the VISTA supervisor and Appendix C presents the Top Ten Ideas that we identified from the VISTA and VISTA Leader surveys.

VISTA Project Cycle

Phases	Recruitment and Selection	Before VISTA Starts On-Site	When VISTA Starts On-Site	Throughout the Service Year	Close of Service Transition
Timeline in months	Up to 6 months before the VISTA term of service	Up to 3 months before the VISTA term of service	Start of term of service	During the term of service	Last 3 months of the term of service
Phase Focus	Action verbs in VAD; Skype or FaceTime interviews	Engage VISTA prior to PSO; periodic check-ins	Phased OSOT/ checklist; weekly meeting template; supervisor's Exit Binder	Communication plan; vision-based coaching	Email introductions; sustainability assessment/ action plan

As illustrated in the table above, the phases for the VISTA project cycle include:

1. Recruitment and selection, with a focus on capacity building from the perspective of writing the VAD and interviewing and selecting the VISTA.
2. Before the VISTA starts onsite, with a focus on capacity building from the perspective of anticipating your VISTA’s needs and understanding and setting realistic expectations.
3. When the VISTA starts onsite, with a focus on capacity building from the perspective of OSOT, building a relationship, and change in supervisor.
4. Throughout the service year, with a focus on capacity building from the perspective of ongoing supervision/communications and coaching your Member for success.
5. Close of service transition, with a focus on capacity building from the perspective of life after VISTA and program sustainability.

DEFINING CAPACITY BUILDING

Capacity Building is a set of activities that expand the scale, reach, efficiency, or effectiveness of programs and organizations. Capacity building allows the organization and the community to sustain the VISTA's project activities once the project period has ended. Tasks and activities are designed to:

- Create, expand, or strengthen an organization's systems or processes
- Transfer knowledge, products, and relationships to the staff and volunteers of the host site

[The Council of Nonprofits](#) also has a similar definition that may be helpful in understanding capacity building.

VISTAs do indirect service in their role of building capacity for an organization. Some examples of the differences between direct and indirect service can be found on the [VISTA Campus](#), specifically [VISTAs and Capacity Building](#) and the [Capacity Building Game](#).

Below, is a excerpt from an [example VAD](#) with the capacity building elements highlighted.

VISTA Assignment Objectives and Member Activities

Goal of the Project: To help ensure that children of incarcerated parents receive the educational, social, and emotional support they need to help them break the cycle of poverty, the MentorCorps VISTA project will build the capacity of WCS by developing a sustainable volunteer recruitment and management system for its mentoring program.

Objective of the Assignment

Assess the current state of WCS' efforts in reaching, selecting, and supporting volunteer mentors, and **create or revise policies, procedures, and documents to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of the mentor recruitment and matching system.**

Member Activities:

1. Research the history of volunteer programs at WCS
 - a. **Identify strengths and challenges of the current program. Based on this report, make a plan for improvement.**
2. **Develop systems for screening and matching mentors**

Objective of the Assignment

Set up outreach systems and **build partnerships with community organizations in order to spread the word about the mentor program. Develop targeted marketing materials.**

Member Activities:

1. Plan for outreach and recruitment.
 - a. Identify skills, abilities, and experiences sought in volunteer mentors.
 - b. Write volunteer task descriptions that include: qualifications, activities, benefits, time commitment, and other expectations.
 - c. **Develop partnerships with community organizations whose members are possible mentors or who can support the organization in other ways.**
 - d. **Develop partnerships with people or organizations that understand the needs of children or prisoners and can assist with the training and support of mentors.**
2. Market the program to targeted audiences.

RECRUITMENT & SELECTION

Writing the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD)

Good Strategy

Create a VAD that is clear and concise.

Make It Better

Use Action Verbs to begin each activity in the VAD.

All VISTA projects have a Project Plan, the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) spells out the specific goals and activities the member will perform during their year of service. The VAD is both a position description and a work plan. It's used for recruiting and tracking a VISTA's performance.

Questions to ask when preparing to write your VAD

- How is capacity-building needed at your site?
- How can a VISTA help with those needs?
- What has prevented your organization from successfully completing this work in the past?
- What is the goal of the VISTA project and how does it relate to capacity building?
- What steps need to be taken to reach the goal?

See [Creating Effective VADs](#) for a detailed tutorial on writing VADs.

Understanding the difference between Capacity Building and Direct Service

- Capacity building is working with staff and the communities to create, expand, or strengthen the systems and processes that help an organization carry out its anti-poverty work. These tasks and activities include the transfer of knowledge/skills, products, and relationships.
- Direct service refers to activities that immediately address a client's needs.

