

## § 2556.180

services of any VISTA or VISTA assistance, to support any inherently religious activities, such as worship, religious instruction, or proselytizing, as part of the programs or services assisted by the VISTA program. If a VISTA sponsor or subrecipient conducts such inherently religious activities, the activities must be offered separately, in time or location, from the programs or services assisted under this Part by the VISTA program.

### **§ 2556.180 What are the limitations on VISTA sponsors receiving funding for the direct cost of supporting volunteers?**

(a) AmeriCorps will not obligate funding for the direct cost of supporting volunteers that is:

(1) More than 30 percent of VISTA funds appropriated in any fiscal year; or

(2) For a new project that was not selected through a competitive process.

(b) The “direct cost of supporting volunteers” includes only those funds that are paid directly to VISTA members, leaders, or summer associates, such as: living allowance; travel reimbursements, including the Settling In Allowance; End of Service Benefits, including the cash stipend; and other expenses paid directly to the member, leader, or summer associate, as determined by the VISTA Director.

## **Subpart C—VISTA Members**

### **§ 2556.200 Who may serve as a VISTA?**

An individual may serve as a VISTA if all the following requirements are met as of the date the individual takes the oath or affirmation, as appropriate, to enter VISTA service:

(a) The individual is at least eighteen years of age. There is no upper age limit.

(b) The individual is a United States citizen or national, or is legally residing within a State.

### **§ 2556.205 What commitments and agreements must an individual make to serve in the VISTA program?**

(a) To the maximum extent practicable, the individual must make a full-time commitment to remain avail-

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able for service without regard to regular working hours, at all times during their period of service, except for authorized periods of leave.

(b) To the maximum extent practicable, the individual must make a full-time personal commitment to alleviate poverty and poverty-related problems, and to live among and at the economic level of the low-income people served by the project.

(c) The individual’s service cannot be used to satisfy service requirements of parole, probation, or community service prescribed by the criminal justice system.

(d) A VISTA candidate or member agrees to undergo an investigation into their criminal history or background as a condition of enrollment, or continued enrollment, in the VISTA program.

### **§ 2556.210 Who reviews and approves an application for VISTA service?**

AmeriCorps has the final authority to approve or deny applications for VISTA service.

## **Subpart D—Terms, Protections, and Benefits of VISTA Members**

### **§ 2556.300 Is a VISTA considered a Federal employee and is a VISTA considered an employee of the sponsor?**

(a) Except for the purposes listed here, a VISTA is not considered an employee of the Federal Government. A VISTA is considered a Federal employee only for the following purposes:

(1) Federal Tort Claims Act—28 U.S.C. 1346(b); 28 U.S.C. 2671–2680;

(2) Federal Employees’ Compensation Act—5 U.S.C. chapter 81, subchapter 1;

(3) Hatch Act—5 U.S.C. chapter 73, subchapter III;

(4) Internal Revenue Service Code—26 U.S.C. 1 *et seq.*; and

(5) Title II of the Social Security Act—42 U.S.C. 401 *et seq.*

(b) A VISTA is not considered a Federal employee for any purposes other than those set forth in paragraph (a) of this section.

(c) A VISTA is not covered by Federal or State unemployment compensation related to their enrollment or

service in the VISTA program. A VISTA's service is not considered employment for purposes of eligibility for, or receipt of, Federal, State, or any other unemployment compensation.

(d) Monetary allowances, such as living allowances that VISTAs receive during VISTA service, are not considered wages. Monetary allowances, such as living allowances, that VISTAs receive during VISTA service are considered income for such purposes as Federal income tax and Social Security.

(e) A VISTA is not, under any circumstances, considered an employee of the sponsor or subrecipient to which they are assigned to serve. No VISTA is in an employment relationship with the sponsor or subrecipient to which they are assigned. The sponsor is not authorized to make contributions to any State unemployment compensation fund on a VISTA's behalf.

**§ 2556.305 What is the duration and scope of service for a VISTA?**

(a) To serve as a VISTA, an individual makes a full-time commitment for a minimum of one year, without regard to regular working hours.

(b) A VISTA carries out activities in accordance with the purpose of the VISTA program, as described in § 2556.1.

(c) To the maximum extent practicable, the VISTA must live among and at the economic level of the low-income community served by the project.

(d) A VISTA carries out service activities in conformance with the sponsor's approved project application, including any description of a VISTA assignment as contained in the project application; and in conformance with the purpose of title I of the DVSA. In any case where there is a conflict between the project application and the DVSA, the DVSA takes precedence.

(e) Under no circumstances may an individual be enrolled to serve as a VISTA beyond five years.

