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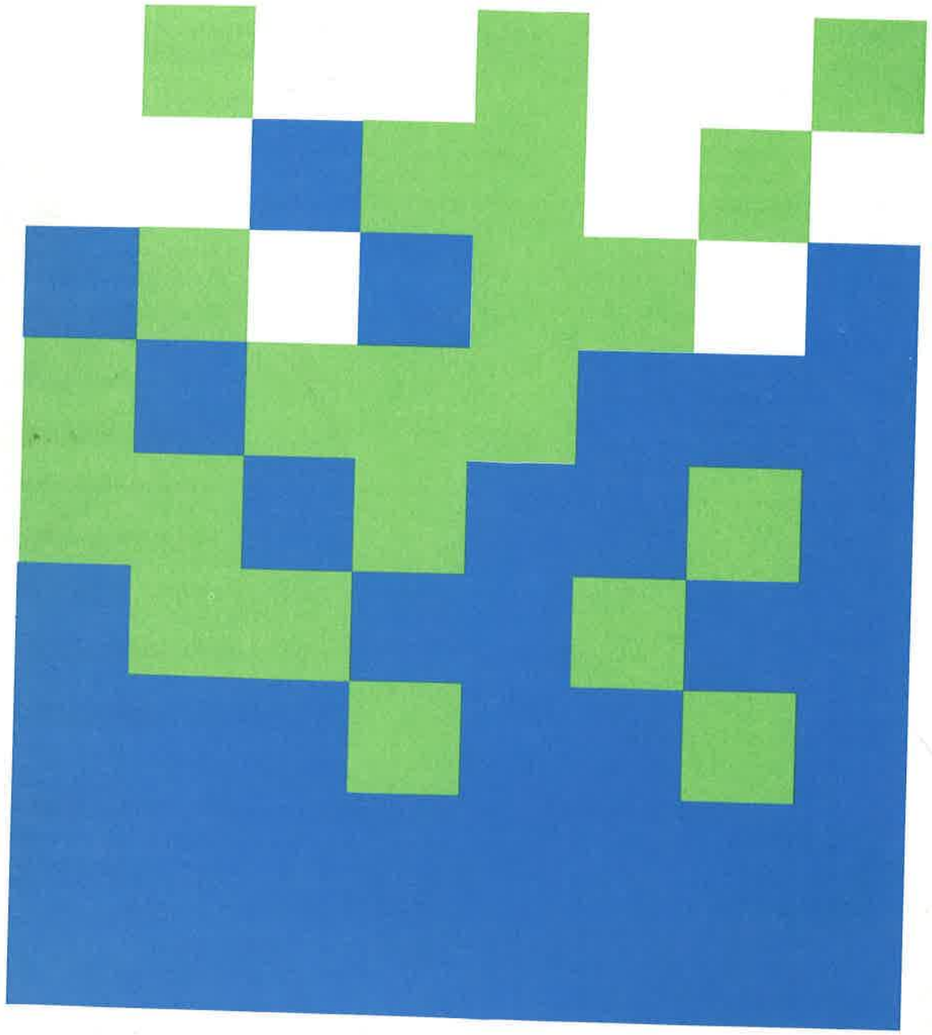

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People seeking information on joining VISTA may call toll-free from anywhere in the country by using VISTA's new telephone number—800 424-8580. The WATS line (Wide Area Telephone Service) went into effect in October making VISTA the first government agency to have WATS service.

The six-month pilot project has a two-fold purpose: to answer requests for VISTA applications and information and to respond directly to inquiries about applications already submitted.

The lines are open from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Eastern Time, five days a week. A recording operates the rest of the time, informing callers of the hours and days of service.

Going Through Changes

Despite the proverbial Dylan line, and although the winds of change are indeed blowing, the new direction is not so obvious.

The nation is suffering from a variety of serious public problems. As awareness of the problems has increased in recent years, so too has the pain. It is now obvious to most observers that many aspects of our governmental, economic, educational, and other institutions of our system are functioning imperfectly.

The contrast between our reality and our potential as a nation has produced an acute discomfort which easily lapses into skepticism, and even despair. Our institutions are commonly indicted as incapable of solving the problems as they are understood today.

It is not difficult to understand this feeling. Thinking about the size of the task before us can indeed be oppressive and depressing. However, such thinking, if it does not move us toward realistic solutions, is merely a morose futility. It seems to me imperative that we move beyond simple awareness of what needs to be done. I believe it is time now that we take a more productive and developmental view of the situation.

