

# OSOT Guidelines

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## Purpose

Onsite orientation and training (OSOT) is the second step in the VISTA member's training continuum. Its primary purpose is to build on concepts and knowledge introduced and developed at the Pre-Service Orientation. OSOT introduces the member to the sponsor, the community, and the goals and operation of the VISTA project, and provides the member the basic knowledge and skills he or she needs to get started on the project.

The scheduling of OSOT should be timely enough to provide the member with the immediate information and skills needed to begin the job, yet flexible enough to allow members to satisfy personal and adjustment needs.

## Sponsor's Responsibility

Develop an OSOT plan that is consistent with project goals and that meets minimum desired outcomes.

- ▶ Submit OSOT plan to the Corporation for National and Community Service state program office 30 days prior to the Pre-Service Orientation (PSO)
- ▶ Involve the member in an ongoing evaluation of activities of OSOT and adjust plans, as necessary, to meet individual member's needs
- ▶ Evaluate OSOT and have written member and supervisory evaluations submitted to the Corporation state program office within five days of the completion of OSOT
- ▶ Begin process of defining in-service training needs based on OSOT outcomes and evaluation

## Scope Planning Guide

The OSOT planning guide is intended to help you prepare a quality OSOT plan for submission to the Corporation state office and subsequent implementation with your new member(s). The guide details the minimum outcomes and components required by the VISTA program. It provides suggestions for planning and implementing your OSOT, as well as a sample list of low-cost resources that should be considered in preparing

and carrying out your OSOT. Finally, the guide includes a sample OSOT plan that can be used as a reference.

Be sure to provide your new member an orientation on the basics of your organization, the community, and the project prior to launching into skill training. The extent to which your member needs orientation and training on the basics is relative to his or her particular background. But when you consider the normally complex scope of VISTA member assignments and the importance of measuring up to the community's needs, you cannot afford to take the basics for granted. You have to be confident that you have a reasonably knowledgeable member representing the sponsor and the Corporation for National and Community Service in the community of assignment.

Information is power. The more information the VISTA member has, the more likely the member is able to perform the activities necessary to reach project goals and address community needs. At the same time, you do not want to overwhelm the member with facts and details, just what he or she will need to build upon.

Enlist help in planning and implementing your OSOT. Talk to or assemble persons - other staff, neighborhood leaders, and members - for a "preliminary design" session to brainstorm your probable OSOT needs and resources. This group could decide what might be the minimum background information your member should understand to get started. You probably have identified persons who could tell your new VISTA member, in a classroom style or in a kitchen-table session, what is what in the community. If your organization or community group doesn't have this information right now, you will need to determine who can do the necessary research.

The communities that most VISTAs work with are complex and diverse. Help your VISTA understand the nuances of the community. Consider assigning someone(s) to act as the VISTA's cultural guide.

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Or you may determine that this “homework” - an experiential fact-finding mission - is exactly what you lay on your new recruits.

You may still have to enlist help to ask the right questions. These questions may include:

- ▶ Who runs the community?
- ▶ How do decisions get made?
- ▶ Are there political clubs or “in” groups?
- ▶ What has worked and not worked in this project or projects like it?
- ▶ How do ordinary citizens/neighbors influence decisions?
- ▶ How do we get and use key statistics to illustrate poverty-related issues such as truancy, crime, income, taxes, derelict house ownership, unemployment, and family violence?

You may also need to enlist help from such individuals as your friendly local librarian, a news reporter, or an involved member of the clergy to guide your members (and you) to the answers that are complete enough to be useful.

At the Pre-Service Orientation, VISTA emphasizes to attendees the importance of being flexible and dealing with ambiguity. However, lack of clarity depletes a member’s energy and morale, and can stall a project. OSOT is the time to settle false expectations that the VISTA member may bring to the assignment. It is also the time to describe your supervisory style and share your expectations of the member, if you haven’t already done so during the interview or during other conversations.

