

AmeriCorps VISTA – 50 Years of National Service

Kelly E. Langan 22 April 2015

"You have come from every part of this country, from every age group, from every background. You have come to serve the poor and the unfortunate of American society, and to open the door of American opportunity to all of our American people."

Your pay will be low; the conditions of your labor will often be difficult. But you will have the satisfaction of leading a great national effort, and you will have the ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their fellow man."[1] – Lyndon B. Johnson, December 12, 1964

For the 50th anniversary of VISTA, it is important for us to reflect back on the foundation the program was built upon. Fifty years ago, VISTA was created to be an antipoverty program. Histories of the program will explain that as time unfolded, the model changed to one of a national service program instead; in truth, however, VISTA still lives up to the potential of both types of programs—it thrives as a national service program focused on antipoverty efforts. This program, across the span of five decades, has garnered bipartisan support through its great successes and constant struggles. "VISTA has touched the lives of millions of Americans, and although

VISTA most often toils quietly, its mark on the national landscape is undeniable." [2]

VISTA's Humble Beginnings

Between 1959 and 1963, the U.S. poverty rate stayed at or above 20%. [3] As a response to the high levels of poverty he had witnessed during his campaign tours, President John F. Kennedy appointed his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, to head a task force in order to "examine the feasibility of creating a national service program whose purpose would be to assist Americans afflicted by poverty." [4] The task force, after conducting some studies on poverty in the nation, supported the idea of this service program and suggested that in America, there were plenty of citizens who were looking to help serve the poor.

The program the task force created was modeled after the Peace Corps, with the then-director of the Peace Corps, Sargent Shriver, on the task force to aid in the process. A bill was quickly proposed for this domestic volunteering program but, unfortunately, was not passed. Although the bill failed to pass while he was alive, President Kennedy set the stage for an antipoverty program to take shape in the form of a national service program.

Soon after Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon B. Johnson, serving as the nation's new president, worked to make the late President Kennedy's dream a reality. Following in

Kennedy's footsteps, President Johnson began the "Great Society," his own version of legislation that would work to create programs designed to alleviate poverty. Eventually, in 1964, with the signing of the Economic Opportunity Act and as part of President Johnson's war on poverty, the antipoverty program called VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) began.

At the signing of the Economic Opportunity Act, President Johnson addressed the nation, explaining, "...this bill will permit us to give our young people an opportunity to work here at home in constructive ways as volunteers, going to war against poverty instead of going to war against foreign enemies."

"All of this will be done through a program which is prudent and practical, which is consistent with our national ideals."

"...Every dollar spent will result in savings to the country and especially to the local taxpayers in the cost of crime, welfare, of health, and of police protection."

"We are not content to accept the endless growth of relief rolls or welfare rolls. We want to offer the forgotten fifth of our people opportunity and not doles..."

"Our American answer to poverty is not to make the poor more secure in their poverty but to reach down and to help them lift themselves out of the ruts of poverty and move with the large majority along the high road of hope

and prosperity..."

VISTA Begins

Initially, VISTA was given a budget of \$3 million—a meager budget to create a national program. "Accounts of the scramble to establish an office include VISTA's start up in an old hotel with bathtubs serving as file cabinets." [5] Still, the first group of VISTAS—a class of 24 volunteers ranging in age from 21 to 71—began their service on December 12, 1964. President Johnson addressed them, saying, "Your pay will be low; the conditions of your labor will be difficult. But you will have the satisfaction of leading a great national effort, and you will have the ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their fellow man."

At this time, VISTA volunteers were placed into impoverished communities and were required to get to know the people and the problems in the community so that they could begin to imagine, construct and facilitate service programs that could help the people in the community thrive. VISTAs were then, and remain to this day, a cadre of volunteers who pledge to live in poverty throughout the duration of their service. Although these early VISTAs were outsiders placed into poor communities, living below the poverty level helped them to understand the population they were serving.

