



## **AmeriCorps\*VISTA Selection & Placement**

### **EVALUATING AND SELECTING APPLICANTS**

Evaluation and selection of applicants is the final stage of the recruitment process. By carefully evaluating applications and conducting thorough interviews, you will be able to select members who best match the needs of your program.

To begin the selection and evaluation process, you will want to do an interview with the applicant. It is important to begin planning by thinking about both perspectives of the interview, yours and the applicant's. Your goal should be to provide information about your program and to learn more about the candidate. An interview is not the time to try to persuade someone to become an AmeriCorps member.

The following interviewing techniques are excerpted from the Peace Corps' "Selection Interviewing Workshop," written by Dr. Keith Helprin, and is used here with permission.

### **INTERVIEW**

#### ***Preparation***

- Review the application and resume, if available. Prepare questions for the interview. (See sample questions)
- Set aside enough time for an in-depth interview (between 45 minutes to 1\_ hours).
- Do not keep the applicant waiting.
- If there are multiple interviewers, make sure there is a clear lead interviewer and that an outline of each person's role in the interview is made so as not to intimidate or confuse the interviewee.
- Avoid interruptions.
- Be friendly and make the applicant feel comfortable.
- If conducting a phone interview:
  1. make sure to set up a time with the applicant that reflects any time zone differences;
  2. make sure the applicant is aware of who will be listening during the interview; and,
  3. consider arranging a conference call if more than one staff member is interviewing the applicant.

#### ***Structure of the Interview***

- Find out about the candidate's background.
- Take notes yourself, and invite the candidate to do the same since you'll be giving them information about AmeriCorps.
- Provide details on AmeriCorps, its benefits, and other key information.
- Provide information about the position and your organization.
- Provide a brief description of the geographic area they would be working in.

- Invite the candidate to ask questions.
- Explain procedures leading to the final decision.

### ***Information Gathering***

- Ask comprehensive, open-ended questions.
- Begin with broad questions in each area and then move on to more specific ones.
- Use comprehensive questions and non-verbal skills such as head nods to encourage complete answers.
- Use silence or extended pauses to draw out reticent applicants.
- Try not to frown, show surprise, or otherwise communicate in a way that would discourage the candidate from giving potentially negative information.
- Summarize and restate what you hear to make sure you understand the candidate correctly.
- If conducting a phone interview, allow for pauses so as not to interrupt an applicant's answer and your next question. Try to provide verbal feedback during the applicant's response to indicate your attention.

### ***Providing Key Information***

Review the *AmeriCorps Program Director's Handbook* and *AmeriCorps\*VISTA Supervisor's Manual* to go over the specific points outlined below:

- Stress the philosophy of AmeriCorps and the commitment involved. If you are an AmeriCorps\*VISTA sponsor, mention the need for a full-time commitment (at least 40 hours per week with no school or outside employment).
- Discuss the specific hours of employment and whether weekend work is expected.
- Explain on-the-assignment training requirements as well as the need for orientations. (For AmeriCorps\*VISTA sponsors, explain the pre-service orientation—the three-day, out-of-town training prior to service).
- Discuss travel reimbursement (if applicable).
- Provide the exact amount of the subsistence allowance and discuss the candidate's ability to manage on that amount (paying rent and all other expenses and any outstanding loans, etc.).
- Discuss cost and availability of suitable housing (especially important for out-of-town and nationally referred applicants).
- Point out that the living allowance is taxable. (AmeriCorps\*VISTA sponsors should mention that living allowances do not reduce Social Security or welfare benefits.)
- Mention possible deferment of qualified student loans. Full-time AmeriCorps members may also have the interest that accrues on their loans paid for after successfully completing their term of service.
- Explain the education award. Mention that it is partially taxable and not transferable to anyone else. (AmeriCorps\*VISTA sponsors should explain the choice between the education award and end-of-service cash stipend.)
- Explain that limited medical insurance is provided to full-time members, but only covers the AmeriCorps member.
- Go over the child care benefit, if applicable.
- Mention other benefits of service specific to your project. (For AmeriCorps\*VISTA sponsors, this could include “non-competitive eligibility” for federal jobs.)

### ***Closing the Interview***

- Be honest, realistic, and as specific as possible in describing the job and work environment. Your best sales tool is a good background interview.
- If you have doubts or concerns about a candidate, spell out your concerns and let the person respond.
- If you are clearly *not* interested in a candidate, explain calmly why you cannot accept the person at this time and give specific examples of how he or she does not meet the criteria.
- Inform the applicant what will happen next in the process and the tentative timeline for that process.