It is clear, for example, that a broad response has begun. Shaken by events of recent years, government, industry, education, and other components of our system are now grappling with problems in new ways. Although little noted during our recent preoccupation with violence and rhetoric, a fascinating range of initiatives are under way in every category of public problems. It is far too soon to conclude that what is being done will be sufficient. But it is equally premature to conclude otherwise. What *is* important is that there is clearly a momentum which needs to be known and needs to be nurtured.

It is also important that every individual assess his own role and responsibility toward the solution of our problems. Before we are entitled to ask change of others, we must be confident that we too are increasing our contribution. This injunction applies especially to those of us who are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as committed and enlightened.

It applies to VISTA.

In many ways VISTA is unique. In one sense, VISTA is defined by the dedicated action of its thousands of volunteers working alongside of the poor. VISTA provides committed individuals an opportunity to work full time for change, and in the process they often change themselves. Because of these characteristics, some may feel that VISTA itself is beyond the need for critical self-evaluation. I have no intent of succumbing to this delusion.

In another sense, VISTA is defined by its leadership. VISTA must constantly evaluate and reevaluate its assumptions. The VISTA leadership must be constantly sensitive to the changing needs and attitudes of the poor, constantly strive to improve the quality of their lives by increasing the quality of the services that VISTA provides.

As in the case of other institutions, there is today a gap between what VISTA is and what VISTA can be. I intend to concentrate on closing that gap as quickly as possible—so that in the not too distant future VISTA will be in the vanguard of the new institutional responsiveness now developing throughout our society.

Carol M. Khosrovi
Director, VISTA

Changes Within

The idea of having a domestic Peace Corps originated in 1962, when President John F. Kennedy appointed a task force to study the feasibility of recruiting Volunteers to help the poor in this country as Peace Corps Volunteers do abroad. Members of the Cabinet were part of this task force which worked for a year to set up what they came to call the National Service Corps.

In 1963, National Service Corps legislation passed the Senate hearings, but the bill never came to a vote on the floor of the House. The next year, President Lyndon Johnson established a task force to draw up proposals for what would become the Economic Opportunity Act including a section on "Volunteers to America," although it could not be called that because it would be confused with the Salvation Army's "Volunteers of America." The name was changed to Volunteers In Service To America—VISTA—by the time legislation for its establishment passed both houses in October, 1964.

VISTA really began on February 26, 1965, when nineteen Volunteers completed the first training program conducted by the Florida Institute for Continuing University Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida, and were awarded their graduation certificates by Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson. By June 30, 1965, there were 202 VISTAs working on 51 projects and 873 Volunteers in training. One year later, more than 2,500 Volunteers were serving on 297 projects.

"Anybody can serve in VISTA," was the slogan in the early days of the program. Most of the first Volunteers were between the ages of 18 and 25. There were a scattering of older Volunteers, including a retired superintendent of schools, a U.S. Navy supply officer, a Baptist minister, a registered nurse, a psychology professor, an electronics technician and a U.S. Forest Service fire-fighter. If they made use of their skills, however, it was in a loosely defined manner. Early VISTA activities consisted largely of tutoring, teacher assistance, day care center managing and recreational work with emphasis on "community development."

The concept of community development—helping groups of poor people help themselves—was an ideal theory, but turned out to be vague in practice. The term was soon changed to "community organization," but this too proved to be futile when in many instances Volunteers didn't know what the poor needed and wanted. They'd get groups of people to come to meetings, then wonder, "What did we organize them for?" It soon became apparent that only when a community was organized around a specific issue or a particular problem, was it effective.

When Lucy Norman, one of the first Volunteers, arrived in Parlier, a small town in Fresno County, California, she met a group of about 40 Mexican-American boys the police called hoodlums. . Most of them had been in trouble and were school drop-outs and kick-outs. They had nothing to do and no place to go but the streets. Lucy helped them find quarters for a clubhouse and get donations of recreational equipment and musical instruments. Some of the boys formed a band and others worked at odd jobs in the community to buy more equipment. Another Volunteer, Skip Pease, tutored some of the boys who wanted to go back to school. "This may not mean much to some people, but it means an awful lot to us because we've never really done anything except create trouble. It's a great feeling to have people look at you and not say 'there go hoods,' but 'there goes somebody who's trying,' " said one of the group. None of the boys got into trouble after the club got started.

There are numerous instances of educational, health, employment, housing, transportation and municipal facility improvements brought about through constructive community action in the early days of VISTA. Many associations of poor people organized by Volunteers to solve specific, concrete problems are still thriving, broadening their scope of activities, effecting changes on their own with the VISTAs long gone, having successfully worked themselves out of a job—which is the overall goal of VISTA. Nevertheless, this wasn't enough.

