



APPLICATION GUIDELINES



AMERICORPS VISTA PROJECT

DUE DATE: *April 28, 2023*

**NOTE: *VISTA Recruitment Enhanced by Earlier
Completion of Your Application***

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About Engage NJ

Engage NJ is the only higher education presidents' coalition focused on civic engagement across all higher ed sectors. We equip and empower campuses to foster competencies that advance democracy and enable students to thrive in 21st century life and work. We have a 10-year history of successfully managing multimillion dollar AmeriCorps grants and, in early 2022, were awarded one of the largest AmeriCorps VISTA grants in New Jersey, focused on getting students to college, then through college, ready to thrive in their lives.

About the ENGAGECorps VISTA Project

At the federal level, AmeriCorps VISTA is the national service program under the AmeriCorps Federal Agency that works to eliminate poverty. Since 1965, over 220,000 VISTAs have joined the fight against poverty by helping local organizations expand their capacity to make change.

Each VISTA makes a year-long, full-time commitment to serve on their specific project during their term of service. In return for their service, ENGAGECorps VISTAs receive a modest bi-weekly living allowance fixed at the poverty level in the county which they serve (averaging \$21,000 annually) and receive health benefits during their service. VISTAs can choose between a Segal Education Award (valued at \$6,495) to pay for a range of education expenses or a \$1,800 cash stipend once they have successfully completed their service year. In addition, VISTA is the only AmeriCorps program that allows members to earn federal non-competitive eligibility, giving members an edge in the federal hiring process. VISTAs must be 18 years or older (no upper age limit), and hold one of the following citizenship or legal residency statuses: US citizen, US National, Lawful Permanent Resident (i.e. Green Card status), and persons legally residing within a state. Examples of persons legally residing within a state may include those holding the following classifications: refugee, asylee, temporary protected status throughout VISTA service, and holding Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status. [Visit here](#) to learn more about the Federal VISTA program.

With the ENGAGECorps project here in New Jersey, VISTAs serve in an office setting and gain experience and leadership skills through capacity building activities such as fundraising, grant writing, research, marketing, program development and volunteer recruitment. As a function of the grant with AmeriCorps, these capacity building activities are laid out in a detailed **Vista Activity Description (VAD)** that is equivalent to a position description developed by our partner sites in close collaboration with our team at Engage NJ. It is a step-by-step depiction of the activities the VISTA will need to perform within the partner site's project to successfully complete their service year. This opportunity prepares ENGAGECorps VISTAs with the skills and experiences to advance along their career journeys, while also developing an invaluable professional network of allies.

As a key component of the Engage NJ 5-year strategic plan, ENGAGECorps VISTAs in New Jersey will focus on:

- A. Changebuilders:** Developing college students' 21st century skills for life and work
- B. Community Centers:** Supporting students' health and food security by joining the network of community resource centers
- C. Education Equality:** Increasing high school completion and college access
- D. Climate Change:** Educating high school students about the human impacts on climate change in our most marginalized communities; & supporting campus-based green initiatives

A.Changebuilders: Developing Students' 21st Century Skills for Life and Work

Continuing in Fall of 2023, Engage NJ and our partners are striving to dramatically increase opportunities for college-going students of all backgrounds to demonstrate excellence while engaging with issue-driven projects in communities, thereby enabling them to make a measurable difference in their local communities as *Changebuilders*. This will see a surge in the number of young socially responsible graduates with the skills required to be successful – both in achieving their own work-life goals and in their efforts to be a part of change for the better.

Partner campuses aim for **50 students minimum** recruited and to intentionally recruit students that mirror the diversity of communities in which projects will take place, and to design partnerships and sequences of experiences that are guided by the following principles at minimum.

One-Year Model

In this model, students are required to commit to the community engagement experience for a period of one year minimum. Campuses must ensure completion of an average of **40 hours** community engagement per student for a minimum of one academic year. The cohort's experience will include working together and learning from one another's experiences. Of those 40 hours annually, approximately 1/5 will be devoted to cohort-based reflection.

Multi-Year Cohort Model

This cohort-based model is also an option for participating campuses. The differences between the one-year model and the multi-year cohort model is that these students must commit to **100 hours** of community engagement per year for the entire duration of their undergraduate education. The cohort's experience will include working together and learning from one another's experiences. Of those 100 hours annually, approximately 1/5 will be devoted to cohort-based reflection.

Key Elements of the Changebuilders VISTA

- Place the Highest Value on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Connecting civic engagement to education leads to greater commitment to completing your education, to committing to local communities, to enhancing academic attainment, and to being a better co-worker. The more variation in race, culture and lived experiences among our civically engaged college graduates, the better for everyone. This is because success in the 21st century comes from being adaptable to different experiences, from understanding differing perspectives, and from being innovative..

