

Preparing for a VISTA's Arrival- From VISTA Campus

Starting a new assignment is always a challenge, and that can be doubly true when a VISTA is also moving to a new community. Performing some advance work before the VISTA arrives can save time and stress for the VISTA down the road. Ideally, VISTAs would have the chance to visit their site ahead of time, but realistically, that is not the case. To help you get started ahead of time with preparations for a VISTA's arrival, here are a few suggestions for making a VISTA feel comfortable in a new community and welcomed into a new position within your organization.

Additional information on preparing for a VISTA's arrival can be found in the Finding Help for VISTAs section of the VISTA Campus.

Locating Housing for a VISTA

A fundamental assumption of the VISTA program is that the skills and energies of VISTAs are used most effectively when they live and work with the low-income people they serve. In keeping with this philosophy, VISTAs are expected to secure housing using their living allowance, which is provided to cover the basic costs of food, housing, and utilities. They should look for housing within the community they are assigned.

Some VISTAs may need to relocate to a new community to serve on a specific assignment. Hence, they will immediately need inexpensive housing. Although your sponsoring organization is not required to provide housing to VISTAs, you should ensure that housing is not a major problem for VISTAs when they first arrive. Some suggestions for a smooth transition:

- Offer to house them until they find a place that is affordable and convenient to their project location.
- Keep your ears open before they arrive for inexpensive rental opportunities.
- Help them identify which neighborhoods are safe, affordable, and appropriate.
- Let them know about community papers or bulletin boards that list apartment openings.
- Drive them through affordable apartment complexes and neighborhoods that could be options for them.
- See if other VISTAs on your project or on a project in town need a roommate.
- Think creatively. Do you know someone who has a large house and is willing to rent out a room?
- Suggest that VISTAs tell their landlord or property manager that they are VISTAs who receive only a small living allowance. Some landlords may discount their rent or reduce the amount of security deposits.

VISTAs receive a relocation allowance to help with any deposits. The amount, which may not exceed \$550, is only given if the VISTA is relocating to serve a 12-month term at a VISTA project. The Corporation State Director determines the relocation amount; therefore, VISTAs should direct requests to the Corporation State Office.

The VISTA living allowance is limited; therefore, VISTAs may accept offers of free or low-cost housing from community members, local organizations, educational institutions, or sponsoring organizations. Some examples of housing that VISTAs may accept include:

- Unused free housing space offered by a community member because he or she is proud to have a VISTA in the community
- A vacant apartment over the shop area offered by a local business owner
- Reduced-rate housing offered by a national housing company to volunteers who serve in a given community and VISTAs who meet the eligibility requirements
- Free or low-cost housing provided by a local, state, or federal government agency in areas with limited housing opportunities
- Housing rented by a sponsoring organization on the VISTA's behalf
- A portion of existing space the sponsoring organization already owns or rents

Creating a Work Space for a VISTA

One way to foster a successful and productive start for your new VISTA is to provide a comfortable office space. A good office station goes beyond desks and chairs—you need to consider noise and interruption control, and lighting. By placing emphasis on the office environment, you can expect to see an immediate boost in energy, productivity, and well-being—necessary factors for any office environment and a good investment in your VISTA's overall success on the project.

Ideally, VISTAs should have access to all the materials that are needed to complete their projects. You are expected to provide VISTAs the use of a computer, printer, Internet access, e-mail access, consumable supplies, telephone, copier, and fax—just as you would for any staff member. Having equipment and supplies readily accessible when the VISTA arrives makes the VISTA's assignment a lot less stressful.

Also, help the VISTA understand how your particular office functions when supplies are needed.

Inform other staff in the organization that a new VISTA will be starting. If you are unavailable when the new VISTA starts, identify a colleague who can meet the VISTA and assist with the on-site orientation.

Welcoming the VISTA to the Community

Settling comfortably into a new community may be one of the most difficult challenges that VISTAs face. Hence, one of your most important roles as a supervisor is to introduce the VISTAs to their new community. This process should begin when they arrive and continue during their initial months with your organization.

The following are ideas for welcoming a new VISTA to the community:

- Prepare a press release announcing the arrival of the VISTAs at your organization. Talk about the VISTA's goals and how the VISTA will improve the community. You might also consider arranging an interview with the new VISTA on a local radio station.
- Host a reception and invite community leaders, board members, and program participants to meet the new addition to your agency. You might also plan a day of community service activities, inviting board members and community leaders, and introduce the new VISTA at that time. Submit a press release to the local media each time you hold an event.

- Have the site supervisor give the VISTA a tour of the community, making introductions, and generally making the VISTA feel welcome.

Emergency Fund for VISTAs

If an immediate family member (spouse, parent, sibling, child, grandparent, or guardian) of a VISTA becomes critically ill or dies, and if the Corporation cannot provide a prepaid ticket in advance of the approved emergency leave, the sponsoring organization should furnish the needed travel assistance, including an advance of up to \$500 from its own funds, to the VISTA. Such advances, however, should be authorized (via telephone) by the Corporation State Office. Both the sponsor and the VISTA must complete and sign the VISTA Payment Voucher form in the My AmeriCorps portal to record receipt of any emergency travel advance. The sponsor forwards the form to the Corporation State Office for processing so that the sponsor is reimbursed for the advance. For more information on emergency leave procedures, see Chapter 9 of the VISTA Handbook.