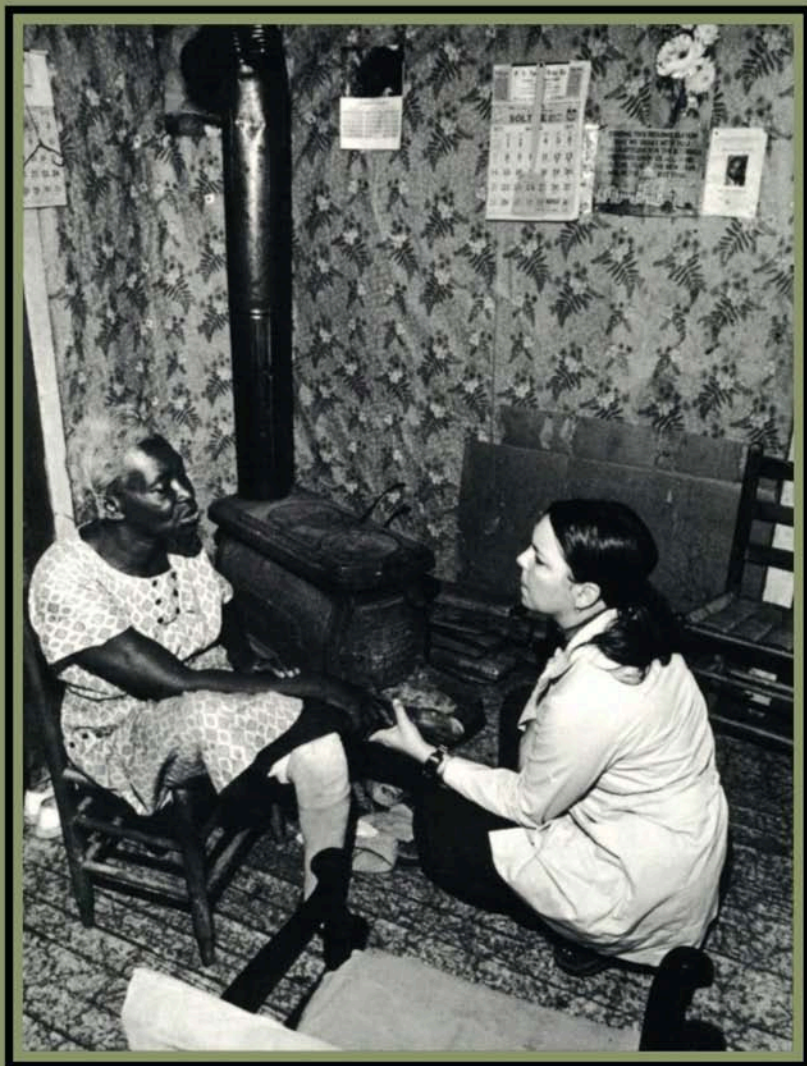


# IN SERVICE TO AMERICA

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*A History of VISTA in Arkansas*



MARVIN SCHWARTZ

**IN SERVICE TO AMERICA**



VISTA nurses, Sherry Prozzo (left) and Carol Brage (right) make a home visit to a multiple sclerosis patient in Newton County. The Volunteers served with Ozark Opportunities in 1972. (Note the Winthrop Rockefeller poster on the wall of the home.) *Photo courtesy of ACTION*

**IN SERVICE TO AMERICA**

*A History of VISTA in Arkansas*  
*1965–1985*

*Marvin Schwartz*  
*Preface by Governor Bill Clinton*

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*Dedicated to Suzanne  
for her patience and support*



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# *Preface*

*By Governor Bill Clinton*

The progress of history is not limited to the grand sweep of major events or milestone occurrences. History is linked to the progress of people—to the slow and sometimes imperceptible changes that pass from one generation to the next. Arkansas has achieved great progress in the past and our people reflect an established heritage that projects Arkansas as the “Land of Opportunity” where any individual with the desire for self-improvement can succeed.

