SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery
for people who are homeless

A Life in the Community for Everyone

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

AmeriCorps and SOAR: An Opportunity for Sustainability
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Abstract

AmeriCorps and its service programs engage individuals to address the nation's critical needs in education, public safety, health, and the environment. Each year, 75,000 adults participate in AmeriCorps programs, bringing their energy, creativity, and skills to more than 3,300 nonprofit, faith-based, and community groups. This issue brief explores ways that agencies can involve AmeriCorps members at low or no cost to help implement the SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) program, which is funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). SOAR seeks to expedite access to Social Security Administration (SSA) disability benefits for eligible adults who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless and who have serious mental illness and/or co-occurring disorders.

AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, created through the National Community Service Trust Act of 1993, is a network of national service programs administered by the federal Corporation for National and Community Service (the Corporation). AmeriCorps encompasses four main programs: AmeriCorps State, AmeriCorps National, AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), and AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps). Each program operates differently, with separate eligibility requirements, application processes, and governance structures.

- AmeriCorps State is administered by governor-appointed State Service Commissions. Grants are awarded to organizations that apply to sponsor service programs. Each program designs service activities for a team of full- or part-time AmeriCorps members to serve up to one year. Members provide a wide variety of service activities, including tutoring children, building homes, and providing outreach to individuals who are homeless. A cash or in-kind match is required for requested program costs.

- AmeriCorps National grants are intended for national nonprofit organizations that operate in two or more states, Indian Tribes, and consortia formed across two or more states. AmeriCorps National has seven grant competitions and application is made directly to the Corporation.

- AmeriCorps VISTA is the national service program designed specifically to address poverty and serve low-income communities. Organizations that sponsor VISTA members are not required to provide a financial match but must provide project direction, supervision of members, and administrative support. Applications for VISTA projects are made through the Corporation State Offices.

- AmeriCorps NCCC is a full-time, team-based residential program for men and women aged 18–24 who wish to serve for one year. AmeriCorps NCCC operates five regional campuses that board from 150-500 members. Organizations can apply for the assistance of AmeriCorps NCCC teams to respond to critical needs related to natural and other disasters, infrastructure improvement, conservation, and community development.

SOAR

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1. Authors are senior project associates at the SOAR Technical Assistance Center, operated by Policy Research Associates, Delmar, NY, under contract to SAMHSA.

AmeriCorps member conducting outreach

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SOAR seeks to expedite access to SSA disability benefits, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), for eligible adults who are homeless and who have serious mental illness and/or co-occurring disorders. SOAR is based on a model that involves outreach, engagement, relationship-building, and the identification of each individual's needs, hopes, and dreams. Engaging AmeriCorps members in SOAR is an effective and wonderful way to sensitize them to the lives of people who are homeless and to involve them in work designed to reduce long-term homelessness in this country.

AmeriCorps and SOAR as Partners

The implementation of state action plans and local SOAR programs requires staff time to do strategic planning, resource acquisition, stakeholder collaboration, outcome tracking, training, outreach and engagement, and implementation of the SOAR process. Staff who are able to do outreach, serve as representatives for applicants, engage with individuals on the street, collect medical records, write medical summary reports, and track outcomes play a key role in the implementation of SOAR. Unfortunately, communities find themselves with a proven program that cannot be fully implemented due to a lack of staff capacity. AmeriCorps members are a natural solution to the unmet staffing needs of SOAR programs. AmeriCorps State members can provide direct outreach, engagement, and assistance with SSI/SSDI applications using the SOAR process. AmeriCorps VISTA members can identify potential SOAR collaborations, organize local SOAR planning meetings, fundraise for dedicated SOAR staff, collect data, and coordinate future trainings. See the appendices for more detailed information on these AmeriCorps programs: Appendix A for AmeriCorps VISTA and Appendix B for AmeriCorps State.

AmeriCorps members are a natural solution to the unmet staffing needs of SOAR programs.

The SOAR TA Center is available to assist organizations interested in creating a SOAR AmeriCorps project! We will help at any stage of the process, including development of the concept paper, completing the application, brainstorming work activities for AmeriCorps members, and recruitment of members. Email SOAR@prainc.com or call (518) 439-7415 ext. 242.

