

PSO Classic At-A-Glance

Winter 2017

PSO: Know. Grow. Change.

Every year, 6,000 Americans from all walks of life dedicate a year of their lives to serving as AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) members fighting poverty and strengthening communities all across the country. AmeriCorps VISTA and the Corporation for National and Community Service (the Corporation) have invested in a comprehensive, multi-modal program of training and support to ensure the member service experience is positive, productive, and cost-effective.

The cornerstone of this integrated training program is the face-to-face Pre-Service Orientation (PSO Classic), a four-day orientation and training event conducted for VISTA candidates by Corporation staff and a cadre of expert facilitators. The PSO Classic provides candidates with:

- **Inspiration** for the challenging and consequential antipoverty work they are about to take on;
- **Orientation** to the structure and mission of VISTA and the terms, conditions and benefits of VISTA service;
- **Cultivation** of practical skills in resource development, volunteer mobilization, communication, relationship-building, and problem-solving;
- **Connection** to peers and resources who can help them succeed; and
- **Confirmation** that AmeriCorps VISTA service is right for them.

The design and delivery of the PSO Classic are rooted in sound adult-learning principles and practices, and have been externally validated as an effective competency-based training intervention¹. PSO Classic offers participants multiple opportunities for individual and group-based learning, application of, and reflection on the knowledge and skills they will need to be successful in their service. Following is high-level description of the topics, conversations, and activities VISTA candidates experience at PSO Classic.

¹ JBS International (May 2013). *VISTA Training Assessment: Summary of Findings*.

Opening Night

VISTA Large Group Welcome – 6:30 to 7:00 PM (approx.)

National and state VISTA staff and training team facilitators welcome VISTA candidates to PSO, review important logistics information, and generate excitement for the learning and experiences to come.

VISTA History and Legacy – 7:00 (approx.) to 8:00 PM

Candidates view an inspirational video showcasing the work of VISTAs at projects across the country, learn about the positive impacts VISTA has in local communities, and begin meeting their fellow participants.

Day 1

Navigating Your Year of Service – 8:30 to 10:00 AM

Goal

Help VISTA candidates confirm their understanding of key terms, conditions, and benefits of VISTA service.

Approach

Through an interactive presentation, national and state Corporation staff review essential elements of the terms, conditions, and benefits of VISTA service and answer candidate questions.

Your VISTA Development Plan (part 1) – 10:15 to 11:45 AM

Goal

Begin the process of building a learning community for the PSO experience.

Approach

Participants get to know one another, set up “working agreements” for their time together at PSO, and begin identifying personal and professional skills they already have as well as those they will need to develop to be successful during their service year and beyond.

Poverty in America: Personal Perspectives – 12:45 to 2:30 PM

Goal

Encourage participants to think about and talk openly and honestly with one another about their perspectives on and relationships to poverty, so as to surface experiences and assumptions about poverty they may bring to their service.

Approach

The facilitator leads participants through a guided reflection and dialogue session in which participants share their personal definitions of poverty and their individual views on the causes of poverty. Personal perspectives will be transitioned into programmatic frameworks in the following session which introduces key poverty theories of change.

Poverty Theories of Change – 2:45 to 4:45 PM

Goal

Introduce participants to the conceptual frameworks that inform their anti-poverty work, in particular how a theory of poverty (what causes poverty) influences theories of change (solutions to poverty).

Approach

Candidates view a short animation describing how poverty is measured in the United States, then participate in a facilitated, group-based exploration of five key poverty theories of change.

Day 2

Getting Started with Your VAD – 8:30 to 10:45 AM

Goal

Help candidates understand their VISTA Assignment Descriptions, or VADs, an essential, guiding document for VISTA projects and the day-to-day work VISTA members do.

Approach

Facilitators provide context for VADs and their role in administration of VISTA projects and the recruitment and support of VISTA members. They then engage participants in a series of activities that provide a guided review of their VADs in order to understand what they are tasked with completing during their year of service. Participants are also prompted to

identify any issues they need to bring up with their supervisors and skills they need to strengthen in order to serve effectively.

Workplace Communication – 10:45 AM to 12:00 PM

Goal

Give VISTA candidates an opportunity to learn about and practice an essential competency of successful VISTA members – communication – which they will need as they enter new organizations and communities and encounter new people, new experiences, and new challenges.

Approach

Through a “take a stand” activity and reviewing a case study, VISTA candidates reflect on their communication styles and skills utilized by effective communicators.

Community Input – 1:00 to 2:30 PM

Goal

Introduce candidates to the VISTA approach to community engagement and practical frameworks and tools to implement it.

Approach

Participants reflect on the many meanings of “community”; explore a framework for community participation strategies and activities; and practice community input techniques that include “gallery walks,” asset mapping, and participatory decision-making.

Volunteer Mobilization – 2:45 to 4:30 PM

Goal

Give candidates a working knowledge of the essential concepts and tasks involved in creating and sustaining a volunteer program.

Approach

Participants learn the components of successful and sustainable volunteer programs, learn how to analyze volunteer trends to inform targeted recruitment efforts, and practice writing recruitment messages.

Day 3

Resource Development – 8:30 to 10:30 AM

Goal

Introduce candidates to the world of philanthropic giving and practical skills to pursue and acquire monetary and in-kind donations to support and sustain the organizations and programs they will be serving with.

Approach

Participants explore the role of relationship building in fundraising work and practice formulating and making “elevator speeches” and “asks.”

Your VISTA Development Plan (part 2) – 10:45 AM to 12:30 PM

Goal

Help candidates understand the ups and downs of VISTA service and provide an opportunity for reflection and action planning for the year ahead.

Approach

Participants reflect on the challenges and opportunities they will experience as VISTA members, review and think about how they will apply what they learned at PSO, and make a plan for getting started at their service sites.

Swearing-in Ceremony – 12:30 to 1:00 PM

A national or state Corporation staff member or a special guest leads VISTA candidates in reciting the AmeriCorps VISTA Oath of Service, after which they officially become VISTA members.