

Service Works!

A Guide to National Service for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors

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NextSTEP ★

National Service To Employment Project

Volunteering and engaging in community service—for volunteers with and without disabilities—are effective avenues for personal and professional development. Service participants actively contribute to the strengthening of their communities, while at the same time gaining valuable skills, exploring career paths, and developing networks that can lead to meaningful employment.

Participating in a national service program is a proven avenue for:

- building self-confidence, independence, leadership
- exploring and refining employment skills, goals, and interests
- testing out potential career paths while building a resume
- expanding personal networks and interpersonal skills
- experiencing the satisfaction of working as part of a team to address challenges that exist in the community

“Everyone says you need experience or no one will hire you. One can get experience from volunteer service.”

- AmeriCorps Member

What is National Service?

- National Service is an opportunity for individuals to volunteer within their community through a variety of programs funded through the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency. Service participants strengthen their communities and develop employment skills while participating in structured programs that pay a living allowance.
- National service provides an opportunity for individuals with disabilities to shift their role from a recipient of services to the provider of services to others. This is a transformative experience for individuals as they realize the impact of their contribution, as well as for community members who see people with disabilities in a different light.
- In addition to a living allowance, service members receive access to health care, and child-care. Individuals who complete their service receive the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, which can be used for future education or to pay back student loans.

A Message To VR Counselors

This document has been prepared to provide you with the background information and details you need to consider national service programs as a training option and part of a long-range employment plan for your clients.

This document is an outcome of a collaborative effort between the Council of State Administrators in Vocational Rehabilitation and the National Service to Employment Project (NextSTEP), funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service. The initiative began with a survey of state VR agencies, addressing how they collaborate with their state's service commissions. The results of this survey led to the creation of an online Learning Community (LC) on Service and VR. The purpose of the LC was to promote collaboration between VR agencies and national service programs. “Service Works! A Guide to National Service for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors” has been written to promote that collaboration by introducing you to national service programs, answering questions you have and guiding you in the next steps.

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National Service Programs



AmeriCorps VISTA members work individually at nonprofits, religious organizations, community groups, and public agencies. The core focus of VISTA placements is to help organizations as they create and expand programs to help bring low-income people and communities out of poverty.



AmeriCorps State/National members serve in programs related to education, public safety, health, and the environment. Members work in teams, full-time or part-time, for one year or during the summer for City Year, Habitat for Humanity, the American Red Cross, or Public Allies, among many others.



AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps) members work as part of a team, full-time, at one of several residential locations (Denver, Colorado; Sacramento, California; Perry Point, Maryland; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Vinton, Iowa). The mission is to strengthen communities and develop leaders, working in partnership with non-profits, local municipalities, state governments, federal government, national or state parks, schools. Members complete service projects throughout the region they are assigned, but the team can be relocated based on emergency need throughout the country.



Senior Corps members are age 55 and older. They contribute their job skills and expertise to community projects and organizations. There are three different Senior Corps programs. Foster Grandparent Program members mentor and support children and young people with exceptional needs. Senior Companion Program members work with adults who have difficulty with the simple tasks of day-to-day living (shopping, light chores, interacting with doctors). RSVP members connect with service opportunities in their community that match their skills and availability. This might involve building houses, immunizing children, and enhancing the capacity of non-profit organizations to improve and protect the environment.

Stories of Service

In Indianapolis, Indiana, Lise Pace-Cox did her service year with Bosma Enterprises, an organization that supports individuals with visual disabilities. Lise recruited and trained volunteers. When she started her VISTA service, Lise thought her newly acquired disability would preclude her from employment entirely. After her year of service, she was hired full-time at Bosma Enterprises. Lise is now responsible for training volunteers at all levels.

In Danville, Kentucky, Oyo Fummilayo worked with the 21st Century Program as a literacy specialist at a middle school. Before this experience, Oyo had been unemployed. She is now an appointee on the Kentucky Council on Developmental Disabilities. Oyo says that her service experience was a stepping-stone to everything she has done subsequently.

Emily Buzzell traveled around the country with her team of 12. Their work included rebuilding homes in Biloxi, Mississippi and handing out groceries to families in need. On the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, the team helped out with programs for children at a Boys and Girls Club.