**§ 2556.310 What are a VISTA sponsor's and AmeriCorps' supervisory responsibilities during a VISTA's term of service?**

(a) The VISTA sponsor is responsible for the day-to-day supervision and oversight of the VISTA.

(b) AmeriCorps is responsible for ongoing monitoring and oversight of the VISTA sponsor's project where the VISTA is assigned. AmeriCorps is responsible for selecting the VISTA, assigning the VISTA to a project, removal of a VISTA from a project, and VISTA separation actions such as termination from the VISTA program.

**§ 2556.315 What are terms and conditions for official travel for a VISTA?**

(a) AmeriCorps may provide official travel for a VISTA candidate or a VISTA, as appropriate, to attend AmeriCorps-directed activities such as pre-service training, placement at the project site, in-service training events, and return from the project site to the VISTA's or VISTA candidate's home of record.

(b) AmeriCorps must approve all official travel of a VISTA candidate or a VISTA, including the mode of travel.

(c) AmeriCorps may provide for official emergency travel for a VISTA in case of a natural disaster or the critical illness or death of an immediate family member.

**§ 2556.320 What benefits may a VISTA receive during VISTA service?**

(a) A VISTA receives a living allowance computed on a daily rate. Living allowances vary according to the local cost of living in the project area where the VISTA is assigned.

(b) Subject to a maximum amount, and at the discretion and upon approval of AmeriCorps, a VISTA may receive payment for settling-in expenses, as determined by AmeriCorps.

(c) Subject to a maximum amount, and at the discretion of AmeriCorps, in the event of an emergency (such as theft, fire loss, or special clothing necessitated by severe climate), a VISTA may receive an emergency expense payment in order to resume VISTA service activities, as determined and approved by AmeriCorps.

(d) Subject to a maximum amount, and at the discretion of AmeriCorps, a VISTA may receive a relocation travel allowance to offset the cost of relocating from the home of record to the project site, as determined by AmeriCorps.

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(e) To the extent eligible, a VISTA may receive health care through a health benefits program provided by AmeriCorps.

(f) To the extent eligible, a VISTA may receive childcare support through a childcare program provided by AmeriCorps.

(g) To the extent eligible, a VISTA may elect to receive a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, and upon successful completion of service, receive that award in an amount prescribed by AmeriCorps, in accordance with the applicable provisions of 45 CFR parts 2526, 2527, and 25285.

(1) A VISTA is eligible to elect to receive an education award if they are a citizen, national, or lawful permanent resident alien of the United States.

(2) A VISTA who elects an education award is eligible to request forbearance of a student loan from their loan-holder. A VISTA who elects an education award may, upon successful completion of service, be eligible to receive up to 100 percent of the interest accrued on a qualified student loan, consistent with the applicable provisions of 45 CFR part 2529.

(3) A VISTA is not eligible to receive more than an amount equal to the aggregate value of two full-time education awards in their lifetime.

(4) Other than for a summer associate, the amount of an education award for the successful completion of a VISTA term of service is equal to the maximum amount of a Federal Pell Grant under Section 401 of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1070a) that a student eligible for such grant may receive in the aggregate for the fiscal year in which the VISTA has enrolled in the VISTA program.

(h) A VISTA who does not elect to receive a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award upon successful completion of service receives an end-of-service stipend in an amount prescribed by AmeriCorps.

(i) In the event that a VISTA does not successfully complete a full term of service, they may not receive a pro-rated Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or a pro-rated end-of-service stipend, except in cases where the appropriate VISTA Case Manager determines the VISTA did not successfully com-

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plete a full term of service because of a compelling personal circumstance. Examples of a compelling personal circumstance are: Serious medical condition or disability of a VISTA during VISTA service; critical illness or disability of a VISTA's immediate family member (spouse, domestic partner, parent, sibling, child, or guardian) if this event makes completing a term of service unreasonably difficult; or unusual conditions not attributable to the VISTA, such as natural disaster, strike, or premature closing of a project, that make completing a term of service unreasonably difficult or infeasible.

(j) In the event of a VISTA's death during service, their family or others that they named as beneficiary in accordance with section 5582 of title 5, United States Code will be paid a pro-rated end-of-service stipend for the period during which the VISTA served. If the VISTA had elected to receive the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award for successful completion of a full term of VISTA service, AmeriCorps will, prior to payment to the named beneficiary, convert that election to an end-of-service stipend and pay the VISTA's family, or others that they named as beneficiary, a pro-rated end-of-service stipend accordingly.