A little over two years ago, VISTA began to supply the poor with more powerful weapons—Volunteers with highly developed technical skills: more lawyers to deal with urban development and poverty law; more accountants, banking, finance and marketing specialists to help create new businesses and get marginal operations on their feet; more architects, urban designers, city planners and engineers to help develop self-help housing projects, health, recreational and business facilities; and help create design center workshops to serve poverty communities; more nurses, doctors, dentists and other health specialists to help establish and staff health centers and other medical facilities for the poor; more teachers to help create bigger and better educational opportunities for poor blacks, whites, Mexican-Americans, Indians and Puerto Ricans.

During the past two years, VISTA has also concentrated on recruiting more people from poor communities—men and women who have unique skills to offer. Blacks who have grown up in urban ghettoes and rural hollows who know intimately the frustrations, needs and potential capabilities of their people. Mexican-Americans born in barrios, many of whom have worked through their childhood in the migrant stream who understand the privations, rich culture and dreams of the Chicanos. Indians brought up on isolated reservations who have borne the deprivation, desolation and despair of those they serve. These and other people who know poverty and know the poor often work in teams with professionally trained Volunteers, interpreting the needs and aspirations of their people to the latter who endeavor to perform the desired specialized services.

Since 1968, fewer 18- and 19-year-olds have been accepted in VISTA. Twenty percent of the Volunteer force were in that young age bracket two years ago, compared to two percent today. To a large extent, Community Volunteers have taken their place, comprising 21 percent of today's VISTAs, a significant increase from five percent in 1968. The number of professionally skilled Volunteers has also multiplied from five percent of all VISTAs two years ago to 24 percent this year. Within the last year alone, the number of technically trained VISTAs has more than doubled. In 1969, there were only 210 lawyers, 15 business graduates, 85 educators, and no architects or health specialists. Today there are 416 lawyers, 132 business graduates, 302 educators, 72 health specialists and 68 architects.

Last year, a group of VISTA Volunteer lawyers sponsored by the New York University School of Law in New York City initiated a number of innovative projects including helping tenants in five structurally sound buildings save their homes from demolition in an urban renewal program; working out a $38,000 business venture involving the Blimpie Corporation, the Chemical Bank and the Real Great Society (a grassroots Puerto Rican group) as the first step in a series of economic development projects; assisting in the formation of a consumer action group in Harlem and restructuring a neighborhood health center in Brooklyn so as to give greater influence and a larger role to the community advisory group in decision-making.

A former VISTA Volunteer lawyer, Steve Leleiko, now coordinator of VISTA activities at N.Y.U., wrote recently, "I think it can be said that VISTA has effectively set in motion a process for major changes in the response of law schools to urban and poverty problems. Part of this process will be in the initiation of major curriculum change in law schools so that third-year law students and graduate law students will be given the opportunity to do field work similar to VISTA's for academic credit."

VISTA lawyer Robert S. Dresser established a permanent Legal Aid organization for Eagle Pass, Texas, the first such effort the Mexican-Americans in the area had ever seen. Another VISTA lawyer, John L. Szabo, working in East Palo Alto, California, as part of a team with three Volunteers who had Masters of Business Administration degrees, helped set up a credit union, advised a number of black businesses in their dealings with local and state government agencies, and worked with a black community group on developing economic, social and physical plans for the whole East Palo Alto area.

Reese Shepard, 23, interrupted his studies for an MBA degree at Stanford School of Business to spend a year in VISTA assisting new businesses in San Francisco, including a precision instrument delivery service, a janitorial service, a photographic studio and a proposed trade association. Steve Grace, 24, who had had business experience before joining VISTA, helped a 65-year-old black man open a meat market and meat jobbing business to service black-owned restaurants in the San Francisco Bay area. The business will also create jobs for a cook, delivery people, a cashier, sales people and meat cutters. VISTA Bob Bruch, 25, who has an MBA degree, works with the Local Development Corporation in San Francisco evaluating business ideas and advising on all phases of business—financial statements, credit ratings, cash flow charts, marketing studies and dealing with banks.

"I am getting experience in a big field of the future—urban and economic development," said Bruch. "We have a lot of freedom to experiment with ideas, both on a personal and on a business level. I am living and working with people I never knew existed before and would never have met if I had gone right downtown from business school. It gave me an opportunity to look at the world differently."

