



Title: Georgia 4-H AmeriCorps VISTA and AmeriCorps State Programs

Author: Cantwell, Jennifer

Year: 2021

Geographic Scope: State

### **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 339 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 Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education's 2021 Edition of the Top Ten Issues to Watch provides guidance for Georgia's leaders regarding challenges in public education and strategies to improve outcomes for students. The report highlights the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and the need for change so Georgia can move "from response to recovery and ultimately to success" (p. i). The report underscores the unequal, negative impacts of the pandemic across the state; the need for new approaches to learning and delivery of instruction; the opportunity to restructure accountability and assessment; the benefits of engaging parents as partners; and the call to reaffirm community collaboration.

4-H is the nation's largest youth leadership development organization, empowering nearly six million young people with the skills to lead for a lifetime. Georgia is proud to be one of the largest state programs with more than 240,000 active participants. Georgia 4-H is one of only a few state programs that uses in-school program delivery coupled with out of school activities. Georgia 4-H is vital to the state's recovery efforts as evidenced by its existing partnerships with school systems, parents and youth; continued program delivery throughout the pandemic.

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 and come from homes with low educational attainment. 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 four full-time VISTA members and two 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, and the State 4-H Extension offices. During the summer months of 2021, two VISTA Summer Associates directly served in two counties, enhancing youth health habits and supporting food security. Summer Associates served in Fulton and Jackson Counties to offer health programs for youth through cohorts called the 4-H Summer Health Squad.

All VISTA members attend an AmeriCorps VISTA Pre-Service Orientation (PSO). At PSO they received 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 participated in monthly webinars and seminars sponsored by both AmeriCorps and the University of Georgia on various topics related to their VISTA roles.

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 29 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 two core programs: in-school educational club meetings and 4-H Project Achievement. These two programs were chosen as the primary focus because they are both consistently delivered by all counties, are aligned with Georgia Standards of Excellence, introduce youth to areas of postsecondary study and potential career paths, and reach a diverse audience through in-school delivery.

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 program delivery. 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 twice a month webinars and are provided relevant trainings throughout their year-long term of service.

Currently in the tenth 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: Barrow, Ben Hill, Bleckley, Bryan, Bulloch, Burke, Candler, Catoosa, Cobb, Cook, Decatur, Dougherty, Fannin, Hancock, Haralson, Houston, Laurens, Morgan, Oconee, Oglethorpe, Paulding, Peach, Pulaski, Putnam, Tift, Toombs, Upson, Washington, and Wilkes.

## Impact

These programs have reached traditionally underserved clients, while increasing diversity in both Extension programs and leaders. The Georgia 4-H AmeriCorps State and VISTA team was honored as the recipient of the UGA College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences Department Award for Diversity due to their diversity and inclusion efforts.

Since 2010 at its inception, 75 Georgia 4-H VISTAs (the FTE of 59) have raised more than \$690,000 in cash and in-kind resources, produced more than 1,500 marketing pieces, and recruited and/or coordinated more than 3,600 volunteers. The 4-H Summer Health Squads provided by VISTAs serving in Fulton and Jackson Counties reached 50 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 20,233 pounds of food in June and July for 974 families in local communities. This year the VISTA program was awarded an additional \$15,000 to support the salaries of the state program coordinators.

During the ten years of the AmeriCorps State Grant, 218 full, 125 half-time, and two minimum-time members have served more than 393,853 hours, reached over 170,394 students through in-school programming, 124,729 students through 4-H Project Achievement and recruited more than 2,020 volunteers that contributed over 22,440 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 26 MSY. Georgia 4-H is the second largest AmeriCorps State program in Georgia. In addition to the \$4,031,778 in federal funds awarded, the AmeriCorps State grant has leveraged over \$894,890 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 2020-2021 program year is provided below. Due to restrictions related to the COVI-19 global pandemic, we did not meet our outcome targets for Project Achievement or volunteer recruitment. We were able to meet our output and outcome targets for in-school educational club meetings as well as our output target for Project Achievement. Please see below for more details.

4-H In-School Educational Club Meetings - A grand total of 17,471 students were served by ACMs in in-school educational club meetings. This exceeded our goal of 16,000. To measure content area learning, ACMs administered a total of 2,279 surveys to students after in-school educational club meetings. Of that sample set, 90% of students (2,041) showed an increase in and/or demonstrated knowledge of the content presented.

4-H Project Achievement - A grand total of 11,804 youth received instruction on the 4-H Project



Achievement process from ACMs. This exceeded our goal of 10,500. Of the students that continued to compete at district-level Project Achievement, 647 completed a survey to measure mastery of best practices in public speaking and demonstration of or increase in confidence in public speaking. Of those students surveyed, 87% (565) demonstrated knowledge of best practices in public speaking or showed an increase in knowledge of best practices in public speaking and 85% (551) indicated confidence in public speaking or showed an increase in confidence in public speaking.

Our target for both Project Achievement outcomes discussed above was 787. Due to low participation numbers resulting from the COVID-19 global pandemic, we were not able to survey enough students to reach our target. However, we did meet our target percentage of students that would demonstrate knowledge or gain confidence (target was 70% - exceeded in both outcomes). Statewide, student participation in 4-H Project Achievement decreased by 26.2% from the 2019-2020 program year. For these outcomes, we survey students that participation in district-level competition. Statewide, participation in district Project Achievement competitions decreased by 32.8% from the previous program year.

Volunteer Recruitment - ACMs recruited 111 new volunteers. These volunteers contributed 1,115 hours of service to Georgia 4-H. Our target for new volunteers was 150. Recruitment efforts were restricted due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. We feel confident our volunteer recruit efforts will increase now that statewide shutdowns have lifted, and face-to-face programming has resumed.

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.