Capacity Building	Direct Service
Recruiting volunteers to build houses	Building houses
Developing a database of mentors	Mentoring teenagers
Writing a financial literacy course curriculum	Teaching a financial literacy course

"My supervisor has an understanding that the VISTA position is not meant to be a direct service position and so all the tasks I have been given are based on my VAD and the capacity building tasks outlined there." – Current VISTA Member

Source: [VISTAs and Capacity Building](#)

Interviewing and Selecting the VISTA

Good Strategy

Preliminary phone screen interviews

Make It Better

Skype or FaceTime preliminary screening interviews. It is more personal and will start your potential relationship with the applicant.

VISTA applicants should have the motivation and ability to perform the capacity building tasks you've outlined in the VAD. In turn, you have an opportunity to weigh the applicant's skills, motivation, and support needs during the selection process.

Before the interview, you should do the following:

- Identify what you want the applicant to do in the position, using the VAD
- Determine the required outputs and performance success factors for the position
- Determine the characteristics and traits of the individual you believe will succeed in the position
- Make a list of questions to ask each applicant during the interview
- Ask all applicants the same set of questions, to make the best decision based on consistent information

During the interview, you should clearly explain how the VISTA role is needed as a capacity-builder for the project. Give a definition of the capacity-building to the VISTA applicant applying and what that means, including how the role coordinates with your organization's project sustainability.

Sample Interview Questions

- Give an example of a goal you successfully achieved. What problems did you have to overcome and what strengths did you utilize to achieve your goal?
- Are you currently involved in community service?
- Have you gone above and beyond the call of duty? If so, how?
- What skills or strengths can you contribute?
- What are your biggest weaknesses?
- Give me a couple of examples from your work history that demonstrate you are a self-starter and can take initiative.
- What level of supervision will you need?

"During my interview, my supervisor explained the purpose of my work and how my responsibilities related to my project organization. The duties and work required were explained in detail to ensure of my interest in pursuing the job." - Current VISTA Member

For more examples, see [Interviewing VISTA Candidates](#)

Anticipate Your VISTA's Needs

You have successfully recruited a VISTA who you think will be a great fit for your organization and now you have a month (or more) before you welcome your VISTA on-site. This time period can easily be overlooked by supervisors but putting in some effort at this point to prepare for your VISTA's start of service can go a long way in helping your VISTA to successfully integrate into your organization. In addition, the more you can demonstrate to your VISTA that you have thought through the VISTA's role and the strategy for the work, the more evident it will be that his or her contribution is important and will be valued by the organization.

"My supervisor lets me use my knowledge and skillsets to build up programs and add my ideas and experiences from former service opportunities and internships."
- Current VISTA member

Anticipate support needed to complete VAD activities

- *What has prevented your organization from successfully completing this work (or work like this) in the past?*
 - Thinking through this question and sharing this information with your VISTA can help your VISTA anticipate and prepare for challenges, while it can also avoid repeating things that did not work in the past.
- *Will the VISTA be new to the community?*
 - If so, there might be some tasks that are more challenging for your VISTA to complete in the beginning – especially ones requiring connections and relationships that take time to build - and this might require a different type of training. However, even if your VISTA grew up in the area or has lived in the area for a while, it is also important to not assume that your VISTA is familiar with the specific community he or she will be serving.
- *Will you be the one to provide support in these areas? Is there someone better suited within your organization or community that you could connect your VISTA to for this support?*
 - Maybe you are not an expert in all of the skills that the VISTA will need to be successful. That is certainly okay but the more prepared you are to connect the VISTA to the people, training and resources they need to succeed, the quicker your VISTA will be able to fully dive into the activities.

Anticipate Your VISTA's Needs (continued)

Good Strategy

Supervisor checks in with the VISTA at several points between nomination and when the VISTA starts on-site to ensure the VISTA is on-track to relocate (if necessary), has completed required documents through My AmeriCorps account and is prepared for their PSO experience.

Make It Better

Supervisor makes the VISTA feel included as a part of the team before VISTA starts on-site. In addition to checking in with the VISTA, the supervisor shares resources that could help orient the VISTA to the community. If the VISTA is in the area ahead of time, the incoming VISTA could go out to lunch with the outgoing VISTA to establish a connection, or be included at the organization's events, like a volunteer appreciation event or even a board meeting. (Since the VISTA has not yet started service, this should all be communicated as an opportunity – not an expectation.)

