
Title: Georgia 4-H AmeriCorps VISTA and AmeriCorps State Programs**Author: Jennifer Cantwell**

Summary: The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) continues to award Georgia 4-H two AmeriCorps grants - AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) and AmeriCorps State. Georgia 4-H is a unit of the University of Georgia (UGA) College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES) Cooperative Extension. Georgia 4-H first received the VISTA grant in July 2010 and the AmeriCorps State grant in September 2012.

During the entirety of these programs, CNCS has funded more than 314 full-time AmeriCorps Member Service Years (MSY). MSY is the terminology used to describe a full-time member (similar to FTE). Both programs utilize a variety of member types (full-time, part-time, and summer only positions). VISTAs and AmeriCorps State members (ACMs) have been a great benefit to Georgia 4-H while serving in county offices, 4-H Centers and in the State 4-H Office. The two programs are designed to increase the capacity of Georgia 4-H, with the ultimate goal of improving results for the beneficiaries of the organization.

Situation: The Urban Institute's 2015 Report on child poverty and adult success reports that children that live below the federal poverty line experience an increase in negative life outcomes. They "struggle academically, do not complete high school, and have spotty employment as young adults" (Ratcliff, 2018, p. 1). Although no direct relationship with employment and lower education achievement was found, 2015 US Bureau of Labor Statistics show that "lower educational achievement brings lower wages on average and dampened opportunities for upward mobility" (p. 6).

In their 5th report on the current and future economics of Georgia, the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education and the Georgia Chamber of Commerce propose that to assure the vitality of Georgia communities, individuals need to work together to strengthen local schools and that an investment "in public education is essential to future economic success for individuals, communities, businesses, and the state" (p. 2). To build a community of economic well-being and growth, students need a successful transition into postsecondary education and a career (p. 3).

Georgia 4-H provides research-based positive youth development (PYD) programming aligned with the Georgia Standards of Excellence to enrich local education efforts and improve life chances for youth, with a focus on improving educational attainment.

PYD programming assists youth in acquiring knowledge, development of life skills, and forming attitudes that will help them become positive, caring, and contributing members of society.

Many of the youth served by Georgia 4-H's AmeriCorps programs live in poverty or have experienced poverty. Under the direction of Extension Agents, VISTAs develop resources to support Georgia 4-H programming while ACMs provide PYD programming directly to youth in support of the mission of Georgia 4-H. The variety of programming and state-wide reach make Georgia 4-H an ideal organization to host AmeriCorps members.

Response: The goal of the VISTA project is to eliminate poverty. VISTAs build capacity within the 4-H program to reach marginalized and vulnerable youth via positive youth development experiences reversing negative statistical trends. Through this process youth affected by the 4-H program will be more likely to graduate high school, not become pregnant during high school, attend postsecondary education, and become positive contributing citizens.

During the last year, Georgia 4-H had five full-time VISTA members and five VISTA Summer Associates serving county offices and statewide at the state 4-H office. VISTA members helped build capacity through volunteer development, fundraising, social marketing, and more, and served in Clayton, Emanuel, Jackson, Thomas, and the State 4-H Extension offices. During the summer months of 2020, five VISTA Summer Associates directly served in five counties, enhancing youth health habits and supporting food security. As COVID-19 showed a larger need for such programming, VISTAs serving Clayton, Emanuel, Fulton, Jackson, and Seminole Counties quickly pivoted to offer virtual health programs for youth through cohorts called the 4-H Summer Health Squad. To reach the public during the pandemic, more than 14 videos were created during the year.

All VISTA members attend an AmeriCorps VISTA Pre-Service Orientation (PSO). At PSO they receive training in capacity building, community assessment, issues surrounding poverty in America, and UGA Extension and 4-H to prepare them for their role. They also participate in monthly webinars and seminars sponsored by both CNCS and the University of Georgia on various topics related to their VISTA roles. Due to social distancing restraints this year, all PSOs and trainings were turned to an online format.

The goal of the Georgia 4-H AmeriCorps State Project is to support the mission of Georgia 4-H and increase the capacity of Georgia 4-H to better serve youth. Increased capacity refers to an increase in youth served, expansion of educational opportunities, and development of higher quality opportunities.

ACMs currently deliver 4-H programming to youth in grades 4-12 in up to 42 targeted counties in Georgia. These counties were identified based on need and the capacity to implement a high quality AmeriCorps program. ACMs deliver a variety of 4-H programming, with an emphasis on in-school educational club meetings and 4-H Project Achievement. ACMs and site supervisors attend a two-day New Service Year Orientation (NSYO). The training covers the following: grant regulations and reporting, member best practices, member retention, CPR/First Aid Certification, team building, and Policies, Procedures, and Protocols. The NSYO is implemented by the Program Director, Program Coordinator, and other staff and faculty members from the 4-H State Office. Site supervisors orient members to their local community and train them to provide 4-H programming. ACMs also participate in monthly webinars and are provided relevant trainings throughout their year-long term of service.

