# Overview of Virtual Member Orientation for VISTA Candidates

The AmeriCorps VISTA Virtual Member Orientation (VMO) is a self-directed online orientation that introduces VISTA members to the terms, conditions, and benefits of service and key programming principles at the start of their service. VMO includes tutorials, online readings, and two live webinars.

The Curriculum
The Virtual Member Orientation develops knowledge essential for success in VISTA service. The curriculum guides the VISTA through issues of legal and regulatory compliance, achieving the goals and objectives of the VISTA assignment, and managing their benefits and professional development opportunities.

Requirements for Success
In order to successfully participate, a person (candidate or member) must have reliable access to the internet and telephone (VOIP, landline or cell phone service), a high-school equivalence of English language proficiency[1], adequate equipment (laptop or desktop computer), and, finally, comfort with computer-based, distance learning.

While our systems are built in a responsive architecture which supports smartphones and tablets, the VISTA Training Unit does not recommend attempting to complete onboarding screens in my.americorps.gov, the tutorials on the VISTA Campus (https://www.vistacampus.gov/), or attending the webinars on a smartphone or other mobile devices. Additionally, public spaces—cafes, streets, lobbies—are not conducive to participating on webinars. The syllabus requires a space where a participant can easily hear, follow on screen, and respond verbally and in writing. If these minimum requirements and expectations cannot be met, the face-to-face PSO (referred to as PSO Classic) will better serve the candidate and the sponsor.

Learning Objectives
The VISTA Training Unit coordinates with CNCS State Offices (CSOs) and VISTA Supervisors to implement the following syllabus:

1. Self-Directed Pre-Service Coursework: Terms and Conditions; Benefits; Civil Rights and Responsibilities; VISTA's Mission and Legacy; Using the Education Award; Child Care Support (if applicable) – located on the VISTA Campus

2. Pre-Service Webinar: overview of onboarding requirements, housing and relocation, preparing for service, background check process

3. Induction Webinar: Launching Your VISTA Service (a review of program principles, benefits, and support systems); Overview of first month of service; Swear-In

4. In-Service Coursework: tutorials on poverty, getting to know the community, the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD), and preparing for On-Site Orientation and Training (OSOT)

5. On-Site Orientation and Training and VISTA Assignment Description review with Supervisors

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[1] Able to read "Readers Digest", or "USA Today", for example.

Candidates must complete Portal onboarding forms and pre-service coursework prior to their arrival on site. Once at site, on the member's first day of service, the formal welcome to AmeriCorps VISTA and the oath of office are administered via webinar. The Virtual Member Orientation continues through in-service coursework that coincides with the sponsor-provided On-Site Orientation and Training.

## Calendar of Training Events

The VISTA Training Unit schedules training events – both Virtual Member Orientations and the PSO face-to-face events – each year based on projections in the Member Service Years (MSY) charts in collaboration with the CNCS State Offices. Training events are sequenced and scheduled frequently to ensure candidates are brought onboard with little or no delay. Please note that the first day of Virtual Member Orientation is usually held on a Monday at the beginning of a pay period, which is then the first day of service for the member. The CNCS State Office has copies of the most updated training calendar.

## Requirements for Activation

### Mandatory Attendance of Candidates/Members

The VISTA Program expects all candidates and members to fully participate and complete all aspects of the Virtual Member Orientation syllabus —onboarding forms, online coursework, webinars, and proper submission of the oath form. Failure to participate and complete assignment may lead to deselection or termination of service.

Candidates and members must log in and participate individually from their personal or project-furnished computer—this pertains not only to completing online coursework but to joining webinars as well.  Participating as a group on a single computer prevents an individual from fully participating and prevents the Training Unit from recording an individual's attendance. This lack of attendance record will lead to much unnecessary follow up of the parts of the Member, Sponsor, CSO, VMSU, and Training Coordinator.  See below for details.

Emergency absence will be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

### Mandatory Portal Onboarding Forms

The VISTA Training Unit notifies candidates at least two weeks before they begin service that they must complete their onboarding forms in my.americorps.gov.  Candidates must complete all forms no later than the Wednesday before the candidate is scheduled to start service.

The forms include:
- Direct Deposit Information
- Federal Tax Withholding (W4)
- Unpaid Compensation Information (Designation of Beneficiary)
- End-of-Service Benefit Selection

If not completed by the deadline, the candidate's living allowance payment will be delayed.

## Member's Acceptance of Service Terms and Conditions

The VISTA Training Unit notifies candidates about two weeks before they begin service to take the terms and conditions course on the VISTA Campus and certify their acceptance of those terms and conditions. The candidate must successfully record their acceptance no later than the Wednesday before their start of service. If the candidate has not recorded acceptance by the Wednesday deadline, the VMSU will notify the candidate that s/he has 24 hours to record their acceptance of the terms and conditions in the Portal.  If the candidate does not meet the 24 hour deadline, the VMSU will inform the candidate, with a copy to the VISTA Supervisor and the State Office, that s/he may not report to site and begin service as scheduled.  The candidate may attend a future PSO and start service at a later date.