Revisit the strengths and needs (weaknesses) of your VISTA

- *What strengths and needs did you identify in your VISTA's nomination?*
 - When you are recommending a candidate via eGrants, you have to identify the strengths and needs of a candidate. These notes can be useful as you prepare for your VISTA member's arrival.
- *How might these strengths and needs allow you to prepare for your VISTA's arrival?*
 - You might want to especially keep an eye out for training opportunities that would address skills the VISTA has yet to develop, so the VISTA can start the service year fully equipped to do the work in the VAD. In addition, if the VISTA has particular strengths that could be a benefit to the organization or program beyond the way the VAD was written, looking for additional opportunities for the VISTA to use his or her strengths can help the VISTA develop professionally.
- *In addition to strengths and needs identified during recruitment & selection, are there other things that you will want to know about your VISTA's work style or communication style?*
 - Some of these things can be learned through observation once the VISTA starts on-site. However, it might be worthwhile to think about what will be important for your VISTA to know about you and for you to know about your VISTA from the start in order to have a successful and productive year

BEFORE VISTA STARTS ON-SITE

Understand and Set Realistic Expectations

Understand performance measures and reporting expectations

- *Do you know the reporting requirements and schedule for your project?*
 - If you do not have this information, it is a good idea to reach out to your intermediary sponsoring organization so you are clear on what the expectations will be.
- *Are tools already in place to capture this data? – If not, will this be a responsibility of the VISTA to develop? Will this be accomplished in time for your first report?*
 - Once you understand what you will be required to report against, it is important to figure out the how by taking an inventory of what information you will already have access to and what information you still need, to determine a process in order to be able to collect it.
- *Will you need to partner with any other organizations to gain access to the data you need? Are these partnerships already in place?*
 - In some cases you may need to collaborate with others and establish the trust required to have access to the information you need. It might take time for other organizations to share this information with you.

Establish realistic expectations about time commitment and workload

- *Are you being realistic about the amount of time you will need to dedicate from your schedule to supervise a full-time VISTA?*
 - While the VISTA will allow your site to accomplish more, the VISTA's productivity will likely be tied to how well they are supported. Thinking ahead about how accessible you will be for the VISTA member and how you will accommodate weekly check-ins with your VISTA member, will allow the VISTA to feel appropriately prioritized for the organization from day one.
- *Do you have an appropriate workload planned for your VISTA?*
 - Keep in mind that your VISTA is making a full-time commitment to your site and since this service is his or her first priority, it will be important that your VISTA feels fully utilized and engaged in the role. If you have supervised interns before, supervising a VISTA will be a different experience. Because of the nature of the VISTA's capacity building role, the VISTA will likely have more long-term projects and tasks of a different nature than one would assign to an intern.

"My supervisor and I created a 30-60-90 day plan focused mainly on capacity building efforts. These included looking at systems and processes in place directly related to my VAD and coming up with improvements to them."
- Current VISTA member

WHEN VISTA STARTS ON-SITE

On-Site Orientation and Training

Good Strategy

You hold an OSOT for a new VISTA and give them a tour of the office, briefly introducing them to everyone, while quickly explaining what exactly it is your organization does. You don't go into much detail because you already explained this when you interviewed them.

Make It Better

Instead of trying to fit everything into one day, spread it out over one to three weeks and make a [checklist](#) so you remember to touch on everything that the new VISTA will need to know.

Sometimes, in the excitement of having a new VISTA start on site, things like On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT) are forgotten about. However, OSOT will introduce the VISTA to not only the organization, but the community that they will be serving in and give the VISTA basic knowledge and/or skills they will need for their project. OSOT should be completed within the first two weeks of a VISTA starting.

- Enable your VISTA to understand the strategy and purpose behind their service
 - Plan a conversation to let your VISTA know how their project will help the organization and community overall
 - Encourage them to follow up with questions to dive deeper into the conversation
 - Go over the VAD with them. Even though this was done at PSO, it's great for the VISTA to hear your thought process and reasoning for choosing projects and creating the deadlines
 - Sometimes, it may be better to make OSOT last several days and give the VISTA 'homework' to do to get them better acquainted with the community

- Make appropriate introductions to key stakeholders and community partners
 - Introduce the VISTA to everyone in the office - not just the people they will be working with on different projects
 - When you introduce your VISTA, tell people why they are there and what they will be working on
 - If you attend a meeting, bring your VISTA if acceptable and appropriate, and introduce them to the people there
 - If you hear of a networking event or a conference that your VISTA may be interested in, pass it along

"I am regularly invited to sit in on calls/meetings that relate to our department as well as one's that do not tie into my role directly. I enjoy gaining a well-rounded perspective on the organization."-Current VISTA Member

WHEN VISTA STARTS ON-SITE

Building a Relationship

Good Strategy

You schedule a weekly meeting with your VISTA, but it's usually only 5 minutes because they don't have questions.