### **§ 2556.325 May a VISTA be provided coverage for legal defense expenses related to VISTA service?**

Under certain circumstances, as set forth in §§ 2556.330 through 2556.335, AmeriCorps may pay reasonable legal defense expenses incurred in judicial or administrative proceedings for the defense of a VISTA serving in the VISTA program. Such covered legal expenses consist of counsel fees, court costs, bail, and other expenses incidental to a VISTA's legal defense.

### **§ 2556.330 When may a VISTA be provided coverage for legal defense expenses related to criminal proceedings?**

(a) For the legal defense of a VISTA member who is charged with a criminal offense related to the VISTA member's service, up to and including arraignment in Federal, State, and local criminal proceedings, AmeriCorps may

pay actual and reasonable legal expenses. AmeriCorps is not required to pay any expenses for the legal defense of a VISTA member where they are charged with a criminal offense arising from alleged activity or action that is unrelated to that VISTA's service.

(b) A VISTA member's service is clearly unrelated to a charged offense when:

(1) The activity or action is alleged to have occurred prior to the VISTA member's VISTA service.

(2) The VISTA member is not at their assigned project location, such as during periods of approved leave, medical leave, emergency leave, or in administrative hold status in the VISTA program.

(3) The activity or action is alleged to have occurred at or near their assigned project, but is clearly not part of, or required by, the VISTA member's service assignment.

(c) For the legal defense, beyond arraignment in Federal, State, and local criminal proceedings, of a VISTA member who is charged with a criminal offense, AmeriCorps may also pay actual and reasonable legal expenses when:

(1) The charged offense against the VISTA member relates exclusively to their VISTA assignment or status as a VISTA member;

(2) The charged offense against the VISTA member arises from an alleged activity or action that is a part of, or required by, the VISTA member's VISTA assignment;

(3) The VISTA member has not admitted a willful or knowing violation of law; or

(4) The charged offense against the VISTA member is not a minor offense or misdemeanor, such as a minor vehicle violation.

(d) Notwithstanding paragraphs (a) through (c) of this section, there may be situations in which the criminal proceedings at issue arise from a matter that also gives rise to a civil claim under the Federal Tort Claims Act. In such a situation, the U.S. Department of Justice may, on behalf of the United States, agree to defend the VISTA. If the U.S. Department of Justice agrees to defend the VISTA member, unless there is a conflict between the VISTA member's interest and that of the

United States, AmeriCorps will not pay for expenses associated with any additional legal representation (such as counsel fees for private counsel) for the VISTA member.

**§ 2556.335 When may a VISTA be provided coverage for legal defense expenses related to civil or administrative proceedings?**

For the legal defense in Federal, State, and local civil judicial and administrative proceedings of a VISTA member, AmeriCorps may also pay actual and reasonable legal expenses when:

(a) The complaint or charge is against the VISTA, and is directly related to their VISTA service and not to their personal activities or obligations;

(b) The VISTA has not admitted to willfully or knowingly pursuing a course of conduct that would result in the plaintiff or complainant initiating such a proceeding; and

(c) The judgment sought involves a monetary award that exceeds \$1,000.

**§ 2556.340 What is non-competitive eligibility and who is eligible for it?**

(a) Non-competitive eligibility is a status that means a person is eligible for appointment, by a Federal agency in the Executive branch, into a civil service position in the Federal competitive service, in accordance with 5 CFR 315.605.

(b) An individual who successfully completes at least a year-long term of service as a VISTA, and who has not been terminated for cause from the VISTA program at any time, has non-competitive eligibility status for one year following the end of the term of service as a VISTA.

(c) In addition to the year of non-competitive eligibility status as provided in paragraph (b) of this section, an individual's non-competitive eligibility status may extend for two more years, to a total of three years, if the individual is:

(1) In the military service;

(2) Studying at a recognized institution of higher learning; or

(3) In another activity which, in the view of the Federal agency referenced in paragraph (a) of this section, warrants extension.

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### **§ 2556.345 Who may present a grievance?**

(a) Under the VISTA program grievance procedure, a grievance may be presented by any individual who is currently enrolled in the VISTA program or who was enrolled in the VISTA program within the past 30 calendar days.

(b) A VISTA's grievance may not be construed as reflecting on the VISTA's standing, performance, or desirability as a VISTA.

(c) A VISTA who presents a grievance may not be subjected to restraint, interference, coercion, discrimination, or reprisal because of presentation of views.

### **§ 2556.350 What matters are considered grievances?**

(a) Under the VISTA program grievance procedure, grievances are matters of concern, brought by a VISTA, that arise out of, and directly affect, the VISTA's service situation or that arise out of a violation of a policy, practice, or regulation governing the terms or conditions of the VISTA's service, that result in the denial or infringement of a right or benefit to the VISTA member.

