



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

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 377 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 152,040 active participants. Georgia 4-H is one of only a few state programs that use in-school program delivery coupled with out of school activities. Georgia 4-H continues to be 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 led to educational enrichment for young people. Continuous youth development efforts post COVID shut-downs was managed by Georgia 4-H staff, partners, AmeriCorps members, and volunteers to increase the statewide and local impact, which led to youth enrollment nearing the 2019 participation level.

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 six 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, marketing, and more, and served in Clayton, Emanuel, Jackson, Houston, Gwinnett, and the State 4-H Extension offices. During the summer months of 2022, two VISTA Summer Associates directly served in two counties, enhancing youth health habits, and supporting food security. Summer Associates served in Fulton and Peach 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 28 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. During the 2021-2022 program year, we added District Team Leaders to the program. Team Leaders provide peer support to their fellow members and help build a sense of team spirit.

Currently in the eleventh 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, Carroll, Catoosa, Cobb, Cook, Dougherty, Evans, Gordon, Hancock, Haralson, Houston, Laurens, Morgan, Oconee, Oglethorpe, Peach, Spalding, Sumter, Tift, Toombs, Whitfield, and Wilkes.

Impact

These programs have reached traditionally underserved clients, while increasing diversity in both Extension programs and leaders. Formerly, 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, 77 Georgia 4-H VISTAs (the FTE of 59) have raised more than \$736,400 in cash and in-kind resources, produced more than 4,100 marketing pieces, and recruited and/or coordinated more than 3,850 volunteers. The 4-H Summer Health Squads provided by VISTAs serving in Fulton and Peach Counties reached over 90 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 2,416 pounds of food in June and July.

During the eleven years of the AmeriCorps State Grant, 229 full, 144 half-time, and two minimum-time members have served more than 428,617 hours, reached over 185,150 students through in-school programming, 137,241 students through 4-H Project Achievement, and recruited more than 2,180 volunteers that contributed nearly 23,900 hours.

The AmeriCorps State grant has grown significantly since July 2012. The first three-year grant provided 16 MSY per year. The current program year we were awarded 23 MSY, with the largest per program year at 35 MSY. Georgia 4-H is the fourth largest AmeriCorps State program in Georgia, among 25 grant recipients. Our current total award is \$993,600 (\$496,800 in federal funds with a

dollar-for-dollar match required). In addition to the \$4,528,578 in federal funds awarded since 2012, the AmeriCorps State grant has leveraged over \$1,065,032 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 2021-2022 program year is provided below. We are pleased to report that all outputs and outcomes were met - as per our normal performance. As an organization, we continue to build up program participation that decreased due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 global pandemic. This is reflected in the AmeriCorps State program as well.

4-H In-School Educational Club Meetings - A grand total of 14,765 students were served by ACMs in in-school educational club meetings. This exceeded our goal of 12,000. To measure content area learning, ACMs administered a total of 1,990 surveys to students after in-school educational club meetings. Of that sample set, 90% of students (1,799) showed an increase in and/or demonstrated knowledge of the content presented.

4-H Project Achievement - A grand total of 12,512 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, 1,103 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, 88% (967) demonstrated knowledge of best practices in public speaking or showed an increase in knowledge of best practices in public speaking and 85% (935) indicated confidence in public speaking or showed an increase in confidence in public speaking.

Volunteer Recruitment - ACMs recruited 161 new volunteers. This exceeded our goal of 130. These volunteers contributed 1,458 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. At the end of the 2021-2022 program year, ACMs were surveyed regarding their overall satisfaction with the program.

- 84.21% strongly agreed and 15.79% 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.
- 79.85% strongly agreed and 21.05% 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.
- 78.95% strongly agreed and 21.05% 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.
- 94.21% strongly agreed and 15.79% agreed with the following - As a result of my service with Georgia 4-H, I am better prepared for future employment.

This satisfaction with their service term along with the skills and experiences gained has resulted in many ACMs pursuing employment with Extension, specifically 4-H. Of the 221 distinct individuals that have served as an AmeriCorps State member (many serve multiple years), 22% (48) have been hired into Extension, many as 4-H Agents.