The federal anti-poverty program, *vista*, brought an influx of dedicated Volunteers to Arkansas. Young and old, *vista* Volunteers believed in self-help and self-advancement, but they also accepted the challenge of initiating that progress in others. *vista* Volunteers motivated Arkansas for positive change—change which is still evident today as we continue to urge communities to work together. I have seen time and time again the success that occurs when a community decides to help itself by pulling together its resources to provide jobs for its people and solve other problems.

Contemporary Arkansas history owes much to the groundbreaking efforts of *vista* Volunteers. Some of our major economic development programs today bear a striking similarity to the community development efforts initiated by *vista* some ten to twenty years ago.

The *vista* concept was ingenious. Its goal was great social advancements, but it began its work in what we now see as the obvious place: in the communities where that need was the greatest. *vista* taught us about the importance and power of people building from within.

*vista* projects relied on the essential dignity and hard work of people within poverty communities and demonstrated that the effective use of re-

## PREFACE

sources and planning would produce positive results, but only if the people themselves maintained the effort. VISTA Volunteers did more than just teach; they inspired others to learn.

Of course VISTA workers were not free of controversy. Change in those days was often accompanied by strife, but the work on balance had a very positive impact.

I am pleased to see this volume bringing due recognition to the dedicated individuals and communities that were involved in the first twenty years of Arkansas VISTA programs. As the first book of its kind in the nation, *In Service To America: A History of VISTA in Arkansas* should inspire other states to support written histories of their VISTA experiences.

In the largest sense, this book may rekindle an awareness and provide new vigor to public service programs weakened by budget cutbacks and anti-government rhetoric in recent years. Marvin Schwartz has written a historical and inspirational work whose value will likely increase with the passage of time.

**IN SERVICE TO AMERICA**



## *Introduction*

VISTA, Volunteers in Service To America, has been called the most radical of all anti-poverty programs to emerge from President Johnson's War on Poverty and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Depending on which side of the community power balance one placed oneself, the concept of radical action or in VISTA's case, government sponsored activities intended to change the nature of society, could be seen as either a threat or a source of unlimited pride.

For the have-nots, the impoverished, those at the depths of poverty, VISTA offered an unprecedented opportunity. It placed highly motivated and trained volunteers directly in the community to help local residents improve their lives. Volunteers brought needed skills to the poor. They were builders, teachers, lawyers, and nurses. They helped qualified individuals receive government services such as food stamps, welfare, and medical assistance. They brought about changes local communities had been unable to achieve on their own.

For those already in power, those who resisted change, VISTA was nothing short of subsidized anarchy. Unlike previous welfare programs that preserved the status quo with handouts only to those who remained in need, this was a government effort that altered society by turning need into constructive energy. Some politicians quickly realized that a new awareness growing from VISTA efforts could vote them out of office. Charges of every conceivable type

## INTRODUCTION

were raised against the Volunteers, and state governors were pressured to remove them from projects.

VISTA projects have been part of Arkansas and national history since 1965. Through the focus of a state VISTA program, a detailed portrait can emerge that illustrates national culture, national character, self image, and the acceptance of change. This book will use the Arkansas VISTA experience as a mirror of an unwritten national history. The projects and personalities explored in these pages are distinctly Arkansan, but in a larger sense they are Southern, and in the largest sense they are unmistakably American.

More than 80,000 Americans had served as VISTA Volunteers by the program's twentieth anniversary in 1985, and approximately 1,300 of them served in Arkansas assignments. During their active service, Volunteers receive a subsistence wage, an income that generally qualifies them for food stamps. This was part of the plan—to have the anti-poverty change agents on the same economic level as the people being served, living among them and seeing the world from their perspective.

Originally conceived as a domestic Peace Corps, VISTA has survived federal budget cuts, policy changes, and specific attempts to kill the program. The human service work of VISTA continues in Arkansas and nationally, but in greatly reduced numbers than in previous years. In 1985, twenty active projects in Arkansas supported literacy tutoring, youth employment training, food banks, and other efforts.

An assessment of the long range results of VISTA must include the program's impact on the Volunteers themselves. To a large degree, many Volunteers conceded they gained more than they gave during VISTA service. Yet personal gain can be repaid by a lifetime of involvement.