Currently in the ninth year of the program, ACMs continue to provide direct service and address critical community needs in the areas of education, public safety, health, and the environment. Current counties in the project include the following: **Appling, Barrow, Ben Hill, Bleckley, Bryan, Bulloch, Carroll, Cobb, Coffee, Cook, Decatur, Dougherty, Effingham, Fannin, Forsyth, Fulton, Gilmer, Habersham, Hancock, Haralson, Houston, Laurens, Morgan, Oconee, Oglethorpe, Peach, Pulaski, Putnam, Spalding, Sumter, Tift, Washington, Whitfield, and Wilkes.**

Results/Impacts: Since 2010 at its inception, 69 Georgia 4-H VISTAs (the FTE of 55) have raised more than \$685,000 in cash and in-kind resources, produced more than 1,500 marketing pieces, and recruited and/or coordinated more than 3,250 volunteers. This year, VISTAs also produced 15 videos to further the reach of programming that are now a sustainable resource. These videos also expanded programmatic reach beyond geographic location. Collectively, these productions have reached more than 4.3K views.

The 4-H Summer Health Squads provided by VISTAs serving Clayton, Emanuel, Fulton, Jackson, and Seminole Counties reached 229 youth, through healthy habits curriculum. Through this programming VISTA Summer Associates enabled youth to enhance knowledge of health, including learning about hand washing, mindfulness, and food security. In addition, these Associates enhanced local food delivery systems and supported the delivery of more than 6,500 pounds of food in June and July for families in local communities.

During the first nine years of the AmeriCorps State Grant, 205 full, 108 half-time, and two minimum-time members have served more than 350,150 hours, reached more than 152,900 students through in-school programming, 112,925 students through 4-H Project Achievement and recruited more than 1,900 volunteers that contributed over 21,320 hours.

The AmeriCorps State grant has grown significantly since July 2012. The first three-year grant provided 16 MSY per year (48 MSY total). The current program year we were awarded 30 MSY. Georgia 4-H is the largest AmeriCorps State program in Georgia. In addition to the \$3,607,978 in federal funds received, the AmeriCorps State grant has leveraged over \$814,308 additional funds (county, state, and private) to support implementation.

The Georgia 4-H AmeriCorps State program consistently exceeds grant performance measures. A summary of the youth and volunteer related performance measures for the 2019-2020 program year is provided below.

4-H In-School Educational Club Meetings - A grand total of 17,178 students were served by ACMs in in-school educational club meetings. To measure content area learning, ACMs administered a total of 2,718 surveys to students after in-school educational club meetings. After removing duplicates (students that took surveys in more than one content area), our resulting sample set was 1,9729. Of that sample set, 91% of students (1,762) showed an increase in and/or demonstrated knowledge of the content presented.

4-H Project Achievement - A grand total of 18,209 youth received instruction on the 4-H Project Achievement process from ACMs. This exceeds our goal of 12,500. Of those youth that received instruction, 5,356 developed a research-based presentation that was delivered in front of their peers and/or 4-H Agent. Of the students that continued on to compete at district-level Project Achievement, 1,289 completed a survey to measure mastery of best practices in public speaking and indicated confidence or an increase in confidence in public speaking. Of those students surveyed, 87% (1,120) demonstrated knowledge of best practices in public speaking or showed an increase in knowledge of best practices in public speaking and 87% (1,119) indicated confidence in public speaking or showed an increase in confidence in public speaking.

Volunteer Recruitment - ACMs recruited 148 new volunteers. These volunteers contributed 2,176 hours of service to Georgia 4-H.

A secondary goal of the AmeriCorps State grant, is to provide meaningful experiences for ACMs, to prepare them for future employment, and to instill a sense of community service and civic engagement in members. AmeriCorps State members were surveyed regarding their overall satisfaction with the program.

- 100% agreed or strongly agreed with the following – Through my service with the Georgia 4-H AmeriCorps program, I have gained skills and experience that I can use in future employment.
- 82.4% agreed or strongly agreed with the following – During my service with the Georgia 4-H AmeriCorps program, I had opportunities to establish connections with other members and the broader National Service Network to build a sense of team spirit.
- 100% agreed or strongly agreed with the following – As a result of my service with Georgia 4-H, I plan to continue volunteering and/or contributing to my community.
- 100% agreed or strongly agreed with the following – As a result of my service with Georgia 4-H, I am better prepared for future employment.