Besides outlining tasks and time tables, you want to establish and communicate your own team “code of the member.” To do this, you must first be clear yourself on the principles, policies, and requirements of VISTA by carefully reviewing your memorandum of agreement with the Corporation and the VISTA Member Handbook. In addition to laying out rules and regulations of VISTA service, the handbook describes VISTA’s approach to leadership and problem-solving in low-income,

disadvantaged communities. This is an approach that you as a supervisor will need to apply to your situation and promote with your member.

With this as your starting point, you should carefully review with your member his or her VISTA Assignment Description and negotiate a clear understanding of any unwritten expectations. These may include what professional behavior and appearance are expected, whether special skills or interests they may bring can contribute to or distract from the member assignment, what the working hours will be, and what kinds of commitments occur after standard working hours and on weekends.

## Suggested Orientation and Training Methods

The methods you use for your orientation and training may include:

- ▶ brainstorming, discussion, and negotiation between you and your member or with a larger team (e.g., with other project staff)
- ▶ interviews/discussions with key community leaders or even a random sample of residents/beneficiaries
- ▶ homework - having a member review the project application and project plan that the sponsor submitted to the Corporation, the memorandum of agreement between the Corporation and the sponsor, and other pertinent organization position papers
- ▶ field trips with strategically assigned tasks the member needs to complete
- ▶ having your member shadow others doing the kind of work the member will be doing
- ▶ attendance at staff, advisory board, and community meetings asking other staff, colleagues with other organizations, and other experts to review their “tricks of the trade” or provide specific skill training
- ▶ one-on-one conversations to address questions the VISTA brought from PSO.

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- ▶ secure free- or low-cost skill training from various community resources such as:

- community colleges
- libraries
- community resource and technology centers
- trade associations
- community adult education programs

## Outcomes for the VISTA Member from Onsite Orientation and Training

By the end of onsite orientation and training, your VISTA member should have gained:

- ▶ an understanding of common expectations and agreements for a working relationship including:
  - the supervisor's other roles and responsibilities
  - the supervisor's management style
  - meetings and interactions between member and supervisor
  - a clear understanding of the lines of communication between member and supervisor
  - a clear understanding of the support provided to the member
  - a clear understanding of the terms and conditions of VISTA service
  - a clear understanding of the chain of command
- ▶ an understanding of the culture and mission of the sponsoring organization, including:
  - its history
  - its mission
  - how it functions as a non-profit, municipality, state, county, or federal entity
  - its role in the community
  - introductions to the staff
- ▶ knowledge of the bigger picture related to the VISTA project and the community, including:
  - the VISTA project and its history
  - how and where VISTA fits into it all
  - an introduction to the community
  - the socio-economic and political structure
  - potential resources that can be applied to achieve project goals
  - the history and status of community self-determination and problem-solving efforts
- ▶ an understanding of the organization's:
  - roles and responsibilities
  - time and attendance, duty hours
  - annual leave
  - sick leave
  - mileage reimbursement policy and procedure
  - working with the media
  - fund-raising activities
  - evaluation of the individual VISTA member and of the project
  - reporting requirements for the VISTA project
- ▶ an understanding of his or her member assignment that:
  - specifies tasks and activities for a specific period of time to accomplish the goals and objectives in the project member assignment
  - specifies training needed for the assignment that builds upon Pre-Service Orientation, onsite orientation and training and close of service activities, and the personal and professional development of the VISTA member
- ▶ a better understanding of skills and knowledge needed to implement the member assignment:
  - depending on the project, you may deem it necessary for the member to receive training in such areas as computer skills, public speaking, group facilitation, conflict resolution, needs assessment and asset mapping, proposal writing, negotiation and interviewing skills, etc.
  - a member may need issue-area-specific training as well on such topics as domestic violence hotlines, early childhood literacy, laws regarding foster care, credit management, micro-enterprise development, etc.

These are just some examples of skills and training your member might need. His or her actual needs depend on the requirements of your project and the experience, skills, and educational background your member already possesses.

# OSOT Guidelines (cont.)

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## Frequently Asked Questions

### *Why do OSOT?*

A strong OSOT not only benefits the member, but also helps to assure that you won't have a poorly trained employee who negatively impacts your organization. The main beneficiary of a strong OSOT plan is the member. With the OSOT plan as a reference, the member will have an indication of what he or she can expect to be doing and what you expect to be accomplished during the orientation. You of course will establish a strong supervisory role from the outset, and can involve the member in preparing subsequent, spelled-out member assignment objectives for weekly or monthly review.