AmeriCorps VISTA Member Lindsey Krinks Contributes to Nashville's SOAR Program

In 2008, Lindsey Krinks began working with Park Center's Homeless Outreach Program in Nashville, TN, as an AmeriCorps VISTA member. At the core of the Homeless Outreach Program is an award-winning SOAR program, which has achieved a 96 percent approval rate in obtaining SSI/SSDI disability benefits for over 221 homeless individuals since its inception in 2006.

One of her primary jobs as an AmeriCorps VISTA member was to build capacity for Park Center by fundraising, organizing and overseeing volunteers, and helping to implement special events. Over the course of two years with Park Center, she brought in an estimated $21,895 worth of in-kind donations, helped to raise $219,637 through fundraising and grant-writing activities, and organized 269 volunteers who collectively put in a total of 1,847 hours.

Her biggest success came in 2010. The SOAR program was up for renewal and funding was competitive for the first time since its inception. For weeks, Park Center's director of development, the supervisor of the Homeless Outreach Program, and Lindsey worked on a proposal that renewed SOAR funding and added an additional staff person to serve as a correctional facility and hospital liaison.

While she is proud of the resources she brought to Park Center, Lindsey is most proud that her achievements allow the Homeless Outreach Program to have a continuing impact on the community. Lindsey says, "Because of programs like this, homeless individuals across the nation are finding that hope, stability, and recovery are possible."

Implementing a SOAR program requires more than training front-line staff on how to assist with SSI/SSDI applications. Often, there are challenges to address, such as identifying potential SOAR community and other partners, forming collaborations with these partners, organizing local SOAR planning meetings, fundraising for dedicated SOAR staff, collecting data, and coordinating future trainings. Folding these activities into existing job responsibilities is often difficult. More and more, communities are partnering with the AmeriCorps VISTA program (VISTA) to find low-cost, full-time staff to carry the torch for SOAR and to advocate for the ongoing implementation of SOAR strategies. The following is an introduction to VISTA and to engaging a state's VISTA program.

What is VISTA?

The VISTA program supports nonprofit and government agencies that fight poverty by encouraging individuals from all walks of life to engage in a year of full-time service. The program places people in sponsoring agencies to create or expand programs that reduce poverty in low-income communities. These full-time members expand the capacity of the organizations they work with by performing indirect rather than direct service. For example, instead of collecting medical records for an applicant's disability claim, a VISTA member might help an agency to develop new relationships and systems with medical records providers. This enables medical information that supports an applicant's disability claim to arrive more quickly. VISTA members can raise funds for agencies, recruit volunteers, organize meetings and trainings, create new or improved existing collaborations (e.g., SOAR collaboration with a local hospital), make presentations, coordinate efforts, build infrastructure in the community, and evaluate or develop programs. Their general role is to increase the ability of an organization to accomplish its mission by implementing permanent, long-term solutions to problems of poverty rather than short-term quick fixes.

What is the cost of a VISTA member?

Any nonprofit or government agency can sponsor VISTA members by applying to be a sponsor of a VISTA project. Federal funds are then assigned based on the scope of the project and the identified need. Sponsoring agencies are either stand-alone projects within a state or subsidiary projects of a larger project. For example, the Tennessee Literacy Coalition (TLC) operates as a stand-alone VISTA project in Tennessee. TLC hosts VISTA members to work on literacy projects to fulfill its mission and provides technical assistance to organizations in Tennessee that are interested in creating VISTA projects. Once these VISTA projects are approved, they become subsidiary VISTA projects of TLC. TLC then helps the subsidiary projects to attain their stated VISTA goals. Generally, both stand-alone and subsidiary projects share some of the costs of the program, depending on the amount of federal and local resources available. Currently, this cost sharing ranges from $2,500 to $14,000 per year. In exchange, an agency receives a full-time member (35-40 hours per week) who receives a monthly living allowance, health coverage, travel costs associated with VISTA training, payroll services, and an end-of-service award ($5,300 for tuition/student loans or a lump sum of $1,500). Sponsoring agencies assimilate costs associated with project supervision and logistical support (access to computer, telephone, etc.). The VISTA program provides liability coverage for all members, training for VISTA members in leadership and program management, and assistance to the sponsoring agency with recruiting members (host agencies are responsible for advertising for, interviewing, and selecting members to serve).

