

Your Rights and Responsibilities

You are protected by VISTA and the Corporation for National and Community Service from being subjected to discrimination or harassment. You also have an obligation as a VISTA to make sure you do not subject anyone else to discrimination or harassment. This extends to everyone you come in contact with, including other VISTAs, clients, and volunteers and employees at your service site.

What Is Discrimination?

Discrimination is treating people differently because of who they are, where they come from, or the groups they belong to. Discrimination in a VISTA service setting is **illegal** when it targets a person or group based on such **non-merit factors** as race, gender, or religion, also known as **protected classes**, which the Corporation for National and Community Service defines as the following:

- Race, color, or national origin
- Sex/gender
- Disability (physical or mental)
- Age
- Religion
- Political affiliation
- Sexual orientation

Illegal discrimination:

- BOTH targets a person or group because of a difference AND singles them out for different treatment
- May be a one-time occurrence or part of an ongoing pattern
- Can happen to anyone

What Is Harassment?

Illegal harassment in a VISTA service setting is **severe and/or pervasive** verbal or non-verbal communication relating to an individual's gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, or any other **non-merit factor** that interferes with a VISTA's performance and/or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive service environment. Harassment can consist of spoken or written words, images, or actions and can happen to anyone. It includes but is not limited to:

- Explicit or implicit demands for sexual favors
- Pressure for one's company
- Unwelcome persistent letters, phone calls, emails or other media
- Distribution or display of offensive material
- Offensive looks, gestures, physical encroachment, or threatening behavior

Illegal harassment:

- Includes – but is not limited to – sexual harassment
- Can be spoken words or unspoken actions
- Is more than just annoying or uncomfortable behavior

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- Generally happens over a period of time
- Creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive service environment
- Prevents a VISTA from serving effectively
- Can happen to anyone

What Should I do if I Experience or Witness Discrimination or Harassment?

If you feel safe and comfortable doing so, you can approach and talk to the person you suspect of engaging in harassing or discriminating behavior directly yourself. If that doesn't work, or if you do not feel safe and comfortable doing so, you can also talk to your VISTA supervisor.

If you can not go to your supervisor, or you do and the matter is not resolved to your satisfaction, you can contact your state office (see list of state office contacts below). Finally, you can contact the Corporation's Office of Civil Rights and Inclusiveness or OCRI (see contact information below). If you and/or your VISTA supervisor or state office contact chooses to contact OCRI, note that claims must be made within 45 days of the incident.

Useful Questions/Suggestions if you think you have experienced or witnessed Discrimination or Harassment?

- Have I (Can I) talk to the person involved?
- What assumptions might I be making? How can I check out these assumptions?
- Assume positive intent. Communicate to clarify.
- Use statements such as, "It appears to me that..."
- Speak with a supervisor (if you can).
- Ask yourself: Is there something I can learn from this?

Where Can I go for More Information?

The Corporation for National and Community Service takes discrimination and harassment very seriously and makes the following resources available to you:

- **Corporation State Office Contacts** – A list of state offices can be found in this Participant Manual and online at the VISTA Campus at www.vis-tacampus.org.

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- **Contact Information for OCRI** – Contact OCRI via mail, phone, fax or email at:
 - 1201 New York Avenue, NW**
 - Suite 10800**
 - Washington, DC 20525**
 - (202) 606-7503 (hotline)**
 - (202) 606-3472 (TDD)**
 - (202) 606-3465 (fax)**
 - eo@cns.gov (email)**

- **Complete List of the Corporation's Official Policies on Discrimination and Harassment** – These can be found in the following pages of this Participant Manual, as well as at the following online location:
 - The online VISTA Member Handbook at www.americorps.gov/help/vistahandbook