Make It Better

Talk about the importance of weekly meetings when you create your communication plan. Have a [document](#) they can complete before each meeting; then go over each question and talk about their progress so far with the project; and ask about how they feel they're developing personally/ professionally, what they have learned, etc.

- Schedule Weekly Meetings
 - Go over project progress
 - See if the VISTA has any questions about how to continue
 - See where they are in their personal and professional goals
 - What motivated your VISTA to join AmeriCorps?
- Understand the differences between a VISTA and an employee
 - Make it clear to other employees that the VISTA is to be treated as a member of staff but is there to do a specific project
 - Don't allow other staff to assign the VISTA work unless you approve—VISTAS aren't staff replacement
 - There are [key differences](#) between a VISTA and an employee

Having a successful relationship between the Supervisor and VISTA has multiple benefits including: higher quality of work done by the VISTA, greater member retention, a more productive VISTA, greater use of community assets and resources, and many more. Some of the simplest ways to build a relationship with your member is to just ask them questions.

- What is your member's work style? How does that fit with your work style? What are your expectations for each other?
 - Develop a [communication plan](#) early on. This way you'll know from the beginning how to communicate and each other's expectations for communication. This is also a good time to establish when your weekly meeting will take place
 - Have your VISTA complete the [StrengthsFinder 2.0](#) assessment to find out what their assets are and how you can best use them for your organization
 - For many VISTAs this is the first time they be in a professional environment and they may need coaching on [office etiquette](#)
 - Examples: how to answer the phone, send a professional email, and dress appropriately for the office

"My supervisor takes interest in me by asking about my family, education, experiences, goals and general talk about poverty related issues. By having this good dialogue, I am more willing to come to him with problems in my work."- Current VISTA Member

Change in Supervisor

Good Strategy

You know you'll be leaving, so you identify one person that your VISTA can go to with questions and who will assign tasks and projects.

Make It Better

Give that person the exit binder you made about everything VISTA-related at your organization. Let that person know the roles and responsibilities of being a VISTA and being a VISTA Supervisor. Follow intermediary organization/State Office's policies for when there is a change in supervisor.

Sometimes, the supervisor who originally wrote the VAD, interviewed and selected the VISTA, and sometimes began working with them leaves the organization and there is a change in supervisor part way through a VISTA's service year. When this happens, it can be confusing and uncertain for the VISTA about what the rest of their year will look like. The following are a few tips for supervisors to ease this transition should they leave their position before a VISTA year ends. If you are a new supervisor starting in the middle of a VISTA's year, there is a Guide for Unexpected Supervision Transitions in Appendix B.

- You are unexpectedly leaving
 - If you don't have an exit binder created, try to get as much of one together as you are able
 - Figure out who will be the new supervisor for your VISTA if your position isn't being filled right away and if possible introduce your VISTA to this person
 - Consult intermediary organization/State Office to see if there is a process for a change in supervisor that should be followed
- You know you'll be leaving before your VISTA completes service
 - You should let the Intermediary Organization or State Office know if and when there is going to be a change in supervisor
 - VISTAs are encouraged to create an [Exit Binder](#) before they end service
 - As the supervisor you should also have a binder of all VISTA information that you can pass along to the next supervisor
 - Some things to include:
 - A copy of the VAD and your thought process for choosing the project(s) you did
 - Why you feel the project is important
 - The progress that's been made so far on the project
 - Any OSOT material or past agendas as examples
 - A description of what VISTA is
 - The roles and responsibilities of being a VISTA Supervisor
 - Any important contacts you have—such as Intermediary Organization contact, State Office, etc.
 - Any member or supervisor reports that you have

Ongoing Supervision/Communications

Good Strategy

Weekly check-in meetings

Make It Better

Implement a communication plan that takes account of communication styles. By doing so, you will build trust that you are committed to leading the capacity-building partnership

First-time VISTA supervisors, in particular, may not be aware of the implications of the capacity-building role of the VISTA for the supervisory relationship. Since the supervisor has the authority to implement the VISTA project, capacity-building is a function of the supervisor's job as well. Using this authority, the supervisor's responsibility is then to direct the VISTA in how to carry out the project. For the VISTA to be productive in carrying out the capacity-building role in this context, the supervisor has to remain actively engaged.

