ServeNebraska VISTA Assignment Description Guidance

A. GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

Every member must have a VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) unique to their role and responsibilities. VADs must fully describe the duties assigned to the member.

VISTA Assignment Description Guidelines

Host sites can use the following guidelines to ensure that member position descriptions accurately and adequately describe allowable duties assigned to the member.

1. AmeriCorps VISTA positions should work toward accomplishing a specific project or goal.

2. **DO NOT USE THE FOLLOWING WORDS OR PHRASES.**
   a. "Other duties as assigned"
   b. Work or job (use serve instead)
   c. Assist (describe the specific tasks instead)
   d. Manage (describe the specific responsibilities instead)
   e. Supervise (describe the specific responsibilities instead)

3. List service activities that are specific to each member
   a. Activities in which members engage but which are not included within the position description may be considered noncompliant or unallowable.
   b. Multiple members should not have the same position description unless performing the same activities for the same term.

4. Describe all member activities explicitly to ensure that prohibited activities are not included.

5. Do not include phrases like, "other duties as assigned" or similarly vague statements about member responsibilities.

6. Do not use employment terms such as: "work/job, job description, hired, or employee". Instead the position description should use appropriate National Service terminology like, "serve/service, position description, enrolled, and member/service participant".

7. Avoid abbreviations and acronyms – instead spell out the terms at the first usage and then use the acronym or abbreviation later in the document.

8. If a member VAD includes member participation in volunteer recruitment, volunteer management or similar activities, a brief description of the potential activities for which the member will be recruiting must be added within the position description itself. For example, "Recruit and manage volunteers to support the afterschool program."

Action Verbs to Create a Strong VAD

When writing a VAD, one common mistake is to frame the position's responsibilities and goals in terms of assisting a staff member in implementing a program or acting primarily in administrative or clerical roles. This can easily be prevented by showing how your position focuses on building the

capacity of your organization. Avoid verbs like "help" or "assist," which can indicate a lack of leadership in the position to AmeriCorps. Here is a list of action verbs to use instead:

Analyze   Assess   Build   Collect   Communicate   Compile   Coordinate   Conduct   Create Develop   Design   Distribute   Engage   Ensure   Establish   Evaluate   Expand   Generate Identify   Improve   Implement   Launch   Market   Measure   Monitor   Organize   Plan Present   Promote   Recommend   Recruit   Refine   Research   Review   Secure   Suggest Update   Use   Write

B. GUIDANCE ON APPROPRIATE SERVICE ACTIVITIES

ServeNebraska has established these guidelines to help programs make a determination about whether proposed service activities are appropriate for a VISTA member position. Here are some guidelines to use to determine if proposed activities are eligible for designation as an AmeriCorps service position:

Project Based
1. VISTA positions are project based, focused on accomplishing specific tasks, goals, or outcomes to alleviate poverty in Nebraska's communities.

Non-duplication or Displacement
1. Member activities must not replace staff or community volunteer responsibilities.

2. AmeriCorps is intended to be above-and-beyond what the individual or regular volunteers would "normally" do.

3. Member activities must be;
   a. more expansive
   b. require more time
   c. include additional activities or,
   d. in other ways are outside of the scope of what a staff person or volunteer would "normally" do, this would potentially be an appropriate member service role.

Capacity Building Activities
1. Capacity building activities must:
   a. Be intended to support or enhance the program delivery model.
   b. Respond to the organization's goal of increasing, expanding or enhancing services to address the most pressing needs identified in the community.
   c. Enable the organization to provide a sustained level of more or better direct services after the national service participant's term of service has ended.

2. As a general rule, AmeriCorps considers capacity building activities to be indirect services that enable AmeriCorps-supported organizations to provide more, better, and sustained direct services. To determine whether assigned national service participants' activities qualify as capacity building, think about the intended results of those activities. Applicants must understand and distinguish activities that build capacity. Capacity building activities cannot be solely intended to support the administration or operations of the organization.

Connection to Anti-Poverty Outcomes
1. Activities must be connected to anti-poverty focus outcomes and goals.

2. For example, a school-based program with a goal of increasing low-income student academic performance cannot enroll a member who spends their time coordinating Day of Service projects for the college campus unless the host site can establish a direct connection between the member's activities and the project's anti-poverty goals.

3. Similarly, members whose stated role is to develop a tutoring program for a school cannot be assigned to recess duty or to supervise the lunchroom.

Administrative activities are not allowed

1. Members must not serve in a primarily administrative role.

2. For example, if a service site expects its staff to maintain their client files, this responsibility should not be shifted to an AmeriCorps member who starts service at the agency. The member may also be expected to maintain his/her own files, but not those of other staff.

3. Similarly, agencies may not assign AmeriCorps members to cover the essential duties of a staff member absent temporarily (such as for maternity or medical leave).