Paul Clark lives in a senior housing complex in Jacksonville, Florida. As an RSVP volunteer, Paul serves as a floor captain in his building. This means that he keeps his neighbors up-to-date on functions, events, and volunteer opportunities. He posts notices about these topics on the doors of apartments on his floor.

A recent study by LinkedIn found that 41% of employers consider volunteer experience just as valuable as paid work experience when they are evaluating candidates. In fact, when comparing two people side-by-side, volunteer experience can set a candidate apart from the competition.

How can service contribute to an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE)?

Service participants:

- Develop specific job skills to add to a resume
- Explore careers
- Improve “soft skills” -- coming to work on time, knowing when to seek help and connect with a supervisor, adhering to work break times
- Increase opportunities for, and practice with, networking and building relationships
- Develop personal goals and objectives through the formal and structured nature of the service experience
- Gain perspective about abilities and limitations in a work environment
- Enhance self-esteem and self-advocacy skills

What should I tell my clients about National Service?

If you are working with a client who is interested in national service, the following steps will get you started. Be aware that most service programs recruit new members in the spring and summer months.

- Talk with your client about their vocational goal and how work experience through service might contribute to this goal.
- Develop your client’s Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE), being sure to include the service experience as a step your client will take towards reaching their employment goal. Service can provide the vocational experience necessary for the individual to transition into employment.
 - Identify support/accommodation needs and incorporate those into the IPE.
 - As with any counselor-client relationship, establish a plan for checking in with the client on progress toward their goal.
- Have your client research different service programs in their community and gain some exposure to service. For example:
 - Encourage your client to participate in a day-of-service activity for a local program to become familiar with what service is all about.
 - Help arrange for the individual to job-shadow a service member to get a better sense of whether service is the right fit.
- Look at the service programs on the AmeriCorps website. See how they relate to your client’s interests and abilities. Use the interactive program selector to help choose the right program at www.nationalservice.gov.
- Every state has a service commission that have a disability coordinator on staff. Contact your state’s coordinator to learn more about the range of service options in the state and how individuals with disabilities can be included at <http://serviceandinclusion.org/index.php?page=coordinatorslist>
- Identify skills and behaviors that the individual can work on in preparing for a potential service experience.
- Help your client to apply for a service program. Most service programs have an online application process.
 - Understand and communicate to your client that this is a competitive process, so they will not automatically get selected to serve.
 - Many service positions require a formal interview -- an excellent opportunity for building job interview skills.

What are the steps once the application is in?

1. Work with your client to develop a plan for checking on the status of their application.
Service programs can receive a lot of applications that require their review and takes time. Counsel your client not to give up or get discouraged. They will need to monitor the status of their application, as they might with a job application. Well-placed check-in calls will reinforce your client's interest and commitment to serve. Have your client do the follow-up contacts to help them develop their self-advocacy skills.
2. Discuss any accommodations your client will need when working at a service program.
Once your client has been accepted to a program, communicate with the program about accommodation needs. Do this only as necessary and with the client's consent and participation.
3. In preparing for the service experience, talk with your client about the steps they can take on the job to monitor their progress.
For example, periodic meetings with the site supervisor could focus on progress toward vocational goals.

“They selected me! I went to the interview and it was the very first time I’ve ever had an interview.”

- AmeriCorps Member

Who can serve?

The Corporation for National and Community Service has programs suited to people of all ages, backgrounds, education levels, experiences, and abilities. This experience can be a strong fit for people who are:

- Between secondary and post-secondary education
- Returning to work after an extended absence
- Eager to learn new skills and gain work experience before starting employment
- Seniors who are looking for meaningful activities in retirement or a change from the type of work they were doing.

AmeriCorps members must:

- Be at least 17 years old
- Be a U.S. citizen, U.S. national, or legal permanent U.S. resident
- Have a high-school diploma, or be willing to work towards one or its equivalent (e.g., certificate of completion)

The *ideal candidate* is a client whose employment goals fit the opportunities available in service.

What is the time commitment?

Time commitments vary by program and project. Below is a brief overview of some of the differences.