For locally recruited Volunteers, a commitment to their home communities has been strengthened. Many national Volunteers found themselves absorbed into the local culture and have remained in Arkansas after their service.

Former Volunteers, both local and national, possess a distinct

## INTRODUCTION

sense of community involvement. They can often be found in community affairs such as school boards, city planning, church activities, and youth programs. They are rarely involved in political office.

Human service is the distinct trademark of VISTA. Volunteers were trained according to program guidelines of helping people help themselves. In Arkansas, that often meant overcoming barriers of racism, mistrust of outsiders or anything that smacked of government, and the economic or political inertia of local power groups. VISTA was Arkansas' first concerted effort by outside organizers to bring about change, and many of its projects have achieved long range community improvements.

VISTA projects have directly related to the human need most evident in each environment. In Arkansas, that need has been partially met through recreational programs for urban youths in Pulaski County and medical and agricultural projects in eastern Delta counties. Through craft cooperatives for Ozark folk artists and literacy projects across the state, VISTA has served the people in the most personal means possible.

Arkansas has cause for pride in its VISTA program. The Lee County Co-operative Medical Clinic at Marianna, initiated by Volunteer efforts in 1970, is one of the finest institutions of its type in the nation. The Arkansas River Valley Area Council, a community action agency at Dardanelle, was until 1986 the nation's oldest ongoing VISTA sponsor, and ARVAC Rural Folk Crafts help preserve Arkansas culture by marketing the work of local folk artists and craftsmen.

VISTA also offers an understanding of the darker side of regionalism. Events in Marianna (Lee County) and Texarkana (Miller County) are comparable in the racial resistance each community brought against VISTA projects. In the east, Lee County's agricultural tradition created an atmosphere of violence and confrontation. In the southwest, Miller County had no Old South heritage to preserve, and there a level of doubletalk and diversion was used to hide true community feelings. In Marianna, Volunteers were di-

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rectly insulted by county officials. In Texarkana, they were called “good boys and girls” whose efforts were said to be an unnecessary duplication of existing services.

Arkansas VISTA projects offer a unique understanding of the state identity and its position within a national perspective. VISTA is people. It is who we are and who we are becoming, an unseen and immeasurable reality. It is the premier of all poverty programs because it promotes the concept of loving your neighbor.

VISTA raises the question of morality and survival. It offers an understanding of why the “good” is necessary and what efforts must be undertaken to maintain that awareness. VISTA is a program of great resurrecting power. It has planted a seed from which later generations are reaping the harvest.

# **NATIONAL VISTA HISTORY**

*VISTA Origins and Initial Identity*

*1962–1969*

*The Nixon Years and Program Changes*

*1969–1976*

*From Carter to Current Status*

*1976–1985*



## *VISTA Origins and Initial Identity* 1962–1969

Initial federal interest in a domestic volunteer service program resulted from efforts by the Attorney General's office and the Justice Department to curb juvenile delinquency and adolescent street gangs in the early 1960s.

While the federal government was busy with domestic issues of desegregation lawsuits, forced school integration, and discrimination in federal jobs and housing, while civil rights activists were being routinely harassed, beaten and jailed in the South, the Peace Corps, already two years old, was achieving significant results overseas.

The realization that professionally trained personnel were least likely to work well in urban ghetto situations led federal planners to propose a "domestic Peace Corps," a service intended as more than just another well meaning intervention program. A key element in this early recognition was author Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, which awakened the nation to the existence of the "invisible poor."<sup>1</sup>

President Kennedy's 1963 State of the Union Address referred to the benefits of a domestic service program patterned after the Peace Corps, and early that year his proposal for a National Service Corps was issued. The program called for volunteers to serve for one year with minimum stipend. Local community agencies would plan their own projects and supervise the volunteer efforts. The only requirements were that Volunteers be eighteen years

old, American residents, and have no dependents under eighteen years.