- Project Goal Accomplishment

A focus on achieving project goals, both individually and in teams, is essential in developing students' abilities to deliver during their undergraduate education and in the workplace. By committing to an end point or product within a relatively small timeframe such as a semester, each contributor to the partnership can track to success, including faculty, community partners, mentors, and students themselves. This is especially important for students learning in real life contexts because their growth as *changebuilders* will necessarily be informed by significant struggles, recalibrations, changing contexts, and even by significant failures along the way. Once students plan a practice or behavior – and then witness the associated results – they can more quickly gain critical self-awareness and competence.

- Tying Experiences to a Career Pathway

Engage NJ trains the VISTAs to work with student changebuilders to understand the skills they are developing through their volunteer efforts and how these skills apply directly to the 21st century workplace. We also bring in professionals to mentor students through our annual THRIVE conference and opportunity fair.

The very skills that students develop through community engagement are the same skills that enable employees to thrive in the workplace; and are the same workplace habits that boost employee morale. This investment of time is *not* just about staying in school - it's not just about giving back to communities and serving others - it's about getting ahead in the job search and standing out to employers by being engaged - it's about increasing employee morale and building a thriving workplace. However, college students and professionals need to work together in order to help uncover and then translate these experiences into marketable workplace skills. Many of the student *changebuilders* need the guidance of local professionals in the form of mentoring and networking in order to fully capitalize on their investment in changing society for the better.

- Recognition

Recognition Pins for Projects and Hours Completed Annually

One-Year <i>Individual</i> Model	Require 40 hrs.+ 1 project minimum	80 hrs / + 2 projects (optional)	120 hrs / + 3 projects (optional)	160 hrs / + 4 projects (optional)		
Recognition Pins & Certs	Red	Orange	Yellow	Green	Blue	Indigo
Multi-Year Cohort Model	Required 100 hrs / +2 projects minimum		200 hrs / +4 projects min.		300 hrs / +6 projects min.	400 hrs / +8 projects min.

Pins & Certs: Engage NJ will co-sponsor the annual process of recognizing student changebuilders with pins and certificates for the projects completed and hours dedicated to a local community. As can be seen above, these are color-coded and reflect the number of projects and community engagement hours accomplished. Campuses usually incorporate these into existing events to recognize student civic leaders, and adapt the criteria based on your own student cohort.

Changebuilders Scholars Award: Each *changebuilder* campus will nominate up to three student finalists annually from which a single winner from each campus will be selected by Engage NJ. The winner will receive a \$1,000 grant to complete a community engagement project or to use toward future studies.

B. Community Centers: Supporting Students' Health and Food Security by Joining the Network of Community Resource Centers

Overview of Community Centers

Since 2018 here in New Jersey, we have piloted and then witnessed a growing number of community resource centers designed to link students with resources that empower and enhance self-determined success. Centers such as these include, but go beyond, building a food pantry. Each center caters to its own distinct campus community but, overall, they strive to increase awareness of, and provide equal access to, resources such as those that address food and housing insecurity, nutrition and hygiene, access to professional clothing, mental health counseling, financial literacy tools, opportunities to volunteer on community projects with peers, and more. By working within the Engage NJ network of community resource centers and with the capacity-building support of a full-time VISTA, partners can expect to build the scale of your community center over several years and with important features.

Key Elements of the Community Centers VISTA

It is important to develop your distinctive version of a community center where myriad supports and resources are availed of in a stigma-free and welcoming environment for all.

- Welcoming

A welcoming community feel is crucial to all community center spaces. This means a conscious removal of stigmatizing and labeling in the center's design, marketing, and programs. Indeed, as opposed to students only accessing the center for things they need, we encourage a design and expectation that students in the Community Center are needed and active on campus and in neighboring communities in other volunteer and community engagement activities.

- Comprehensive

Center staff should work to establish a comprehensive approach to student resource provision. These areas of comprehensive resource availability may include the following examples:

- Food and housing security
- Nutrition & hygiene
- Community engagement
- Financial literacy tools
- Counseling and mental health
- Access to professional clothing

- Cost-Effective

There are numerous strategies for compiling resources without needing to raise significant funds. By building bridges to offices across campus and to services brought in from neighboring businesses and services, the community center can provide robust programming and resources at a fraction of those required for centers outside of higher education. Partners in this network can learn about different ways of engaging students and faculty in community resource center spaces through various volunteer, community engaged learning, or research projects. For example, students in a social work master's program can run informal group counseling for students, perhaps as a pizza lunch event, and gain valuable practicum hours in the process. This was rolled out at minimal cost (for pizzas only) over the past few years at partner campus, [NJCU](#), with great success.