- Provide ongoing project guidance
 - Decide whether you or someone else in the organization will provide ongoing project guidance
 - Tailor meeting format to your communication styles
 - Express expectations, listen to the VISTA, and give constructive feedback in an ongoing process
 - Maintain an "open door" policy to make yourself available when there are questions or concerns

- Conduct action planning
 - Develop a common understanding with the VISTA of what are the needs or gaps in capacity and how to address them
 - Align the vision for the project outcomes with that of the organization
 - Work with the VISTA to update the VAD action plan and then work as a team to implement it and monitor the implementation
- Challenge the VISTA to take responsibility while you remain engaged
 - Position yourself as a resource and empower VISTAs to take ownership of their work.
 - Set boundaries or limits so that the project doesn't get too big
 - Engage in trial and error and give the VISTA more creative freedom as they demonstrate their competency
 - Recognize situations in which a VISTA may become too focused on direct service, gets stuck, or is burning out

"...integrating [the VISTA] into the organization as a VISTA rather than a staff member can be like trying to make a square [peg] go into a [round] whole."
– Current VISTA Leader

Coaching Your Member for Success

Good Strategy

Set professional goals

Make It Better

Create a shared vision of the future within which you and the VISTA will set goals and work together to attain them

Utilizing a VISTA in your organization is a trade-off. On the one hand, the organization gets a dedicated person with the knowledge and skills for which you selected him or her. On the other hand, the VISTA usually comes without specific knowledge or experience with your organization and how to conduct its activities. Coaching is a way for the organization to teach or upgrade skills that the VISTA will need to complete the project.

- Identify and upgrade skills
 - Provide training in needed skill areas (for example, providing grant writing training)
 - Encourage the VISTA to practice their skills and to apply them in various settings to reinforce what they are learning
 - Support them in refining and implementing measures to make the project sustainable
 - Create a space in which the VISTA may express their emotions, including voicing their concerns with the supervisor or the project, in a professional manner

- Engage the VISTA in the organization and the community
 - Bring the VISTA and introduce them at community meetings
 - Invite the VISTA to organization and partner meetings and conferences
 - Based on the VISTA's interests, identify ways for the VISTA to become more engaged with the community

- Encourage the VISTA's professional development
 - Notice or ask about the VISTA's interests and guide activities in that direction
 - View the VISTA as a consultant or partner and ensure they have meaningful work
 - Allow them to branch out and try new things, including working on unrelated projects
 - Encourage them to attend networking events or join professional organizations

"Showing them around, giving them tiny tips and training experience, and making them feel like part of a team."
--Current VISTA Leader

CLOSE OF SERVICE TRANSITION

Life after VISTA

It is important to recognize that VISTA members are committing to serve for one year, and as a supervisor you should encourage your VISTA member to explore options for Life after VISTA throughout their term of service. (Check out this handy [month by month guide](#) to help with the process.) During the last couple of months, as they begin actively seeking out their next opportunity, here are some questions to consider to help support the VISTA member.

➤ **Anticipate support needed to explore Life after VISTA.**

- *What path is the VISTA member interested in pursuing?*
 - VISTA members come from all different walks of life, and the paths that they take after completing service are varied. Take some time to talk with the VISTA about what avenue they are exploring. They may be pursuing additional schooling or they may want to pursue a career in the nonprofit world – but the sector is so varied, there are numerous paths that they could take. Your VISTA may also be interested in another year of service. VISTA members also receive the benefit of non-competitive eligibility after they complete service, so they may choose to pursue a position with the federal government. Whatever path they are pursuing, as a supervisor, your support and guidance may really help the VISTA to fully explore the options that are available to them.

Good Strategy

Share job opportunities with your VISTA member that match their interests

Make It Better

Introduce your VISTA via email to an organization in your network that matches their interests and include a copy of the VISTA member's resume for consideration

- *Has the VISTA member started applying for grad school or for jobs?*
 - The VISTA's timeline will depend upon which path the VISTA is interested in pursuing. It can be helpful to check in with the VISTA within the first couple months of their service to develop a better sense of what they are pursuing. You can then plan to check back in about their progress based on what you already know. If the VISTA is planning to apply to graduate school they may be very wrapped up in that process over the fall and winter, and may need time to plan school visits in the spring. If the VISTA is pursuing their next career opportunity, they will most likely begin applying to job postings three to four months before their service ends. It's important to recognize that the VISTA will simultaneously be focused on next steps and in wrapping up their service year. Regular check-in meetings may help to ensure that the VISTA member keeps a dual focus.

CLOSE OF SERVICE TRANSITION

Life after VISTA (continued)

Anticipate support needed to explore Life after VISTA.

