
Title: Georgia 4-H VISTA Summer Associates Provide COVID-19 Relief through Food Security Efforts and Youth Healthy Living Programs

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Situation: The University of Georgia's youth development organization, Georgia 4-H, is positioned in all 159 counties in Georgia and serves as the state's largest youth leadership organization. In addition to in-school partnerships during the regular school year, youth programming extends year-round (and into the summer) with the goal of further supporting youth in acquiring knowledge, developing life skills, and forming attitudes that will enable them to become self-directing, productive, and contributing members of society. The unexpected global pandemic, saw a need for Georgia 4-H AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteer In Service to America) members to pivot direct programming to meet a national call from the Center for National and Community Service to provide pandemic relief in combatting food insecurity and providing health educational programming for youth.

Response: During the summer of 2020, AmeriCorps Volunteer In Service To America (VISTA) Summer Associates were recruited and placed in rural and urban areas of Georgia to include: Emanuel, Fulton, Jackson, and Seminole Counties and the State 4-H office. Their eight-week service term began with a three-day synchronous training led by Georgia 4-H Volunteer Development Specialist and the Georgia 4-H Healthy Living Specialist. VISTAs were provided the resources to teach lessons and modeled their virtual teaching skills for practice. Lessons included "Wash Your Paws," "Food Access and Health," "My Delicious Nutritious Plate," "What is Food Security?", and "Mindfulness and Healthy Eating." Following the training, VISTA Summer Associates provided virtual healthy living programming for youth in their communities, with a focus on nutrition and food access, by creating youth cohorts called 4-H Summer Health Squads. In addition, VISTAs supported UGA Extension and their local community efforts with food insecurity initiatives by supporting local food drives, extending services of local food pantries, and assisting local school systems with food delivery efforts.

Results/Impacts: This summer initiative further strengthened regular-term VISTA service goals while also striving to meet the National Service priority of combating hunger and food insecurity. VISTA Summer Associates gained professional experience serving with youth to meet local and national priorities, supported efforts to alleviate poverty through education, supported a reduction in summer learning loss while increasing healthy habits, educated youth about enhancing food security, and built capacity and sustainability of the organization and for local communities through a focus on education and health. During the three-day VISTA synchronous training, Summer Associates developed skills and comfort for delivering virtual health programs for teaching healthy habits and supporting food insecurity initiatives in their communities. Throughout the summer, VISTAs built capacity in 14 local organizations and recruited eight additional volunteers to further strengthen their efforts. Their efforts served more than 6,500 pounds of food to more than 5,200 individuals. In addition, the Fulton County VISTA strengthened the Fulton County Extension "Fulton Fresh" mobile market to serve nearly 4,000 individuals this summer more than 12,700 pounds of food in Metro Atlanta.

Through the 4-H Youth Summer Health Squad, 229 youth were reached through virtual programs. Youth completed pre and post assessment survey and post-assessments. Assessments tracked health knowledge gained and intentions for health improvement by changing behavior. The assessments revealed that respondents:

- feel they know how and when to wash their hands (98%),
- feel they know more about how food security and hunger affect their community (87%),
- plan to use mindfulness to help them enjoy their food and make healthy decisions (86%),
- plan to use MyPlate to help make healthy eating choices (77%),
- plan to eat the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables (73%),
- plan to prepare healthy food or snacks with their family (71%),
- plan to drink less sugary drinks (81%),
- plan to drink the recommended amount of water (86%), and
- plan to stay physically active (92%).

VISTA Summer Associates were asked to provide their "shining moments" as an exercise of reflection and positivity during COVID-19. Here are their responses:

"I served to take a platform many youth were already on a lot, YouTube, and created content that would be educational for them. I have had the opportunity to create fun and entertaining videos for nearly 200 students that taught viewers about health, but also encouraged them that learning is awesome." Blake McBride, Emanuel County 4-H VISTA

"As the Jackson County 4-H AmeriCorps VISTA, I served 94 youth in 1st through 12th grade from 7 different counties across the state of Georgia by providing them with 14 different engaging and hands-on virtual day camp opportunities that promoted participants to be active and healthy during the stressful times of the COVID-19 Pandemic." Lauren Pike, Jackson County 4-H VISTA

"In 57 short days, I had the privilege of preparing and serving 947 lbs of food to over 1200 youth in Seminole County Georgia and shared the importance of healthier habits and food insecurity and access to 60 4-H'ers across Southwest District as a Georgia 4-H AmeriCorps Summer VISTA. This was such a humbling experience to see the impact it has on such a small community during times like these." Kameron Landeen, Seminole County 4-H VISTA

"This summer, we have helped hundreds of Fulton County families survive this pandemic by providing weekly deliveries of fresh produce and educational kits that correspond to online enrichment courses highlighting healthy habits with cooking, gardening, and mindful living videos. We have also helped the community by maintaining an active and vibrant teaching garden that has been a healthy, enlightening resource for many of the area residents." Mary Woo, Fulton County 4-H VISTA



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The University of Georgia 4-H program is the largest youth leadership organization in the state.

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