(b) Matters not within the definition of a grievance as defined in paragraph (a) of this section are not grievable, and therefore, are excluded from the VISTA program grievance procedure. Though not exhaustive, examples of matters excluded from the VISTA program grievance procedure are:

(1) Matters related to a sponsor's or project's continuance or discontinuance; the number of VISTAs assigned to a VISTA project; the increases or decreases in the level of support provided to a VISTA project; the suspension or termination of a VISTA project; or the selection or retention of VISTA project staff;

(2) Matters for which a separate administrative procedure or complaint process is provided, such as early termination for cause, claims of discrimination during service, and Federal worker's compensation claims filed for illness or injury sustained in the course of carrying out VISTA activities;

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(3) Matters related to the content of any law, published rule, regulation, policy, or procedure;

(4) Matters related to housing during a VISTA member's service;

(5) Matters which are, by law, subject to final administrative review outside AmeriCorps;

(6) Matters related to actions taken, or not taken, by a VISTA sponsor or subrecipient, or AmeriCorps, in compliance with or in order to fulfill the terms of a contract, grant, or other agreement related to the VISTA program; or

(7) Matters related to the internal management of AmeriCorps, unless such matters are shown to specifically and directly affect the VISTA's service situation or terms or conditions of their VISTA service.

### **§ 2556.355 May a VISTA have access to records as part of the VISTA grievance procedure?**

(a) A VISTA is entitled to review any material in their official VISTA file and any relevant AmeriCorps records to the extent permitted by the Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act, 5 U.S.C. 552, 552a. Examples of materials that may be withheld include references obtained under pledge of confidentiality, official VISTA files of other VISTAs, and privileged intra-agency documents.

(b) A VISTA may review relevant materials in the possession of a sponsor to the extent such materials are disclosable by the sponsor under applicable Freedom of Information Act and privacy laws.

### **§ 2556.360 How may a VISTA bring a grievance?**

(a) *Bringing a grievance—Step 1.* (1) If a VISTA is currently enrolled in the VISTA program or was enrolled in the VISTA program within the past 30 calendar days, they may, within 15 calendar days of an event giving rise to a grievance or within 15 calendar days after becoming aware of such an event, bring a grievance to the sponsor or subrecipient where they are assigned to serve. If the grievance arises out of a continuing condition or practice that individually affects a VISTA, the VISTA may bring it at any time during

their enrollment that they are affected by the continuing condition or practice.

(2) A VISTA brings a grievance by presenting it in writing to the executive director, or comparable individual, of the sponsoring organization where the VISTA is assigned or to the sponsor's representative who is designated to receive grievances from a VISTA.

(3) The sponsor must review and respond in writing to the VISTA's grievance within 10 calendar days of receipt of the written grievance. The sponsor may not fail to respond to a complaint raised by a VISTA on the basis that it is not an actual grievance, or that it is excluded from coverage as a grievance, but may, in the written response, dismiss the complaint and refuse on either of those grounds to grant the requested relief.

(4) If the grievance brought by a VISTA involves a matter over which the sponsor has no substantial control or if the sponsor's representative is the supervisor of the VISTA, the VISTA may pass over the procedure set forth in paragraphs (a)(1) through (3) of this section and present the grievance in writing directly to the Deputy Regional Administrator, as described in paragraph (b) of this section.

(b) *Bringing a grievance—Step 2.* (1) If, after a VISTA brings a grievance as set forth in paragraphs (a)(1) and (2) of this section, the matter is not resolved, they may submit the grievance in writing to the appropriate Deputy Regional Administrator. The VISTA must submit the grievance to the Deputy Regional Administrator either:

(i) Within seven calendar days of receipt of the sponsor's response; or,

(ii) In the event the sponsor does not issue a response to the VISTA within 10 calendar days of its receipt of the written grievance, within 17 calendar days of the sponsor's receipt of the written grievance.

(2) If the grievance involves a matter over which either the sponsor or sub-recipient has no substantial control, or if the sponsor's representative is the supervisor of the VISTA, as described in paragraph (a)(4) of this section, the VISTA may pass over the procedure set forth in paragraphs (a)(1) through (3) of this section, and submit the grievance

in writing directly to the Deputy Regional Administrator. In such a case, the VISTA must submit the grievance to the Deputy Regional Administrator within 15 calendar days of the event giving rise to the grievance occurs, or within 15 calendar days after becoming aware of the event.