- *What else can I do to support my VISTA transition out of service?*
 - Offer to write letters of recommendation or serve as a reference. It is always helpful to hear from a current supervisor, and this could be the boost they need to make it to the next step. If you are serving as a reference, ask the VISTA member to share the position descriptions with you and why they are passionate about the opportunity. The more detail you have, the better the support you can provide.

“My supervisor wrote letters of rec for grad school for me. Throughout the year, she would check to make sure I was enjoying the types of projects I was getting or if there was another avenue I was interested in trying out. She has given me opportunities to go to webinars and a symposium for public policy, which I will be pursuing in grad school.”–
Current VISTA Member

Help VISTA translate service to resume and career

- *How can your VISTA best showcase their skills and achievements?*
 - Share this VISTA Campus webinar about [Translating VISTA Service onto your Resume](#) with your VISTA member. Serving as a VISTA is a unique experience and it is important that the VISTA understands how to best share their qualifications and achievements. As a supervisor it may be helpful to ask your VISTA to do some self-assessment about how they have helped to move the project at your site forward. Take some time to review the VAD and share some of the key accomplishments that your VISTA has made. Ask to review your VISTA’s resume and offer feedback about how it could better reflect their skills and accomplishments.
- *What else can I do to support my VISTA member with interviews?*
 - Now that you know more about what your VISTA is interested in pursuing, share opportunities as you come across them. Encourage your VISTA member to pursue informational interviews in order to better understand the field and to gain interview experience. Check in with your VISTA during regular meetings and ask what type of support they need from you. It could simply be the flexibility in their schedule to attend an interview, but they could also need support as they prepare for an interview. Each VISTA member will need different levels of support, so tailor your approach as needed by the individual.

CLOSE OF SERVICE TRANSITION

Program Sustainability

“Another example of capacity building was reviewing the Study Hall Aide system. I created a manual to describe the process and am currently updating it to include collaborative efforts from the Program Director.” – Current VISTA Member

In the final two months of service, make a focus to discuss program sustainability with your VISTA member. While you have had discussions about this previously, now is the time to encourage your VISTA member to think about transferring your program to the community. There are three key components that the VISTA should transfer: knowledge, products and relationships. You and your VISTA member can check out [this webinar](#) on the VISTA Campus for more information.

Support the VISTA in transferring knowledge

- *What unique knowledge does the VISTA hold about the project?*
 - In terms of sustainability, it's important for the VISTA to help you and other key stakeholders carry on the project after their service is complete. Although sustainability should be a focus throughout their service, it becomes especially important in the last couple of months of the service year. Have a meeting with the VISTA to spark some ideas about the knowledge they hold and what they need to leave behind. This might be anything from how-to guides, to a list of accounts and passwords, to a list of community partners.
- *Who will you and the VISTA need to share this knowledge with?*
 - As each VISTA carries out a unique project, it is up to you and the VISTA to determine who else needs to have access to this knowledge. If the VISTA works on a largely internal project, it may be easy for you to identify those audiences. If the VISTA is working on a project with community partners, sit down with them and try to brainstorm a list. Based on that list, you can then identify what might be needed by each partner to keep the project sustained long-term.

Support the VISTA in transferring products

- *What products has the VISTA created for your organization or for the project?*
 - The products the VISTA has created vary greatly by organization and may be either physical or electronic. Physical copies of things could include posters, promotional materials, etc. The VISTA may have electronic copies of the designs for posters and promotional materials. They may also have created templates for newsletters, reporting forms or databases. Many sites ask the VISTA member to leave an [Exit Binder](#), which can include a number of these products. It is important to take some time and talk with your VISTA member about what both you and they think should be included in the binder and [in what format to present it](#).

CLOSE OF SERVICE TRANSITION

Program Sustainability (continued)

Support the VISTA in transferring products

- *Who will need access to these products?*
 - If the VISTA project is largely internal, then you as the supervisor may keep the Exit Binder, or it could be given to the next VISTA at your site. If the project has a number of community partners, then there may need to be multiple versions of the Exit Binder created specifically for each partner organization. Work with your VISTA to help identify the best way to disseminate the products.