## Candidates Who Do Not Complete the Day 1 Webinar:

If a candidate fails to attend the "Launching Your VISTA Service" webinar and either (a) does not submit an Oath to the VMSU or (b) submits an Oath but was not sworn in by a Federal Official, the candidate has 24 hours as of notification to complete the requirements of their first day of service and avoid deselection. Failure to comply will lead to deselection of the candidate (and the VMSU will end the candidate in training).

This policy and procedure assume that the candidate is present and serving at his/her site. However, if a candidate submits an Oath, did not attend the "Launching Your VISTA Service" webinar, and did not report to their site, the CSO will determine the candidate's status. If it is appropriate for the candidate to serve, the process above and deadlines are applicable.

## Inappropriate Behavior

If a member engages in behavior that is disruptive, unprofessional, or otherwise inappropriate—verbally, in writing, through non-responsiveness, or lack of capacity—then the CSO, in coordination with the Training Coordinator, will determine if the member should continue VISTA service.

## Returning VISTAs

A returning VISTA need not attend PSO if they attended a PSO within the last five years, unless the CSO deems it in the best interest of the project or program to do so.

# VISTA's Partnership with Sponsors/Supervisors in the Virtual Member Orientation

First and perhaps foremost, the VISTA Training Unit, VMSU, and CSO rely on the Sponsor to inquire as to the candidate's ability to succeed in the Virtual Member Orientation (VMO). If a person does not meet the basic requirements for success in the VMO, then the Sponsor should request of the CSO that the person be placed in a PSO Classic.

Once a candidate is placed in a VMO, the sponsor and supervisor must be able and prepared to support the syllabus in terms of:

- Ensuring that the candidate meets the requirements to successfully participate in a VMO.

- Furnishing a work station (individual access to a computer and phone beginning on the first day of service)

- Aligning the member's service schedule so that s/he can fully participate in the VMO webinar on the first day of service

- Providing the candidate with the oath form and fingerprint cards

- Supporting the member participation in the VMO in every regard

- Implementing an onsite orientation & training (OSOT)

- Reviewing the VAD with the member to clarify activities, answer questions, and ensure the candidate understands the goals

- Ensuring the member submits his/her oath form in PDF to the VMSU on the first day of service

- Ensuring the member submits his/her fingerprints cards to VISTA HQ within the deadline (see VDR Chapter on Criminal History Checks)

Supervisors are encouraged to attend the induction webinar with their candidates to be present for the induction and witness the oath of service.


## Basic Steps to Prepare Candidates for Service

The VISTA Training Unit (VTU), VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU), CNCS State Office (CSO), and the sponsor/supervisor are partners in positioning the VISTA applicant/candidate/member for success.

**1. Recruiting the Best Person for a Position**

Recruitment begins with a Sponsor's well-crafted service opportunity listing in the Portal, optionally supplemented by announcements through other media. Go to https://www.vistacampus.gov/resources/marketing-recruitment for recruitment resources. The VISTA program expects that the sponsor, through guidance and support of the CSO, will:
- interview individuals
- ensure the applicant reviews the VAD and understands the assignment (see VAD below)

- review the essential terms and conditions of VISTA service, e.g.,

    o terms of commitment

    o living allowance

    o criminal history background: full self-disclosure

    o fingerprinting, i.e., obtaining prints and submitting the cards to VISTA HQ

    o benefits and their requisites

    o training, and if attending a Virtual Member Orientation, ensuring the requirements stated above are met

The VISTA program further expects that the sponsor has explored whether the applicant has a need for accommodation, or a criminal history that had not been shared on the application. If either condition exists, the sponsor should alert the CSO as this may impact the applicant's eligibility and participation in training. (*Please see Special Needs section below.*)

**VISTA Assignment Description (VAD)**

Project sponsors should provide a VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) to each of their applicants during the interview, and well before the start of Virtual Member Orientation. The VAD describes a VISTA's specific tasks and responsibilities with the project.

- Sponsor must submit the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) to the CSO for review

- The CSO must ensure the tasks are reasonable and effective in the context of the project's objectives, and comply to policy and legal constraints

- Sponsor reviews the VAD with the applicant during the initial interview

- Sponsor and CSO confirm that the candidate/member has an up to date copy of the VAD for use during Virtual Member Orientation (VMO) and On Site Orientation and Training (OSOT)

A VAD that is valuable to the candidate and member is one that addresses the tasks for which the VISTA will be responsible, with rough timelines for the VISTA's year of service, and an indication of the sponsor's priority of those tasks.

*A tutorial and sample VAD form is on the Supervisor's Page under "Life as a Supervisor," "The VISTA Assignment" on the* VISTA Campus https://www.vistacampus.gov

## 2. Enrolling a Candidate in the Virtual Member Orientation

The CSO coordinates enrollment in the Virtual Member Orientation.

The Virtual Member Orientation serves:
i.      as a safety net to ensure all candidates are on-boarded with little or no delay
ii.     as a means of accommodating those for whom travel is a hardship
iii.    as a support to projects that are well-prepared to partner in implementing a Virtual Member Orientation (e.g., they are tech-savvy, a multi-site intermediary with an excellent communications plan, etc.)