A bill was drafted for congressional consideration of the National Service Corps, yet despite widespread citizen support, the bill barely gained necessary approval in the Senate and never appeared for a vote in the House. Primary opposition to the bill was directed at what was considered creative federalism, direct grants to state and local projects that bypassed state-level veto power. In its original form, the NSC did not require state governors' approval of projects. That veto power was added later on, but following Kennedy's assassination in November 1963 discussion of the bill in the House ended.

One of President Johnson's first major domestic initiatives was the War on Poverty, and he selected Sargent Shriver, then director of the Peace Corps, to head the new program. Within a few months, passage of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), an umbrella agency for a variety of anti-poverty programs such as the Job Corps, Upward Bound, Neighborhood Youth Corps, and Head Start. The National Service Corps concept, renamed Volunteers In Service To America, was included within OEO. Shriver, evidencing an enthusiasm as first OEO director, announced in 1965 that by 1976, the bicentennial year, there would be no more poverty in America.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning, VISTA was unique among its colleagues. It offered neither job training nor funding. VISTA was people.<sup>3</sup> From the lofty OEO rhetoric—"the elimination of poverty in the midst of plenty by opening to everyone the opportunity to work and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity"—Johnson drew his remarks, now held as a VISTA anthem, addressed in December 1964 at a White House ceremony to the nation's first twenty Volunteers. Their job, he told them, would be:

. . . to guide the young, to comfort the sick, to encourage the down-trodden, to teach the skills which may lead to a more satisfying and rewarding life. No aspect of the War on Poverty will be more important than the work you do. . .

## VISTA ORIGINS AND INITIAL IDENTITY

Your pay will be low; the conditions of your labor will often be difficult. But you will have the satisfaction of leading a great national effort and you will have the ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their fellow man.

The following month, the Volunteers, ranging in age from twenty to eighty-one, received six weeks of intensive training and were placed in year-long assignments in California migrant camps, in Arkansas rural communities, in the Hartford, Connecticut, ghetto, and in the hollows of eastern Kentucky.

Glen Ferguson, first national VISTA director, predicted a first year recruitment of 3,500 Volunteers, a group he described as “mentally alert, physically able men and women who would like to give a year of themselves to the poor.”<sup>4</sup>

Material compensation for service would be a monthly stipend of fifty to seventy-five dollars and a termination stipend of fifty dollars for each month of service. Volunteers would also receive travel compensation, health insurance and other federal benefits though they were not strictly considered federal employees.

By the end of 1965, more than two thousand Volunteers were living and working among the nation’s impoverished, and another one thousand Volunteers were preparing for placement. Despite some early growing pains, the program was flooded with applicants, a sense of mission demonstrated by young people in a response to the positive image of the program.

An alternate view of VISTA’s early support suggests that the high public enthusiasm for Johnson’s War on Poverty was the response of a guilt ridden populace, a “Great Society” embarrassed by its new-found affluence, wanting to assuage a middle class unease by helping.<sup>5</sup> This motivation, if it truly existed, may also have been a collective guilt resulting from the Kennedy assassination and a desire to shape a Kennedy legacy, which Johnson offered.

Padraic Kennedy, deputy and acting director of VISTA from 1966 to 1970, recalled the program’s early years from a different perspective:

## NATIONAL VISTA HISTORY

In the earliest days, from 1965, it was hard to get people to join, and VISTA was considered a poor relation of the Peace Corps. The things that changed that and hurt Peace Corps recruiting were the war in Viet Nam, which decreased the desire for international service, and the urban race riots which focused attention on American poverty in a dramatic way and made people want to serve at home rather than overseas.

National recognition of the program also grew as a result of organized promotional campaigns. Magazine and newspaper ads, radio programs and TV spots were run, and inserts were slipped into monthly mailings to millions of retired government workers. The 1967 VISTA film "A Year Toward Tomorrow," narrated by Paul Newman, won an Academy Award for best documentary. Additionally, Volunteers were allowed consideration for deferment from military service. Because of the universal allowance of such deferments, most Volunteers mistakenly believed VISTA service created an automatic deferment.