(3) Within ten working days of receipt of the grievance, the Deputy Regional Administrator will respond in writing, regardless of whether or not the matter constitutes a grievance as defined under this grievance procedure and/or is timely submitted. In the response, the Deputy Regional Administrator may determine that the matter submitted as a grievance is not grievable, is not considered a grievance, or fails to meet the time limit for response. If the Deputy Regional Administrator makes any such determination, they may dismiss the complaint, setting forth the reason(s) for the dismissal. In such a case, the Deputy Regional Administrator need not address the complaint on the merits, nor make a determination of the complaint on the merits.

#### **§2556.365 May a VISTA appeal a grievance?**

(a) A VISTA may appeal the Deputy Regional Administrator's response to the grievance under §2556.360(b)(3) by submitting a written appeal to the appropriate Regional Administrator. To be eligible to appeal a grievance response to the Regional Administrator, the VISTA must first have exhausted all appropriate actions as set forth in §2556.360.

(b) A VISTA's grievance appeal must be in writing, contain sufficient detail to identify the subject matter of the grievance, specify the relief requested, and be signed by the VISTA.

(c) A VISTA must submit a grievance appeal to the appropriate Regional Administrator no later than 10 calendar days after the Deputy Regional Administrator issues their response to the grievance.

(d) Certain matters contained in a grievance appeal may be rejected, rather than denied on the merits, by the Regional Administrator. A grievance appeal may be rejected, in whole or in part, for any of the following reasons:

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(1) The grievance appeal was not submitted to the appropriate Regional Administrator within the time limit specified in paragraph (c) of this section;

(2) The grievance appeal consists of matters not contained within the definition of a grievance, as specified in section § 2556.350(a);

(3) The grievance appeal consists of matters excluded from the VISTA program grievance procedure, as specified in § 2556.350(b); or

(4) The grievance appeal contains matters that are moot, or for which relief has otherwise been granted.

(e) Within 14 calendar days of receipt of the grievance, the appropriate Regional Administrator will decide the grievance appeal on the merits, or reject the grievance appeal in whole or in part, or both, as appropriate. The Regional Administrator shall notify the VISTA in writing of the decision and specify the grounds for the appeal decision. The appeal decision will include a statement of the basis for the decision and is a final decision of AmeriCorps.

### **Subpart E—Termination for Cause Procedures**

#### **§ 2556.400 What is termination for cause and what are the criteria for termination for cause?**

(a) Termination for cause is discharge of a VISTA from the VISTA program due to a deficiency, or deficiencies, in conduct or performance.

(b) AmeriCorps may terminate a VISTA for cause for any of the following reasons:

(1) Conviction of any criminal offense under Federal, State, or local statute or ordinance;

(2) Violation of any provision of the Domestic Service Volunteer Act of 1973, as amended, or any AmeriCorps or VISTA program policy, regulation, or instruction;

(3) Failure, refusal, or inability to perform prescribed project duties as outlined in the project plan, assignment description, or as directed by the sponsor to which the VISTA is assigned;

(4) Involvement in activities which substantially interfere with the VISTA's performance of project duties;

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(5) Intentional false statement, misrepresentation, omission, fraud, or deception in seeking to obtain selection as a VISTA in the VISTA program;

(6) Any conduct on the part of the VISTA which substantially diminishes their effectiveness as a VISTA; or

(7) Unsatisfactory performance of an assignment.

#### **§ 2556.405 Who has sole authority to remove a VISTA from a VISTA project and who has sole authority to terminate a VISTA from a VISTA project or the VISTA program?**

(a) AmeriCorps has the sole authority to remove a VISTA from a project where they have been assigned.

(b) AmeriCorps has the sole authority to terminate for cause or otherwise terminate a VISTA from the VISTA program.

(c) Neither the sponsoring organization nor any of its subrecipients has the authority to remove a VISTA from a project or to terminate a VISTA for cause, or for any other basis, from the VISTA program.

#### **§ 2556.410 May a sponsor request that a VISTA be removed from its project?**

(a) The head of a sponsoring organization, or their designee, may request that AmeriCorps remove a VISTA assigned to its project. Any such request must be submitted in writing to the appropriate Portfolio Manager and should state the reasons for the request.

(b) The Portfolio Manager may, at their discretion, attempt to resolve the situation with the sponsor so that a solution other than removal of the VISTA from the project assignment is reached.

(c) When an alternative solution, as referenced in paragraph (b) of this section, is not sought, or is not reached within a reasonable time period, the VISTA Case Manager will remove the VISTA from the project.

#### **§ 2556.415 May AmeriCorps remove a VISTA from a project without the sponsor's request for removal?**

Of its own accord, AmeriCorps may remove a VISTA from a project assignment without the sponsor's request for removal.