- Network Development

VISTAs can work across the network to share replicable ideas and successes such as using community engaged learning (service learning) to tackle specific community center projects. NJCU, for example, utilized two faculty working together on a CEL project to design and develop a [KIOSK](#) for students.

VISTAs can act on opportunities and challenges raised by the network at regular events, such as creating weekend backpacks of food to bring home to family members. VISTAs in this cohort will gain from collaboration, sharing best practices, and proactive methods of avoiding action that inadvertently stigmatize students and community members.

C. Education Equality: Increasing High School Completion and College Access

ENGAGECorps VISTAs can help to expand or deepen the impact of programs designed to increase high school completion and college access, including by increasing the capacity of existing tutoring and mentoring programs.

Key Elements of the Education Equality VISTA

VISTAs in this cohort will support current campus efforts to build those bridges of success from neighboring high schools to your campus. Many high schools that serve systematically excluded students are struggling to get as many of their students as in previous years to graduate and go to college, based on feedback and on enrollment figures especially at minority-serving institutions. Covid, layered on top of pre-existing barriers to successful engagement and completion, are taking their toll on the numbers attending college.

- Increase Persistence, Graduation, and College Access

The goal of this VISTA cohort is to build the capacity of your programs in neighboring high schools that, ultimately, will contribute to the size of graduating cohorts and number of high school graduates who are ready for and believe in the value of a college education. VISTAs can, for example:

- Work on designing elements of your program such as curriculum and events
- Work heavily on college student volunteer recruitment and management
- Help with fundraising campaigns and drives as needed for such things as transportation, materials, and events

Ultimately, the aim for VISTAs is to increase the capacity of your programs with high school students to persist, graduate, and go to college.

D. Climate Change: K-12 Climate Change Education and Other Green Initiatives

New Jersey is the first state to adopt climate change education standards across the K12 curriculum. This is brand new, and society's youth have not yet had the experiences to think about and critique how climate change is narrowing their life choices. Coupled with the challenging choices many students are facing as Covid pushes many highschoolers out of school and into poorly paid work, we must act with urgency to provide knowledge, experience, and hope to the next generation of public servants, executives and influencers, many of whom will take their new high school degree and look for postsecondary pathways to becoming an informed citizen and to considering various "green" careers.

Key Elements of K-12 Climate Change Education & Other Green Initiatives

VISTAs will increase the capacity of high schools to educate students about the human impacts on climate change in our most marginalized communities. This may be by expanding access to resources and curricula, such as those advanced at the Governor's Climate Change Education HUB, or by building robust higher education – high school partnerships that bring volunteers and personnel into schools to serve as near peers to high schools and support teachers in programming.

VISTAs may also focus on building the capacity of campus-based green initiatives, ranging from expanding access to green career training opportunities, expanding the capacity of faculty learning communities to develop cross-disciplinary courses focused on climate change, mitigation services with campus facilities, or other similar initiatives.

- **Expanding the Capacity of Existing Higher Ed-High School Partnerships**

ENGAGECorps members' work with faculty, staff, and students, to enhance partnerships with local high schools aimed at helping teachers and high school students learn about standards-focused curriculum on climate change.

For college students, these partnerships will provide meaningful civic and climate experiences in the process.

This will be done in several ways:

- Working within existing campus-high school partnerships, such as through sustainability and education majors, to bring college students into high school classrooms and field-trips to deliver project-based supports to teachers in adopting the new standards
- Provide, as needed, best practices to faculty to adapt their courses into CEL so as to connect their course objectives to high school classes, bringing their students into high school classrooms for mutually beneficial experiences

- **Provide Training, Licenses and Curriculum to VISTAs and Teachers on Climate Education**

PLEASE NOTE: This resource is dependent on additional funding to support a partnership with Strategic Energy Innovations (SEInc.org), our climate change education content expert partner.

Engage NJ is building a partnership with nationally recognized leader, SEInc., to train ENGAGECorps members to support high school teachers with proven methods and with standards-aligned sustainability curricula to meet the new standards – how to access project-based curricula, and how to bring them into different high school grades and subjects. With the additional funding, both SEI and ENGAGECorps members will provide ongoing hands-on time and support to teachers.