Adding to the misunderstanding were recruiting efforts held at college campuses across the nation. Some national Volunteers recalled large banners proclaiming "Get Your Draft Deferment Here!" hung above the VISTA recruitment table at their college student union. But local selective service boards still had to be notified of a man's VISTA status. This excerpt from a 1968 letter by Joe Bruch, OEO program officer for the southwest region and Arkansas, was part of many such letters to local draft boards:

We feel that Mr. . . . will make a significant contribution to our efforts in the "domestic war." Please consider his VISTA application in classifying his draft status.

Training of VISTA Volunteers during the 1965–1969 period was modeled after training for Peace Corps Volunteers, even to the duration of the program. Because Peace Corps Volunteers received twelve weeks of training for a two-year service, VISTA Volunteers received six to eight weeks of training for their one-year service. Early VISTA training took place in contracted university centers in various parts of the country. Individuals were mostly nationally re-

cruited, middle income college graduates, some with specific professional skills but most with basic liberal arts degrees.

A popular training model from this period began with a two week stay at a low-cost urban hotel or boarding house where trainees were introduced to the ideas of poverty through discussions, lectures, community walks and visits. This was followed by two weeks living in with an underprivileged family in a local community and two weeks back in the urban setting to review their experiences.

Where a person was recruited or trained had little or no connection with where he or she eventually served. A person could be recruited in New York, trained in Colorado, and serve in Florida. Volunteers rarely knew where they would be assigned until the last days of training, often because the position the trainee would fill hadn't previously existed. Program development and Volunteer training often occurred simultaneously.

Additional training programs of this time created two unique Volunteer types. One was the Program Development Planner (PDP), national Volunteers specially trained in community planning. The PDP Volunteer acted as a bridge between the VISTA-sponsoring agency and its community, helping them develop programs to resolve the area's problems. The PDP Volunteer laid the groundwork and helped design programs to be carried out by national Volunteers that followed. This was VISTA's attempt to assist Community Action Agencies in understanding and dealing with local problems.

The PDP Volunteers, with their quiet, orderly manner, left an impression in many communities that later Volunteers would conduct themselves with a similar decorum. In those cases, the aggressive, confrontational attitudes of some national Volunteers came as quite a surprise.

The other unique type of Volunteer trained during this time was the Summer Associate. These were college students who served in a special ten-week VISTA program during their summer break from school. Though they might be enrolled in a distant college, the stu-

dents were often residents of the area or state they were assigned to serve. One purpose of the VISTA Associate program was to make potential sponsors aware of the value of the VISTA program and have them request more Volunteers in the fall.

In these early years, most volunteers were placed in local projects under the sponsorship of Community Action Programs (CAP), an OEO creation that enabled state and local non-profit agencies to receive federal funds for anti-poverty activities. With a federal budget of more than eighty-two million dollars to be dispersed in its first year, OEO encouraged the states to establish CAP agencies and many state OEO directors and technical assistants were quickly appointed.<sup>6</sup>

Volunteers could only be sent to an area at the request of the state or local agency or nonprofit organization, and they would work under the direction of the sponsoring agency. State governors were given veto power for the start up and continuation of all projects, but the primary Volunteer work was left to the CAP agency to decide. VISTA assignments shaped themselves into three distinct types:

1. Community Empowerment or Organizing—projects that attempt to raise group consciousness to social inequalities and develop the leadership to effect changes.
2. Basic Services—projects that provide direct assistance to individuals or communities through education, recreation, welfare counseling, transportation assistance and other services.
3. Physical Projects—projects that built or restored playgrounds, community centers, parks, that provided energy conservation services or other improvements to an individual or a community's physical environment.

Of these three project types, community empowerment or organizing efforts created the most resistance. Local power structures—the political, financial, and ethnic interests that shaped local societies—did not approve of Volunteers organizing low income communities to the point of changing the balance of power. Those complaints were made known by members of Congress, urban mayors, and governors.<sup>7</sup>

VISTA National Director William Crook recognized the lack of defined mission as early as 1967. In a staff memo that year he emphasized community organizing as a means and not an end. Social change could only be achieved within certain restraints, one of which was VISTA's ability to "take the heat," Crook wrote.<sup>8</sup>

According to Mimi Mager, former executive director of Friends of VISTA, a nonprofit organization that commemorates the program and lobbies for continuing federal support, the early Volunteers' political actions set up adversarial relations.