In Boston, Harvard graduate students in city planning and architecture work as VISTAs with neighborhood groups around the city. One past project involved the conversion of the auditorium in a ghetto school into a gymnasium. Some of the VISTAs worked with the tenants in a public housing project, developing plans for a total overhaul of the buildings, management, social and recreational opportunities. In Pikeville, Kentucky, Steve Cram, a graduate architect, helped the community develop plans for 100 units of low-income, turnkey housing. And in New Orleans, several VISTA architects and planners are living in Model Cities target areas, working with the people, interpreting their needs and desires.

There are a number of nurses in VISTA setting up health centers and providing medical attention to groups of people who had little access to such assistance before. VISTA nurse Marianne Zadra was the only nurse in Newton County, Arkansas, for several months. She accompanied local VISTAs to visit people in hard to reach places in the mountains and helped both children and old people get needed attention. Mary Martell, a Volunteer with an R.N., taught 42 women basic practical nursing in St. George, S.C. The women then worked in the community as nurse's aides and health helpers, sometimes providing the only medical help available. Another VISTA nurse, Donna Shipley, helped establish several rural health centers in cooperation with a hospital in Beckley, West Virginia.

Volunteers with educational experience are improving opportunities for learning in communities throughout the country. For example, Bill and Dorothy Rupert, who were teachers before joining VISTA, started a remedial reading program for Passamaquoddy Indian children in Maine, as well as a kindergarten which the state has agreed to make a permanent school program. Eleven VISTA Volunteers, who are candidates for master's degrees in education, teach groups of Oglala Sioux Indians on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota in a program to qualify the Indians for high school equivalency diplomas. While helping the Indians to gain the skills they need to cope with a technological society, the VISTAs are also part of an attempt to promote understanding of the Sioux people within the dominant society. Another Volunteer, Linda Sheets, who had no prior educational experience before joining VISTA, but who speaks fluent Spanish, established and conducted a daily bilingual pre-school for 30 five-year-old Mexican-American children who spoke little or no English. Linda, assisted by VISTA Rollin Buchanan who also speaks Spanish, taught the youngsters enough basic English to understand first grade classroom instruction.

Volunteers from poor communities who have little education, or professional experience, also provide unique and valuable services to their people and to themselves. Eleven Navajo Indian Volunteers, some of whom received their G.E.D. diplomas after receiving instruction by VISTA teachers, are tutoring other Indians on the reservation who are working toward their diplomas. These Navajo VISTAs also seek out job opportunities for their people and provide a connecting link between needy Indians and social services.

Older Volunteers play a significant role in VISTA. At present there are 275 older Volunteers serving on 137 projects. Fifty percent of them are over 62 and the oldest Volunteer is 83. They come from all walks of life and use their talents and experience on projects where these are most needed. Like many of the younger VISTAs, a good number are married couples

who either work together as a team or serve together in separate capacities.

Their talents, experience and maturity enable them to perform a variety of important services for poor people of all ages. T. Frank Smith, 75, and his wife, Becky, 64, for example, used an old hobby of theirs, marionettes, to enrich the lives of a large group of underprivileged youngsters in Nashville, Tennessee. Teaching the children to make their own puppets, and originate and produce their own plays, transformed the children's apathy into creativity and led to money-making craft and cabinet-making projects, particularly beneficial to a group of potentially delinquent boys.

Frank Greenblatt, a 77-year-old VISTA Volunteer, is involved in community organization of elderly people in Mattapan, Massachusetts. He has started three Golden Age Clubs, obtained club rooms, meeting space, bus service and trips for a large group of old people. He is also the liaison for the Model Cities program and works at relocating people who live in substandard housing to better apartments for the same rent.

Fred McKeane, a 63-year-old Volunteer who works with underprivileged children in Washington, D.C., was a retired businessman in real estate and distributing before he joined VISTA two years ago and has since recruited a number of other elderly Volunteers through his enthusiasm about VISTA. "There's an exciting job for older people to do in VISTA, much more fun than sitting around in retirement. Old people have so much to give, particularly to children who are dying for love," says McKeane. He tries to develop self-confidence in poor black and Spanish-American youngsters by teaching them music, dancing, voice and dramatics through an Urban Arts program he started.

"I believe that you can take any healthy child and open his mind to creative ideas and change his attitude on poverty—intercept the design that keeps him there. If you get to him before people knock the notion into his head that he can't do anything and teach him that he can do things, there isn't any force in the street, home or school that can keep him in poverty," said McKeane. "That to me is the satisfaction I find in serving VISTA. You also learn a lot more than you can teach. A lot of Volunteers say that."