What are the responsibilities of the sponsoring agency?

Generally, sponsoring agencies that create a welcoming and safe workspace for the VISTA member in which to work as part of a team have better outcomes with the VISTA program. To do this, the supervisor of the VISTA member should:

- Participate in the on-site orientation shortly after the member begins to serve.
- Provide a workspace for the member that includes access to a telephone and computer.
- Meet with the member on a regular basis to provide supervision and to ensure the work plan is completed.

- Make changes to the work plan as needed.

- Review progress reports and help the member submit these reports by due dates.

- Communicate with the state VISTA Program Manager regarding performance and incorporation of the VISTA member in the sponsoring agency.

Who is the typical VISTA member?

VISTA members come from a variety of career paths and levels of experience and education. Some VISTA members are recent college graduates; others are pursuing a "second career," embarking on a new journey after supporting a family or working in the business community. Whatever the background of the member, he or she is generally interested in serving the community and helping to make the world a better place through the alleviation of poverty.

What are the benefits a VISTA member receives during a year of service?

VISTA members receive a monthly living allowance that is generally indexed to 100 percent of poverty for a single individual, depending on location. This modest stipend comes with health coverage, training, travel, and relocation expenses. When members finish a year of service, they receive an educational award of $5,300 that can be used to help pay for tuition or qualified student loans. Or, the VISTA member can receive a $1,500 stipend instead of the educational award. VISTA members receive their paychecks directly from VISTA as a direct deposit into their bank account. Members also receive training in project management and leadership and may be eligible for assistance with childcare costs.

National outcomes of VISTA

According to studies completed in recent years:
- For every dollar a cost-share partner contributes, $5.63 is generated in effort and accomplishments.

- VISTA members have helped their sponsoring agencies generate an additional $50 million cash annually – an average of $50,000 per VISTA project.

- VISTA members annually recruit more than 200,000 volunteers who provide more than 6 million hours of service to their communities.

How can my organization apply for a VISTA project?

The first step is to contact your state's Corporation for National and Community Service (CNS) State Office. These offices provide program support and outreach for VISTA projects and other AmeriCorps programs. Contact information for each state can be found at: http://www.AmeriCorps.gov/about/contact/stateoffices.asp Ask the state VISTA office staff if your project would be a stand-alone project or subsidiary project of an existing VISTA effort in your state. Your state VISTA contact can walk you through the application process for becoming a VISTA project site. In general, organizations complete a two-step process:

- Step 1 – AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper: Organizations submit this paper to the CNS office for review. This paper acts as an initial screening tool to evaluate whether the organization would be an appropriate sponsor of a VISTA member.

- Step 2 – AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application: If the concept paper is approved, the organization will then submit a full application through eGrants, a website that CNS uses to receive and evaluate VISTA project applications. Application materials and guidance are provided after the concept paper is approved.

One of the greatest challenges to implementing a SOAR program is having enough direct service staff members able to utilize the SOAR model fully when assisting people with their SSI/SSDI applications. AmeriCorps State programs are designed to address direct service needs such as these. AmeriCorps members dedicated to helping individuals who are homeless to access disability benefits and health insurance would not only likely end the cycle of homelessness for each individual served, but also would bring income and healthcare cost reimbursements into the community. We estimate that, once recruited and trained, a full-time AmeriCorps member could complete 50 applications per year. A 10-member team could file 500 cases per year. At the current SOAR approval rate of 71 percent, 355 cases would be approved, generating approximately $2,871,240 in annual income for the applicants, the majority of which would be spent on rent and other essentials such as food, clothing, and medication. The AmeriCorps State program is an excellent opportunity for states, regions, and communities to build SOAR staff that can address the service needs of individuals who are homeless and who have a serious mental illness or co-occurring substance use disorder.

What is AmeriCorps State?