Support the VISTA in transferring relationships

- *What relationships has the VISTA built throughout their service year?*
 - One of the key components of VISTA service is relationship building, and with the temporary nature of service it is important for the VISTA to actively transfer these relationships as they close out service. As a supervisor you can help support this process by helping the VISTA identify key stakeholders and their relationship to the project. It may be helpful for the VISTA to leave behind a contact database that not only includes the name of each contact, but also their role within the project. Ask your VISTA to make key stakeholders aware of their departure early, and to possibly begin building relationships between some of these stakeholders.
- *Who are the community champions for the VISTA project?*
 - As the VISTA member traverses the service year, chances are they will come across specific people from the community who are very passionate about seeing the project succeed. Take time throughout the service year to help the VISTA identify these people. As the service year draws to a close help the VISTA identify ways that these people can take on larger roles in the project. This then helps the project move forward during the transition from one VISTA to the next and also when there is no longer a VISTA at the site.

Good Strategy

Create a program sustainability [assessment](#)

Make It Better

Create an [Action Plan](#) based on the assessment

APPENDIX A

Summary of Resources

- **Defining Capacity Building**
 - [Council of Nonprofits: What is Capacity Building](#)
 - [VISTA Campus](#)
 - [VISTAs and Capacity Building](#)
 - [Capacity Building Game](#)
 - [Sample VAD](#)
- **Recruitment and Selection**
 - Writing the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD)
 - [Creating Effective VADs](#)
 - [VISTAs and Capacity Building](#)
 - Interviewing and Selecting the VISTA
 - [Interviewing VISTA Candidates](#)
- **Before VISTA starts on site**
 - Anticipate Your VISTA's Needs
 - [Capacity Building in Action](#)
 - [Strengthening Your Organization, Your Community and Your Projects](#)
 - [Strategic Factors for Building Community](#)
 - [Program Assessment Worksheet](#)
 - [Partnership Assessment Worksheet](#)
 - Understand and Set Realistic Expectations
 - [CNCS Performance Measurement](#)
 - [VISTA Intermediary Sponsor and Sub-site Supervisor Major Tasks At-A-Glance](#)
- **When VISTA starts on site**
 - OSOT
 - [Three Week Agenda for VISTAs](#)
 - [VISTA OSOT Checklist for Supervisors](#)
 - [OSOT Checklist](#)
 - [OSOT Planning Worksheet](#)
 - [Supervisor OSOT Suggestions](#)
 - Building a Relationship
 - [Difference Between VISTAs and Employees](#)
 - [Weekly Supervisor and VISTA Member Meeting Template](#)
 - [Communicating Through the VISTA Life Cycle](#)
 - [Building a Relationship with your VISTA Supervisor](#)
 - [StrengthsFinder 2.0](#)
 - Change in Supervisor
 - [Exit Binder](#)
 - [Creating a Binder for the Next VISTA](#)

APPENDIX A

Summary of Resources

- **Throughout the Year**
 - Ongoing Supervision/Communications
 - Communication plan
 - [Coaching and Supervision Checklist](#)
 - [The Art of Communicating](#) (#7 in the list of visual aids)
 - [Building a Relationship With Your VISTA Supervisor](#)
 - [Example Communication Plan](#)
 - [Strengths Finder 2.0](#)
 - Provide project guidance
 - [Core Competencies of a Supervisor](#) and, especially, the section on “Able to balance needs” (page 6)
 - [One on One Form](#)
 - Conduct action planning
 - [Virginia Housing Alliance Action Planning Resource](#)
 - Challenge the VISTA to take responsibility while you remain engaged
 - [Successful Member Coaching and Supervision for Sub-site Supervisors](#)
 - [Retaining VISTAs throughout the Project Lifecycle - Responding to Resistance](#)
 - Coaching Your Member for Success
 - Create a shared vision of the future with your VISTA
 - [Vision-based coaching: optimizing resources for leader development](#) and, especially, Figure 2 and the sections on “Developmental Resources” and “Relational: Vision and Positive Coaching Relationship”. Citation: Passarelli AM (2015) Vision-based coaching: optimizing resources for leader development. *Front. Psychol.* 6:412. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00412
 - Identify and upgrade skills
 - [Core Competencies of a Supervisor](#) and, especially, the section on “Able to coach” (page 4).
 - [Successful Member Coaching and Supervision for Sub-site Supervisors](#)
 - [Coaching and Supervision Checklist](#)
 - Engage the VISTA in the organization and the community
 - [Supervisor Coaching Scenario](#)
 - [Community Entry Worksheets](#)
 - Encourage the VISTA’s professional development
 - [Introduction to Coaching](#)