- **Expanding Access to Campus-Based Green Initiatives**

VISTAs can provide capacity-building services to existing, nascent, green initiatives on campus. These may include:

- Expanding access to green career training opportunities in solar, wind, or other
- Expanding the capacity of faculty learning communities to develop cross-disciplinary courses focused on climate change
- Mitigation services with campus facilities
- Other

2023 Timeline: Application, Onboarding, Reporting, & Training

RECRUITMENT AND PLACEMENT

By April 28	Applications submitted NOTE: Earlier completion of application can enhance recruitment due to seniors graduating in May; Recruitment - Engage NJ and Partners Advertise Positions (pending final approval of position descriptions (known as a VAD) by funder; Detailed VADs completed - important step for interviewing and required by funder
April - June	Screening, interviewing, and selecting candidates; Partner fee invoices released upon selection of candidate
July 1	Deadline for sites to select candidates and candidates to accept positions
July TBD	Orientation for Supervisors of ENGAGECorps VISTAs; Supervisors sign MoU
August	Sites prepare office and project timelines for VISTA
W/O August 21st	VISTA members attend virtual federal pre-service orientation (PSO) and Engage NJ on site orientation (OSOT)
August 28	Start Date at Partner Site NOTE: Full Program Fees Must be Paid Prior to VISTAs Start Date

IMPORTANT DATES DURING YEAR OF VISTA SERVICE

9/11	Day of Service – Required - www.911day.org
w/o 10/9	Engage NJ Team Visits Sites: First Reports Due
10/19 TBD	NJVOAD Virtual Conference - PLEASE REGISTER!
November TBD	Fall Retreat for VISTAs - <i>one day in person</i>
w/o 11/20	Short Report Update Due
w/o 12/18	Short Report Update Due
2024	
January 15	MLK Day of Service
w/o 1/30/24	Engage NJ Team Visits Sites: Second Report Due
February 24	Engage NJ THRIVE Student Conference (ALL VISTAS SERVE)

	Thrivers and Kesselman Nominations Opens – VISTAs Promote
w/o 2/26	Short Report Update Due
March TBD	Spring Retreat for VISTAs - <i>one day in person</i>
w/o 3.25	Short Report Update Due
March - June	VISTA Yr.3 (2024 - 2025) Recruitment Season
April TBD	Thrivers and Kesselman Scholars Announced
w/o 4/22	Engage NJ Team Visits Sites: Third Report Due
w/o 5/28	Short Report Update Due
June TBD	VISTA Planning Meeting: Lessons from the Year
w/o 6/24	Short Report Update Due
w/o 7/22	Short Report Update Due
August TBD	End Year Celebrations – <i>in person</i>
	Engage NJ Team Visits Sites: Third Report Due
w/o 8/27	VISTA Yr 3 (2024- 2025) Orientation

VISTA Supervision and Program Compliance

Sustainability

AmeriCorps VISTA resources are usually provided based on a multi-year grant cycle. From year to year, we expect that the objectives and activities of the VISTA will evolve. Applicants should have a sound concept of how the resources and progress furnished by the VISTA will be sustained by the organization. VISTAs are viewed as an extension of an organization's efforts to support and empower a community.

Host Site

The host site is the site that will host the VISTA for the duration of the service year. Each VISTA is guided by the workplace policies of their host sites — requesting leave, hours of operations, ADA compliance, etc.. Each host site is expected to provide a VISTA the necessary office space, equipment and access to all items needed for successful completion of the service term. Our hosts often collaborate with one another to see to the success of the project and to provide the best suitable service experience for the VISTA.

Supervision

Supervision ensures that every VISTA has the right conditions and requirements to perform their service, including a full understanding of the project's mission, goals, and vision, as well as a solid understanding of the community they are serving.

All sites are required to have a site supervisor. Supervision of the VISTAs require dedication of time and resources aside from the supervision of the project itself. VISTA Site Supervisors are expected to meet with their VISTA on a routine, weekly basis in order to further the VISTA project. VISTA Supervision may require anywhere from 5-10 hours a week depending on the intensity of the program and the point of service. For example, within the first quarter of service during on-boarding and acclimation to the site, the site supervisor would need to dedicate a minimum of at least 10 hours a week to see to it that the VISTA has all the resources needed for the success of the project.

Site Supervisors must ensure that VISTAs have a host site, work space and access to all office materials needed for the service year, the VISTA has all necessary resources available to them and also understand HR policies as it relates to the host site. All VISTA supervisors are required to attend site supervisors training. VISTA supervisors are also expected to assist and provide training and enrichment opportunities for their VISTAs. Site Supervisors should be dedicated to the growth of the VISTAs by providing ample context and access to networks and maintaining open, candid, communication with us.

