

Getting the Most out of Your OSOT

Provide your new member an orientation on the basics – of your organization, the community, the project – prior to launching into skill training. Defining the basics will depend on the member's particular background, but don't 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 Service in the community of assignment.

Information is power. The more information the AmeriCorps*VISTA member has, the more likely the member is able to perform the activities necessary to reach project goals and address community problems. 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 On-Site Orientation and Training needs and resources. This group could decide what might be the minimum background information your member should understand to get started. If your organization or community group doesn't have this information right now, you will need to determine who can do the necessary research. Or you may determine that this "homework" – an experiential fact-finding mission - is exactly what you lay on your new recruits.

Brainstorm the questions you want to answer. These 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?

Pre-Service Orientation emphasizes the importance of being flexible and able to deal with ambiguity, but too much ambiguity is insidious. 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 AmeriCorps*VISTA member may bring to their assignment. It is also the time to describe to the member your supervisory style and share your expectations of him/her.

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 AmeriCorps*VISTA by carefully reviewing your Memorandum of Agreement with the Corporation and the AmeriCorps*VISTA Member Handbook. In addition to laying out rules and regulations of VISTA service, the Member Handbook describes AmeriCorps*VISTA's approach to leadership and problem-solving in low-income, disadvantaged communities, that you as supervisor will need to apply to your situation and to promote with your member.

With this as your starting point, you should carefully review with your member his or her Member Assignment Description and negotiate a clear understanding of any unwritten

expectations. These may include what professional behavior and appearance is expected, whether special skills or interests they may bring can contribute to or distract from the work plan, what the working hours will be, and what kinds of commitments occur after standard working hours and on weekends.

Working with National Recruits, members from outside your community

National recruits and members who move to your community for their year of service, may need help with their transition to VISTA in ways that local recruits do not. You can guide them through this transition by following these guidelines:

- 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 and invitations for 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 addition to your organization. Or plan a day of community service activities, inviting board members and community leaders, and introduce the new member at that time. You might also submit a press release to the local media about the arrival of your new AmeriCorps*VISTA members with some 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 others going from a thriving metropolis to a remote poor rural community, can be like moving to a foreign country. "Culture shock" can often be debilitating, often overwhelming.

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 that is 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 peoples' perceptions and practices about time and timeliness?
- What are peoples' perceptions and practices around sexual 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?