Summary of Resources

- **Close of Service Transition**
 - Life after VISTA
 - [Supervisors and VISTAs Planning Together for Life after VISTA](#) (webinar)
 - [Transitions Talking Points](#)
 - [Incorporating Transition Planning into Service](#)
 - [Self-Assessment Question Bank](#)
 - [Translating Service into Job Speak](#)
 - Program Sustainability
 - [Exit Binder](#)
 - [Letter from a Former Member](#)
 - [Beyond VISTA: Project Sustainability Approaches and Strategies](#) (webinar)
 - [Building Sustainability for Nonprofit Organizations](#)
 - [Program Sustainability Assessment Tool](#)

Guide for Unexpected Supervision Transitions

You are now supervising a VISTA and this VISTA is already on-site and in-service. You don't have time to prepare for the transition, were likely not involved in the selection or onboarding of this national service member and just need to jump into this role. New jobs, relocations, promotions, maternity leave – there are many reasons that might lead to a change in a VISTA's supervisor during the VISTA's service year. Regardless of the reason why, there are a few things that you can focus on now to ease the transition for both of you.

New Supervisor Checklist

- ❑ **Introduce yourself to the role and responsibilities of a VISTA and a VISTA's supervisor.** In addition to reviewing [What VISTA Members Do](#), [the VISTA Supervisor's Manual](#), and [Key Points on VISTA's Terms, Conditions and Benefits](#), you might find reviewing the links shared in Appendix A useful.
- ❑ **Review your VISTA's VAD (VISTA Assignment Description).** The VAD is the work plan that was approved by the CNCS State Office and it describes what your organization is supposed to accomplish with its VISTA resources. Try and identify how the four core principles of VISTA (anti-poverty focus, community empowerment, capacity building, sustainable solutions) are evident in the VAD. After reviewing the VAD, what questions do you have? Are these questions for your VISTA, for your organization or for your sponsoring organization?
- ❑ **Ensure you have connected with your Intermediary Sponsoring Organization or CNCS State Office** to introduce yourself and confirm that they have the correct contact information for your site. If they have not already contacted you, they will likely appreciate the reminder of the change.
- ❑ **Seek clarity on your role as supervisor.** Expectations for supervisors may vary based on the project. Some projects have supervisors more heavily involved in reporting processes than others and some projects may require you to participate in training or networking with other supervisors. There is likely also variation in required forms, documents and processes.
- ❑ **Have a conversation with the VISTA** to give him/her an opportunity to share both the successes and challenges that have been faced so far. What are your VISTA's immediate needs? What are your VISTA's goals for the service year? Who has the VISTA been working with to accomplish these tasks?
- ❑ **Based on your conversation, set expectations.** Your approach, work style and expectations might be different from those of the VISTA's previous supervisor. Any differences might take some time for a VISTA to adjust to, but communicating these expectations clearly and early on in the partnership should minimize miscommunication and conflict.

Guide for Unexpected Supervision Transitions

Additional Tips:

- Identify what you do not know and be willing to ask questions.
- Model adaptability for your VISTA. Transition can be tricky (for both you and your VISTA) but it can also be a great teaching moment in bringing flexibility to the changes one encounters in life. Yes, this is likely not a role you expected to have, but this change is also not what the VISTA expected when they accepted the role.
- Bring a positive attitude. If you are concerned about adding another responsibility to your plate, that is something you could express to who you report to, but this is not an appropriate sentiment to express to your VISTA. No one wants to feel like a burden.
- You are likely bringing new expectations to the role. Make them clear from the start.
 - This time can be a great opportunity to start new and address any challenges the VISTA has been facing. Were weekly meetings only happening sporadically? Was the VISTA stuck on one project without making much progress? You are bringing fresh eyes to their work and can help them brainstorm some creative approaches.
- Will the supervisor's responsibilities be shared among multiple parties? This approach is not recommended but if this is the case, make sure the VISTA clearly understands the role of each supervisor.

Top Ten Ideas

For our ALC Project we created 2 surveys: one for VISTA Members and one for VISTA Leaders. The purpose of the surveys was to collect information about how VISTA host organizations train VISTA supervisors to support VISTA members in their capacity-building role and how that support contributes to their experience as VISTA Members. Based upon the results of the two surveys, we have listed the top ten strategies that supervisors use to support their VISTA members.

1. Schedule weekly check-ins with your VISTA
2. Have an open door policy
3. View the VISTA as a partner
4. Allow the VISTA the freedom to take on projects
5. Allow the VISTA to try new things
6. Encourage the VISTA to explore professional development opportunities
7. Make the VISTA feel like a member of the team
8. Give your VISTA constructive feedback in an ongoing basis
9. Bring your VISTA to meetings to give them an opportunity to learn something outside of their VAD
10. Ask about your VISTA's interests and tailor activities in that direction