VISTAS were involved in some controversial issues, and local politicians felt threatened by that. In issues such as strip mining legislation, VISTA was trying to address the root cause, not just band-aid assistance. This became very threatening to local officials.

Because OEO would not spell out proper behavior for the Volunteers, a fine line was drawn between legitimate VISTA goals and unacceptable militant action. Congress took the initiative and passed a series of restrictive amendments aimed at curtailing Volunteer and CAP employee activities. Most notable among these was the 1966 Hatch Act which prevented Volunteers from engaging in partisan politics and voter registration, prevented Volunteers from being involved in union organizing, and limited the use of the VISTA name for publicity.

Additionally, OEO trainers instilled in the Volunteers a sense of their being change agents who would help people help themselves. As criteria for project approval, Volunteers had to come in direct contact with the poor, and project activities had to produce an improvement in the lives of the poor.

In its first five years, VISTA had quickly established itself as a program where social education could easily be mistaken for social agitation. In its attempt to remedy the conditions that caused poverty by encouraging the poor to take action on their own, VISTA and the War on Poverty were seen by some as an example of the government financing a revolution against itself.<sup>9</sup>

If any such revolution was forthcoming, the next period of VISTA

## NATIONAL VISTA HISTORY

history decisively altered the program direction. Under a new presidential administration, VISTA struggled to survive yearly budget battles and federal mandates that altered and then attempted to eliminate the program.

## *The Nixon Years and Program Changes* *1969–1976*

VISTA had reached an impressive level of public support in its first few years. Applications received in 1968 were more than the OEO budget could absorb, up 120% from the preceding year. Federal analysts cited a new national awareness among youth, as three-fourths of newly assigned Volunteers chose VISTA over the Peace Corps because it served America first.<sup>10</sup>

The traditional Volunteer was still nationally recruited, college educated, and generally came from a comfortable economic level that made VISTA his first real involvement in poverty. Few Volunteers reflected a minority or low income background at this time. Those who had climbed up from poverty were, for the most part, not yet ready to return and help others do the same. Nor were there yet many older Volunteers in the program, a status probably influenced by the arbitrary assignment of training and project locations.

College campus recruiting efforts yielded the idealistic and energetic Volunteers for whom a one-year service period was their limited chance to change the world. It became rapidly apparent to them and to VISTA administrators that more than idealism and special skills were needed. Volunteers needed to be more sophisticated and capable because the problems they faced were more complex than had been realized.

Resistance to community empowerment and organizing projects was also great, and Volunteer efforts were often cut short by a local

power base that viewed their work as unnecessary agitation by outside trouble makers. Recognition of a need for “inside leadership” led to a new direction in Volunteer recruitment, according to Kennedy.

By late 1966 we had begun to rechannel our thinking. . . . We began to realize that to serve the proper communities justly we needed Volunteers who understood those communities—the residents themselves.<sup>11</sup>

A major shift in recruiting emphasis was begun in the late 1960s, and a larger effort was made to recruit older Volunteers and local residents of the low income communities. This shift would place locally recruited Volunteers (LRV) or community Volunteers in fifty-six percent of all Volunteer positions by 1975.

A VISTA team concept of national and local Volunteers was designed to appeal to two groups: the community Volunteers were expected to relate well to people in the poor community, and the national Volunteers were expected to have an impact on the middle class. The new recruitment drive was accompanied by a change in Volunteer training from the uniform national program of University-based training to a more regional focus.

An increasing emphasis was also placed on skills training at this time, and Volunteers who possessed skills associated with direct service projects—teachers, architects, lawyers, nurses, etc.—were highly valued. Though training now took place within the region or near the area of service, trainees rarely knew the location of their project sites until the last days of training.

Training contracts were offered nationally through a closed bidding system. Special divisions of major corporations such as General Electric, Westinghouse, Volt, and others, entered bids on the cost of the training programs and the six-week curriculum.