Fundraising (cash or in-kind) is allowable, but only in specific situations. There is no limit to the percentage of time that members can spend towards fundraising.

1. Members cannot:
   a. Raise funds for their living allowance
   b. Raise funds for an organization's operating expenses or endowment
   c. Raise funds for an organization other than their service site
   d. Write a grant application for funding provided by a federal agency including AmeriCorps VISTA, Summer VISTA associates, AmeriCorps grant proposals, and AmeriCorps grants
   e. Solely recruit volunteers to do any of the above

2. Fundraising activities might be allowable if:
   a. The activities raise cash or in-kind funds directly supporting the member's specific service project or activities

Direct Service is generally unallowable

1. VISTA is a program designed to improve the capacity of its host sites. Capacity building projects are generally indirect services. Direct service should not be the focus of the AmeriCorps VISTA member's service.

2. ServeNebraska strongly encourages host sites to consult with the ServeNebraska Program Development Officer before allowing members to provide direct services.

3. Direct service might be allowable if the activities;
   a. train the member on their capacity building activities,
   b. are required in an emergency, and
   c. are organization-wide events (such as days of service events)

AmeriCorps VISTA and Academic Requirements

1. AmeriCorps VISTA members can earn academic credit while completing their VISTA project. However, the VISTA position should be defined by AmeriCorps service expectations and not those established for another school or employment purpose.

2. For example, a host site should not simply designate what had been an unpaid internship as an AmeriCorps position, unless the program can demonstrate that (1) the AmeriCorps position requires the individual to complete service hours AND (2) conducts activities providing a benefit to the community beyond the standard internship expectations.

Advocacy, Lobbying, and Election Engagement is never allowable, outreach and education are

1. AmeriCorps VISTA members cannot participate or support activities that attempt to influence federal legislation. AmeriCorps defines advocacy as a term similar to lobbying. Therefore, we suggest sites use the terms "educate" or "outreach" to talk about the tasks where an AmeriCorps VISTA member will make efforts to educate public officials about issues.

Examples of Appropriate VISTA Activities

GOOD INDIRECT SERVICE ACTIVITIES	BETTER CAPACITY BUILDING ACTIVITIES	BEST SUSTAINABLE ACTIVITIES
Recruit a site's volunteers	Develop forms, volunteer assignments	Develop volunteer management system and procedural guide
Train direct service providers	Write training curriculum or manual; train trainers	Develop training manual and train-the-trainer curriculum
Coordinate a pilot project	Develop procedures, systems, or replication manual to sustain project	Develop funds for staff or recruit volunteers to run program
Write press releases	Develop press kits, media database	Secure media partners
Organize fundraising events for specific projects	Grant writing, develop database	Secure development staffing
Organize task forces & develop coalitions	Develop leadership structure of task force or coalition	Create infrastructure of long-term community partners
Conduct outreach	Design brochures, posters	Develop volunteers to perform outreach
Conduct evaluation	Design evaluation tools	Train staff to integrate evaluation

C. PROHIBITED ACTIVITIES

AmeriCorps has a strong emphasis on monitoring for prohibited activities, and the consequences for programs that fail to adhere to these prohibitions can be high-profile and severe. All programs should make note of the prohibited activities and ensure that members, site supervisors, and other staff are well-versed in them. It is required that prohibited activities are covered in the Member Orientation, as well as specifically detailed in the member service agreement and host site agreements.

AmeriCorps members may not engage in prohibited activities directly or indirectly by recruiting, training, or managing others for the primary purpose of engaging in a prohibited activity. Individuals may exercise their rights as private citizens and may participate in the activities listed below on their initiative, on non-AmeriCorps time, and using non-AmeriCorps funds. Individuals should not wear the AmeriCorps logo, nor should they identify themselves as AmeriCorps members, while doing so.

F. POSITION DESCRIPTION CHECKLIST

Use the following checklist to help determine if the written position description meets program requirements.

1. Section One
   - ☐ Service site name is written
   - ☐ Capacity Building Goal is written
   - ☐ Position Title includes "VISTA"
   - ☐ Supervisor name and contact information is listed

2. Project Goal
   - ☐ Target population is listed
   - ☐ Includes information on how position will (1) build capacity in the organization and/or (2) alleviate poverty in the target population, and (3) become sustainable over time.

3. Objective
   - ☐ Objectives are aligned with the project goal
   - ☐ Objectives can be reasonably achieved in the given timeframe

4. Member Activities
   - ☐ Tasks and activities are not:
     - ☐ Duplicative or displace existing employees/volunteers efforts
     - ☐ Prohibited activities
     - ☐ Administrative
     - ☐ Disconnected from program outcomes
     - ☐ Described using the words "work" or "job"
   - ☐ Tasks and activities are clearly described
   - ☐ Tasks and activities are specific to the member's position
   - ☐ No acronyms or abbreviations are included
   - ☐ Are generally indirect services