

# Speaking Out on Domestic Violence

I am growing tired of hearing about how violent, dysfunctional, and dangerous America's youth is becoming. Think about how often you glance at the newspaper, turn on the T.V., or hear of something that happened in your neighborhood that creates fear and disappointment concerning violence and kids. Because of these constant reminders, I believe Americans are beginning to understand that we need to work together to solve the problems we have created.

Recently I had the honor of participating in an AmeriCorps forum in New York with President Clinton. It was so exciting to be a part of an event celebrating excellent programs nationwide focusing on public safety. Topics included safe schools, community policing, and conflict resolution. As a VISTA, I spoke about "Victim's Assistance" and my work at the Calcasieu Women's Shelter in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

The presentations about safe place programs for kids to grow up with positive role models were good to hear. But as I sat

there, I realized I was the only one representing a program for women. This lack of representation caused me to stop and wonder how many VISTA programs are involved in women's organizations. When I applied to VISTA, I read about literacy councils, tenant groups, and after-school programs. Granted, more of these programs exist than the 1,500 battered women's shelters in this country. I wanted to work with women but I learned I had few options to fulfill my interests.

As I have been consumed by VISTA this year, my mind is constantly thinking about how VISTA can help even more people. If our country is concerned with its youth, domestic violence is another

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arena where we can do preventative work. If we can provide mothers an opportunity to find a safe space to raise their children, isn't that benefiting the youth of today?

Domestic violence is a learned behavior. When children learn to equate love with violence, they grow up expecting violence in their lives. This is one reason why there is so much violence among youth. If we can stop this cycle of violence within the family, we might eliminate the need for after-school programs. Kids might be able to go home to a safe space.

It is all about prevention. We need to educate adults about the damage that is being to be done to upcoming generations. We need to get into schools, clubs, churches, police trainings, and any public or private organization that will listen.

I encourage VISTA to continue to expand their focus on programs that can benefit from its support. This should include battered women's shelters, rape crisis centers, and other safe programs for families. Helping women today will help children tomorrow. And if we continue to use people in this country to help people in this country, we will find ourselves living in a much safer and more productive world.

*Submitted by VISTA Elizabeth Matthews. Elizabeth serves with the Calcasieu Women's Shelter in Lake Charles, LA.*

## THE VISTA CONNECTION CORNER (VCC)

*The VCC is a self-made advice column and it works like this: a Volunteer addresses a concern or question to all VISTAs. You respond in your next submission. A response and new question are then printed, offering everyone a chance to read and learn from one another.*

After talking to other VISTAs, I can say that many experience the "less than ideal situations" which the VCC talked about this spring. I think a lot of these frustrations result from differences between our expectations and the real situations that exist in some of our cases.

I expected a year dedicated to learning about and acting on the problems faced by poor citizens. While this has been part of my year, there have been unexpected challenges.

My project goal is to create a welfare-to-work program for families. Although some people I work with are interested in this objective, not everyone considers the problems faced by low-income people a priority. I have spent a lot of time attempting to convince my sponsor, never mind the broader community, that the program can succeed. The general lack of commitment translates into insufficient planning.

How can VISTA overcome some of these obstacles? Remember you're a VISTA. As a VISTA, you have more freedom to openly confront the decisions or apathy of a sponsoring organization. In my case, I and the other VISTA questioned the appropriateness of our agency being a VISTA sponsor

and its efforts to assist low-income people. Bureaucracies respond to people who rock the boat, often by addressing the concerns but sometimes by tossing them overboard. Our sponsor chose the first option. The result has been better utilization of the VISTAs and a better program for the clients. However, even if a VISTA were to demand more from an organization and end up tossed overboard, that's alright. Bureaucracies can afford to be dispassionate; VISTAs and the people we serve don't have the luxury.

How have you resolved similar conflicts in your project?

Aaron Mysliviec, VISTA.