- **AmeriCorps State/National:** Time commitments vary, depending on the program. Most assignments are full-time for one year (1700 hours), but there are also opportunities for half-time (900 hours), reduced half-time (675 hours), quarter-time (450 hours), or minimum-time (300 hours) positions.
- **AmeriCorps VISTA:** All Vista positions are full-time (1700 hours) year-long engagements. The VISTA summer program is the only exception, with the engagement lasting between 8-12 weeks, but still being a full-time commitment.
- **AmeriCorps NCCC:** AmeriCorps NCCC requires an intensive, 10-month commitment.
- **Senior Corps:** Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions serve between 15 and 40 hours a week. RSVP volunteers choose how, where, and how often they want to serve, with commitments ranging from a few hours to 40 hours per week.

Will service participation affect Social Security benefits?

AmeriCorps volunteers receive a living allowance, which can affect Social Security benefits. Below is a general overview of how benefits are affected. For details, contact the National Service Inclusion Project or the Work Incentive Planning and Assistance project in your state (see Resources).

AmeriCorps* State/ National

AmeriCorps*VISTA

Is the living stipend considered income if I am receiving SSI?

No

No

Is the living stipend considered income if I am receiving SSDI?

Yes. Can count toward Substantial Gainful Activity, but may be offset by work incentives.

No

Food Stamps

No

No

Pell Grant

No

No

HUD Housing Programs

No

No

Veterans' Benefits

No

No

Medicaid

*For those receiving SSI: No
For those receiving SSDI: Yes
-- contact WIPA to learn more:
www.arcmi.org/new/wipa.contact.htm*

No

Medicare

Yes

No

Trial Work Period

Check with benefits counselor for questions regarding trial work period, or contact WIPA

Check with benefits counselor for questions regarding trial work period, or contact WIPA

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

Yes

No

“Through VISTA, I was able to learn how to do things like marketing and planning that they don’t necessarily teach you in school...VISTA was a way to get hands-on experience without feeling the pressure of ‘You’re going to fail.’”

- AmeriCorps Member

How are VR agencies around the country connecting with national service?

- Florida's VR agency uses service experiences to help students increase their networks, try out different types of employment environments and tasks, and increase their social and communication skills.
- In Minnesota, VR has begun to promote volunteering among transition-age students as an option to gain skills and build resumes.
- Michigan's service commission has sponsored "Service Shadow Days" where service organizations host transition-age students with disabilities for a daylong service experience.
- In Delaware, all VR transition counselors are matched up with service agencies. VR counselors have used service sites for community-based work assessments.

"I honestly think that without that year [AmeriCorps National], I would not be the person I am today. I would not be as prepared for college as I am today."

- AmeriCorps Member

What are the benefits of VR counselors and service-program professionals working together?

- Opportunities increase for people with disabilities to become independent and develop skills for competitive employment.
- VR stretches case-service dollars because individuals with disabilities who participate in service receive needed training at little or no cost.
- VR staff help service programs increase the pool of members qualified and available to serve by contributing the knowledge they have about their clients' skills and work ethic
- Service programs benefit from VR's expertise on accommodations, assistive technology, and creating an inclusive environment.
- Segal AmeriCorps Education Awards, a post-service benefit, become available to members who have successfully completed a service term. These are used to pay college costs or repay student loans.

Resources

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) engages more than five million Americans in service every year.

CNCS website: www.nationalservice.gov

Service stories: http://www.nationalservice.gov/for_individuals/current/stories.asp

The National Service Inclusion Project (NSIP) provides training and technical assistance to help national service programs include individuals with disabilities as active participants.

NSIP website: www.serviceandinclusion.org

Service stories (audio): <http://www.serviceandinclusion.org/index.php?page=participants>

The National Service to Employment Project (NextSTEP) conducts research, provides technical assistance, and creates demonstration projects focusing on people with disabilities in volunteer and community-service roles. Among its other activities, NextSTEP is working to promote collaborations between VR and service programs.

Work Incentive Planning and Assistance (WIPA) projects serve all Social Security Administration beneficiaries with disabilities, including transition-age youth. WIPA offices provide benefits planning and other services.

<https://secure.ssa.gov/apps10/oesp/providers.nsf/bystate>