AmeriCorps State is a federal grant program administered by governor-appointed State Service Commissions. Grants are awarded to organizations (government and non-government) that apply to sponsor service programs. The sponsoring organization designs the program, determines the number of full- or part-time AmeriCorps members to recruit, and decides what service the members will provide. Programs are designed around the needs of the community and state and may include, but are not limited to, service related to homelessness, hunger, community outreach, health, and the environment. Each program designs service activities for the team of AmeriCorps members, who then serve up to one year. In addition to their assigned service activities, members help to recruit volunteers to provide additional support to the host program.

What is the cost of an AmeriCorps State member?

Organizations that apply for an AmeriCorps State grant must provide a minimum cash or in-kind match of 24 percent of program costs for the first three years of funding. Starting with the second three-year cycle, the match requirement gradually increases every three years to 50 percent by year ten. Applicants apply for funding to cover a portion of the members' living allowance and program costs. The amount requested will vary depending on the size of the program (number of full- and part-time members), the amount of living allowance offered, and match available to the organization. Most AmeriCorps State programs are designed for multiple members (e.g., 10) as it is a more efficient use of program costs for supervision, administration, and training. However, members of one program may work in different sites and in different cities. For example, a program may plan for 10 full-time members and offer a living stipend of $12,000. The budget request would be for approximately $140,000 (including health insurance, travel, and other program costs). The agency would then need to match that request with at least $33,600. This match could be met with the salary of the full-time AmeriCorps program supervisor's salary and benefits.

AmeriCorps State programs that engage full-time AmeriCorps members must offer a living allowance between $11,800 (minimum) and $23,600 (maximum). In addition, health care benefits must be provided to full-time members in accordance with AmeriCorps requirements. There is no minimum living allowance for part-time members, but organizations may choose to provide them.

What are the responsibilities of the grant recipient?

The grant recipient is responsible for recruiting, selecting, and supervising the AmeriCorps members who serve in their programs. Organizations should provide orientation to and training for the members' service activities. During the course of the service period (up to one year), the organization must track the output and outcomes of the members' activities.

It is necessary that AmeriCorps programs meet non-duplication (duplicating an activity already available in the locality of the program), non-displacement (displacing an employee or position) and non-supplementation (replacing state and local public funds) requirements.

Who is the typical AmeriCorps State member?

AmeriCorps members are diverse in age, education, and experience. Members must be at least 17 years old and have a desire to serve their community. Often members are recent high school or college graduates looking for an opportunity to live and serve in a community while earning an education award. Members are also retirees or individuals in transition who would like a way to give back to their community.

Individuals who wish to join an AmeriCorps State program can search for programs based on their interest in a specific type of service and the state in which they wish to serve. An advanced listing search allows potential members to search for programs within metro areas and for programs that would utilize specialized skills (e.g., counseling, community organization, fund raising, writing/editing, and teaching/tutoring).

What are the benefits an AmeriCorps State member receives during a year of service?

AmeriCorps State members who serve full-time (1700 service hours) are offered a living allowance between $11,800 (minimum) and $23,600 (maximum), as well as health care benefits. There is no minimum living allowance for part-time members, but organizations may choose to provide them. When members finish a year of service, they are eligible to receive a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award from the National Service Trust. A member with a year of full-time service will receive an award of $5,350 that can be used to help pay for tuition at qualified institutions of higher learning or to pay back qualified student loans. The amount is reduced for less than full-time service and must be used within seven years.

How can my organization apply for an AmeriCorps State project?

Organizations (state and local governments, school systems, nonprofit organizations and faith-based groups) that wish to apply for AmeriCorps funding and operate their program in only one state are eligible to apply for AmeriCorps State. Each State Service Commission will select which applications to fund and which they will forward to compete in a national competition. For application and deadline information in your state, contact your State Service Commission. SSC contact information can be found here: http://www.americorps.gov/about/contact/statecommission.asp

States and Territories without Commissions (South Dakota, Puerto Rico, the Territory of the Virgin Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands) as well as federally recognized Indian Tribes may apply directly to the federal Corporation for National and Community Service.

Applications are evaluated on program design, organizational capability, cost-effectiveness, and budget adequacy. The narrative section of the application gives the organization an opportunity to share program strengths, document a compelling community need, and describe member roles and activities. The program must describe measurable outputs and outcomes for member activities.