This assumes that the candidate/member is positioned to succeed in a VMO. The basic requirements are stated above in the section *Requirements for Success.*

If a person does not meet the basic requirements for success in the Virtual Member Orientation, then the Sponsor should request of the CSO that the person be placed in a PSO Classic.

## 3. Supervisor Contact Information

In an effort to facilitate effective communication about the Virtual Member Orientation requirements and expectations with sponsors and supervisors, the CSOs will forward details to VISTA supervisors about each Virtual Member Orientation in which they have candidates enrolled.

## 4. Travel Request Profile (TRP)

The VMSU manages relocation travel. Given the short time between the Virtual Member Orientation enrollment deadline and the service start date, the VMSU will create the relocation Travel Request Profile (TRP) on behalf of the candidate and will not verify site addresses with the CSO.

The VMSU sends notification to the Candidate of the approval to relocate and the amount of the relocation assistance. This is done on a rolling basis as Candidates are enrolled in the Virtual Member Orientation. All candidates will receive a notification about their relocation within one week of being enrolled. The notification includes guidance on how to follow up with the VMSU if a Home of Record or Site Address is incorrect.

Relocation vouchers will be posted to the member's my.americorps.gov account within the first week of service. The member must print, sign, and mail the voucher to the VMSU within five days of the voucher being posted.

**5. Special Needs—Physical, Linguistic, and Other Accommodation**

If a VISTA candidate has a need for physical accommodation, due to a vision or hearing impairment, limited mobility, or use of hands, for example, the candidate is expected to alert the CSO and/or VTU as soon as possible. Certain impairments will prevent the candidate from participating in the Virtual Member Orientation.

If the candidate has low English language proficiency, lacks reliable connectivity to the internet, lacks basic computer literacy, is uncomfortable with computer-based learning, has only access to a smartphone, or does not have a workspace conducive to learning, the CSO and the VTU must be alerted as these will prevent the candidate from participating in the Virtual Member Orientation.

**6. Mandatory Portal Onboarding Forms Prior to VMO**

Once the CSO enrolls a Candidate in Virtual Member Orientation, the Candidate will receive an email directing them to the Starting VISTA page (https://www.vistacampus.gov/starting-vista-service) of the VISTA Campus.

This page links the candidate to the My AmeriCorps Portal (https://my.americorps.gov) to complete the online on-boarding forms:
- o Direct Deposit
- o W-4
- o Unpaid Compensation
- o End of Service Benefit (Education Award or Stipend).

The email also links them to the required pre-service coursework on the VISTA Campus. https://www.vistacampus.gov/virtual-member-orientation) of the VISTA Campus.

The VISTA program recommends that the sponsor impress upon the candidate the importance of completing these onboarding forms as soon as possible. Incomplete forms or coursework will prevent the VISTA from starting service as planned.

**7. Mandatory Online Coursework Prior to VMO**

The VTU will direct Candidates to the Starting VISTA page (https://www.vistacampus.gov/starting-vista-service) where they will be registered and required to complete a number of online, self-directed tutorials.

Candidates are required to complete all pre-service coursework and accept the Terms and Conditions of Service prior to arriving at their service site. Failure to complete the coursework (to include accepting the terms and conditions) will prevent the candidate from starting service and receiving relocation support.

The VISTA program recommends that the sponsor impress upon the candidate the importance of completing this coursework, like the onboarding forms, as soon as possible.

**8. Submission of Fingerprints**

The CSO will send fingerprint kits to the sponsor before the VISTA candidates arrive on site. The kits contain print cards and directions on how to acquire print services as well as how and where to send those prints. Those prints must be received at VISTA headquarters no later than 30 days after the VISTA member's service start date. The member may request an extension if required by emailing vistafingerprint@cns.gov.

# Requirement to Take the Oath or Affirmation of Service

As a condition of entry into service, VISTA candidates are required to take the same oath or affirmation as individuals entering federal employment, as set forth in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, VISTA's authorizing legislation.

A CNCS representative, most often the VISTA Training Coordinator, administers the Oath or Affirmation of Service during the "Launching Your VISTA Service" webinar. The supervisor will supply a paper copy of the oath form to the VISTA prior to the webinar.

The VISTA member will sign the oath form, have their supervisor sign as a witness, scan in PDF format, and email the scanned form to the VMSU (VMSU@cns.gov).

# Alternate Oath for Legal Residents (Non-Citizens)

A VISTA candidate who is not a U.S. citizen or a U.S. national but who legally resides within a state (someone who is a permanent legal resident or otherwise is a legal resident of a state) must take the alternate oath of service, as set forth in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended.

# Alternate Oath for Religious Reasons

On rare occasions, a candidate may object to taking the oath of service, as set forth in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, for religious reasons. If a VISTA candidate states that s/he cannot pledge, swear, or affirm allegiance to any country, flag, or political institution for religious reasons, the candidate may take the alternate oath for religious reasons. This is in accordance with applicable federal law and regulations prohibiting religious-based discrimination in federally conducted programs such as VISTA.

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