Day to Day Supervisor Responsibilities:

- Monitors day to day activity of VISTA
- Assigns VAD related tasks
- Attends site supervisor training
- Monitors attendance/HR related policies
- Communicates with Engage NJ and VISTA member
- Meets with VISTA member on a routine, weekly basis
- May assist with completion of Monthly and Quarterly report
- Monitors VISTA performance
- Completes all data reports (monthly and quarterly reports on schedule)
- Assigns tasks for successful completion of the VAD
- Attend site supervisors training
- Point of contact for Engage NJ and VISTA
- Meet with VISTA routine, weekly basis

Communication

Communication with Engage NJ is vital to our collective effort to support the VISTA. This includes email correspondence with reasonable turnaround times as well as meeting with the Engage NJ team every 3 months of the ENGAGECorps VISTA project. Issues arise and VISTAs often reach out to the Engage NJ team to mediate and assist. Our ability to do so not only provides the VISTA with necessary support but also increases the likelihood of their successful completion of their year.

VISTA Enrichment

AmeriCorps VISTAs volunteer to live at the poverty level for a full year while serving full time. We aim to provide additional support and development opportunities outside of the VISTA members' routine activities. Applicants are encouraged to list any and all benefits they intend to provide a VISTA. These details further recruitment and retention.

In Person / Hybrid / Remote Service Site Policies

AMERICORPS TELE-SERVICE POLICIES- AmeriCorps has updated the AmeriCorps VISTA teleservice policy to take effect on January 1, 2023. The new teleservice and virtual service site policy change reflects the changing nature of work in an increasingly digital and “post-pandemic” landscape. This new permanent policy change expands the opportunities for sponsors and sites to continue to plan for and design successful teleservice and virtual service site assignments while recommitting to the community-based focus of the EngageCorps program. These virtual opportunities are flexible, and any workplace policies already in place for employees at the host site must also be available for VISTAs.

Data Collection

All VISTA partner sites are required to submit quarterly reports on the performance of all of the ENGAGECorps VISTA projects as a condition of our grant. Data must be retained by each site to be collected by Engage. Sites may choose how they will retain their data. However, quantitative data as it relates to the demographics of service, such as volunteer recruitment and resources leveraged by the VISTA member (in kind or cash donations) will be submitted to Engage NJ as short updated quantitative data a monthly basis through user-friendly technology. In addition, quarterly reports will be collected during site visits to obtain qualitative data as it relates to the overall progress of the VISTA project.

Our Partnership Policies on Recruitment and Retention, and Refund Policies

Engage NJ aims to maintain a cohort that will function as one. We will work with each site to do our due diligence in retaining all of our VISTA members. Please note the following retention policies:

- Recruitment deadlines must be strictly adhered to. Sites that have not chosen a VISTA member to assign to their project by the July 1 deadline may have to reapply for a VISTA in the next service year
- VISTA members will not be permitted to serve on location at their host site until the Program Fee has been paid in full
- If a member voluntarily ends their service or is terminated within the first 30 days from the first day or On Site Orientation and Training (OSOT) in August, we will look to replace the member immediately so they can remain on track with the cohort. Following the first 30 days, we will not be in a position to recruit a replacement VISTA
- In the case of the VISTA no longer serving at the site during the first six months of service - whether due to resignation or termination - the \$10,000 partner fee is 50% refundable. Following six months of service, should the VISTA no longer serve at the site for any reason, the \$10,000 fee is nonrefundable
- We are implementing stringent guidelines for accountability of sites and site supervisors. Guidelines include:
 - Interventions for non-compliance by sites, for example, sites requiring VISTA members to perform service outside of the VAD, and late submission of reporting data
 - These will be reviewed in full during Supervisors orientation in July
 - All policies regarding accountability will be laid out clearly in our MoU

Application Instructions

Please use the [following link](#) to complete your application in full. It includes 6 sections and will require approximately 2.5 hours to complete in full. Section 4 – Capacity Building and Sustainable Practices, and Section 5 – VISTA Project Capacity Building Objectives, are the most detailed sections describing the total year of VISTA service. NOTE: it may be helpful to draft these sections in a word document first.

Engage NJ will use this information to draft a complete position description and VISTA Activity Description (VAD) that are used by AmeriCorps to approve the year's service and to promote the position on a national site known as MyAmeriCorps.gov

Once Engage NJ and your office are in agreement on the position description and VAD, recruitment and interviewing can proceed, pending the final approval by AmeriCorps of all positions.

Engage NJ will screen all applicants for eligibility. All partner sites interview and select your preferred candidate. VISTAs must accept the position offer by July 1, 2023 in order to be accepted.

Engage NJ intends to be an active partner at all steps in the process, and can be reached directly by phone or email – janice@engagenj.org / info@engagenj.org / Ph: 609-335-3668