### ***Clues to Look For***

- Is the candidate a self-starter?
- How much and what type of volunteer work has she or he done?
- Consider the candidate's previous commitments.
- What was a difficult and challenging commitment the candidate made and met?
- Is the candidate flexible and adaptable?
- Look for enthusiasm, readiness for challenge, and ability to deal with adversity.
- Has he or she thought out reasons for applying to become an AmeriCorps member?
- Is the applicant looking for a job or looking for a service opportunity?
- Has he or she given evidence of tolerance and the ability to work with a wide variety of people?
- Consider the types of questions the candidate asks during the interview. (For example, do most questions deal with the project or AmeriCorps benefits?)
- If you conducted a phone interview, was the applicant attentive or watching television or folding laundry while speaking to you?

### **CHECKING REFERENCES**

Through the national recruitment process, AmeriCorps usually requires two written references that are submitted by the applicant with the application. You may also want to check with references personally over the phone. The main goal when checking references is to confirm the information given by the applicant. If information from references starts to differ from the information obtained in the application and interview, increase the number of references that you contact. When checking references:

- Identify yourself, your organization, and the reason for your call.
- Describe the position that the candidate has applied for.
- Ask questions related to the candidate's appropriateness for that position.
- Verify the nature of the relationship between the applicant and the reference.

## SELECTING MEMBERS

Applicants should fall into one of three categories: individuals that you plan to accept, individuals that you want to put on a waiting list, individuals you do not plan to accept.

Do not make the mistake of considering unacceptable candidates because you do not have enough qualified applicants. It will pay off in the long run to spend more time and energy doing more recruitment than to select members who will not complement your project.

## CREATING A WAITING LIST

A waiting list will be invaluable in case one of your members resigns or is dismissed. The waiting list should be composed of those applicants wishing to remain under consideration for a position with your project. To determine if an applicant would like to be placed on your waiting list, send a letter notifying applicants that you would like to place them on your waiting list. Encourage them to respond by a certain date and tell them that they will be contacted if a position becomes available.

Maintain contact with the individuals on the waiting list and make them feel part of your program. Invite them to special events and send them your newsletters, announcements, and reports. If you do not have enough acceptable applicants to build a waiting list in the beginning of your program, develop one throughout the year by highlighting the program for potential members. If you find that you will not be able to invite the people on your waiting list to be members in your program, consider passing the names along to another appropriate AmeriCorps program in your area.

### SELECTION CHECKLIST

- ☒ Evaluate and rank applicants.
- ☒ Send non-acceptance letters to those who will not be interviewed.
- ☒ Arrange interviews.
- ☒ Interview candidates.
- ☒ Contact references by phone.
- ☒ Divide interviewed applicants into three groups: accepted, wait listed, and non-accepted.
- ☒ Send non-acceptance letters.
- ☒ Send acceptance letters.
- ☒ Confirm acceptance by applicants.
- ☒ Send wait list letters.
- ☒ Confirm the interest of the people on your wait list.

***Note: For AmeriCorps\*VISTA members, the CNS State Office must have final approval of all applicants.***

# **Sample Interview Questions for AmeriCorps\*VISTA Applicants**

## **I. Motivation and Commitment**

1. What is the applicant's knowledge of the VISTA program. Does the applicant understand the terms of VISTA service/how the program works?
2. Describe why the applicant wants to serve in AmeriCorps VISTA. What is his/her reason for joining VISTA? What does he/she hope to gain from the experience?

## **II. Skills and Experience**

1. What has the applicant done in the past to gain experience in the service field or what skills could be used to achieve success in a VISTA program
2. Has the applicant had experience and training, or a combination of both, to prepare him/her for the challenges faced in VISTA projects? Give examples or situations.

## **III. Social/Cultural Sensitivity**

1. Why does the applicant want to work with low-income communities? Have they had previous experience doing so? If "yes," describe that experience. If "no," why are they interested at this time?
2. Describe the applicant's experiences working with and interacting with people from different racial/ethnic/social/economic backgrounds. If the applicant has limited experience, why do they want to do so now?

## **IV. Ability to Adjust**

1. Describe a difficult work or social situation where the applicant was required to adapt to unexpected or changing conditions? How did the applicant deal with that situation? Was he/she aware of personal weaknesses? What personal strengths/skill did the applicant use to resolve or address the situation?
2. Describe a situation where the applicant was an outsider. How did he/she handle the situation?

## **V. Other**

3. As a VISTA, what do you expect from your sponsoring agency?