### *How long should OSOT last?*

Your OSOT may last one week or it may last two, three, or four, depending on the needs of the project and community on the one hand, and the needs of your member on the other. The length and content may be determined, for example, by whether you are recruiting a member from the local community or from another town, city or state. Orientation and training length may be influenced by whether you are recruiting someone with previous experience on this or similar projects. Your project may be one that requires extensive skill training and/or experiential learning (e.g., requiring your new member to spend significant time shadowing others involved in the project or conducting field interviews). A nationally recruited member may need more time finding and securing housing, and getting to know the community prior to beginning skill training. These and other factors should be considered when you design your OSOT plan and determine how long your OSOT should last.

### *What's the timeframe for submitting an OSOT plan?*

Your OSOT plan should be in the Corporation state office 30 days before the start of the PSO. The state office will review the plan for consistency with project goals, for technical quality, and for its potential for meeting desired OSOT outcomes. State office staff will discuss your plan with you prior to PSO.

### *Does a particular format have to be followed?*

This OSOT planning guide is offered as technical assistance. You may send to the state office whatever format you are accustomed to using. A sample plan is attached for your reference; you may choose to use this format for your plan.

### *What about specific issues for locally recruited members?*

All projects receiving a member should prepare and conduct an OSOT, even if the member is from the community he or she will be serving. It has been the experience of Corporation for National and Community Service staff, based on monitoring such projects that, even though your agency has recruited and interviewed a prospective member locally, there is a great need for initial orientation and training.

For instance, you will need to thoroughly discuss the specifics of their VISTA role, your agency functions, and your member's new relationship with the community. The member often will need to look at the community from a new perspective and may need help on redefining his or her role in the community. These individuals may not be familiar with the politics of the community, and in their new role, they need to know them. Finally, often locally recruited members have unique skill training needs to carry out their service effectively.

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## ***What about specific issues for those recruited from outside the community being served?***

Members recruited from other cities and states who relocate to their community of service may need very different kinds of orientation and training than locally recruited members. Keep in mind that members who are moving to significantly different environments from which they were raised and educated often experience “culture shock” and stressful transition and adaptation. You can help them through this transition by following these guidelines:

- ▶ Help ensure that these members’ basic needs are met before doing anything else. Helping them find housing, learn the local transportation system, and locate basic services (medical centers, dentists, supermarkets, laundromats, etc.) will provide incalculable dividends.
- ▶ Introduce them to key community groups and individuals who can support them in their transition to their new home and life.
- ▶ Give them ideas for and invitations to social activities that can help them feel more “at home.” You might want to host a reception and invite community leaders, board members, and program participants to meet the new additions to your organization. Or plan a day of community service activities, inviting board members and community leaders to meet new members. You might also submit a press release to local media about the arrival of your new VISTA members with human interest information about their assignments.
- ▶ Give the new members a thorough orientation to the culture of the community they will be working in. The transition for the member who moves from a middle class suburb in one part of the United States to a low-income, inner-city neighborhood in another part of the country, or for one going from a thriving metropolis to a remote, poor, rural community can be like moving to a foreign country. “Culture shock” can often be overwhelming and even debilitating.

In this area, enlist as much support from the community as possible to help the member understand the local culture, including:

- ▶ What’s the “language” of the community? How do people speak to one another both personally and professionally? How do people handle bi- and multi-lingual situations? How does one most effectively use translators, if needed?
- ▶ What role do social events play in the community?
- ▶ What is appropriate dress in different social situations and in professional situations?
- ▶ What are the predominate religious practices and beliefs and how might they affect the community’s perceptions of the member and the project?
- ▶ How are meetings conducted?
- ▶ What are people’s perceptions and practices about time and timeliness?
- ▶ What are people’s perceptions and practices around gender roles, cohabitation, and relationships?
- ▶ What must a member do to ensure his or her safety?
- ▶ How do things really get done? Who are the real movers and shakers, and how are they accessed and involved?