Philadelphia's VISTA History

Although VISTAs have served throughout the country in a number of ways, they have served in Philadelphia consistently and continue to have a strong presence throughout the city. In a VISTA volunteer newsletter[6] from 1966, Robert F. Levey tells the story of eight VISTAs who volunteered on a project in South Philadelphia. These volunteers spent most of their time renovating a row house in which some of the volunteers lived during their time of service. Their purpose was to show local residents different strategies to improve their homes—no training or large budget necessary. Throughout the article, though, readers come to understand that the job of a VISTA is never as simple as one task. These VISTAs eventually saw a need for tutoring classes, school and job counseling and other services that they subsequently provided and housed in their own homes. Stories like this surface regularly when surveying the history of VISTA—stories that tell about individuals who are willing to give all of their time and energy to the community they're serving.

A few years later, in 1971, the VISTA volunteer published another article about Philadelphia's most innovative VISTAs.[7] This article focused on the partnership between The Architects Workshop in Philadelphia and VISTA as they worked together "to provide neighborhood people with the technical information they need to deal with...any agency that has the authority to make changes in a community." [8] Throughout this partnership, the VISTAs involved in the project did work that epitomizes all

that VISTAs are meant to do—they recruited skilled volunteers from local schools, responded to unforeseen community needs by helping to find housing for the elderly and found ways to finance their projects within the community. These VISTAs learned quickly that “Even the simplest project requires dialogue between the architect and the community people,” because they noticed that “if people have not been consulted in every stage of planning a project, they lose the sense of it being theirs.” [9] These lessons, though, are not specific to architecture and volunteering. Instead, these values are taught to VISTAs even today as they work to create sustainable programs in their communities.

VISTA's Impact Today and Tomorrow

In 1993, President Clinton signed the National and Community Service Trust Act into law, creating the Corporation for National and Community Service as well as AmeriCorps. CNCS absorbed ACTION, the federal agency that had housed VISTA since 1973, and VISTA became part of the AmeriCorps family of national service programs.[10]

Despite the ups and downs in its history across the country, VISTA has thrived in Philadelphia, where about 2,000 individuals have served,[11] and it continues to grow nationwide. VISTA's impact can be seen in the 170,000[12] individuals who have served, the organizations in which they served and the millions of

people who have worked with VISTA to produce change in their own lives and in their communities. Today, over 100 AmeriCorps VISTA members support more than 65 organizations in the Philadelphia region.[13] Nationally, more than 7,000 serve.[14]

Ann Schwartzman, executive director of the Pennsylvania Prison Society in Philadelphia, saw her work as a VISTA in 1979 empower "men and women to seek solutions to life challenges." She explains, "By working together, we have been able to change policies and implement change." This work as a VISTA, and watching the impact of her service, led her to a career in nonprofits and social services. Schwartzman says, "Seeing the results of this hard work is rewarding and doable. I cannot imagine a different line of work." VISTA alums like Schwartzman often choose to continue working in capacities that allow them to serve their communities.

As more people from within impoverished communities continue to volunteer with VISTA, these communities learn to give themselves "hand ups" instead of collecting "handouts." As President Johnson reminded the first VISTA class, every dollar spent on the VISTA initiative leads to innovative programs that inevitably save the taxpayers dollars; moreover, every VISTA volunteer service undertaken in Philadelphia and beyond leads to professional development and greater opportunities for the VISTAs themselves and for the community members they are privileged enough to work with. No other

domestic national service program has lasted as long as VISTA, and this program has always remained focused on finding innovative ways to help the poor help themselves.

[1] Remarks to Members of VISTA - "Volunteers in Service to America." <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26756>

[2] History of VISTA

[3] VISTA history

[4] History of VISTA

[5] History of VISTA

[6] From Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 3-5 of VISTA Volunteer, May 1966. "VISTA Cleans up Philadelphia."

[7] From p. 12-17 of VISTA Volunteer, June 1971. "Philadelphia's Relevant Architects"

[8] "Philadelphia's Relevant Architects"

[9] "Philadelphia's Relevant Architects"

[10] History of VISTA

[11] Corporation for National and Community Service

[12] Corporation for National and Community Service

[13] Corporation for National and Community Service.

[14] Corporation for National and Community Service, <http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameri-corps/ameri-corps-vista>

Author Bio

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