In many cases, state and project directors would come to the training event to review a new batch of Volunteers, seeking those with the skills their areas needed. The closing days of these training projects were often occupied with abrupt interview sessions in which directors tried to make personal assessments of the Volunteers.

This was often followed by prolonged bartering sessions among the directors for the individuals they believed could best serve their projects.

While many VISTA projects were still establishing an initial presence across the nation, the program as a whole was becoming more specialized. This was a forced change that came as a result of federal policy. Attitudes of the Nixon administration created the emphasis that brought in more local Volunteers, regionally based training, and a program shift from organizing to more direct service projects.

The 1968 election of Richard Nixon signified the beginning of the end for OEO as it was originally conceived. CAP agencies across the nation had been created under OEO guidelines and had sponsored the most controversial VISTA projects. According to Diana London, current federal branch chief of VISTA, the result—a natural tension between the agencies and the Volunteers—was both expected and welcomed by OEO leaders.

OEO looked to the VISTA program to reform the CAPs and make them more responsive to the needs of the area. There were bound to be clashes between the power structure and what the Volunteers tried to do.

Community organizing activities by Volunteers contributed to controversy, but Nixon had other ideas about what OEO agencies should attempt and to whom they should be accountable. By mid 1969 he had reassigned Head Start to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and the Job Corps to the Labor Department. His reorganization plan would eventually place VISTA under a totally different guidance policy than it had with OEO, but until 1971 he took little action other than to lift the semi-official draft deferment on new and current Volunteers.<sup>12</sup>

C. R. Lane, acting VISTA director during this period, was more explicit about the new direction for the agency:

VISTA is no longer going to be this place where you can do your own thing . . . especially if that means confronting the establishment. We hope, predict, and are striving for a new type of volunteer who will work within the system and lower the noise level.<sup>13</sup>

During this time, the Nixon administration was quietly preparing plans to eliminate VISTA altogether. David Pass, a former Volunteer doing research in Washington for a thesis on VISTA claims to have discovered these plans when a page outlining them was left behind at a copying machine by a federal cleric. Pass said he brought the information to Volunteer leaders giving them time to organize their reaction.

The response by national volunteers might have been predicted. On July 27, 1970, 350 Volunteers, carrying with them proxies for another 1,200, arrived in Washington, DC for a three-day conference. The trained community organizers held a rally and formed the National VISTA Alliance, a Volunteer organization that demanded VISTA and OEO be returned to their leadership positions in the War on Poverty.

Though a confrontation had begun, it was immediately clear which side had the upper hand. Nixon's response was to propose zero funding for VISTA in 1971, in effect kill the program. It was his way of dealing with the program after initial attempts had failed to bring it under stronger control. Congressional support kept VISTA intact, but executive influence brought on the next phase of the reorganization plan. In July 1971, the federal program ACTION was created to serve as an umbrella organization for all existing volunteer agencies.

On the surface level, it may have been time for VISTA to restructure its emphasis. The 1960s were over. Time was up for the period of consciousness building and social pride, the intangible results of empowerment projects. In the 1970s, the emphasis was on achievement and economic results.

In the most simplistic terms, ACTION supporters might have defended the new federal emphasis as a change from making people feel good to making them do good. It also gave the Nixon administration a positive image by making the gesture of restructuring an existing volunteer program, thereby discrediting critics who held the Executive Office as an opponent to such programs.

Under its new ACTION guidance, VISTA began to slowly feel the restrictions placed on it by an unsympathetic administration. Yet

some federal employees view this change as far more deliberate than it might appear. Bob Torvestad, current ACTION administrator for Arkansas and Oklahoma, said the 1970 VISTA rally and march in Washington reportedly infuriated Nixon.

That march was the single event that caused national recruiting to go downhill. National training contracts also ended about that time. The use of local Volunteers had nothing to do with the shift from OEO to ACTION. The march actually got Nixon mad. That was something.

Nixon's exaggerated concern over radicals created the paranoid atmosphere which distinctly characterized his administration. He perceived OEO as a haven for radicals and a symbol of change. His decisions to reform the War on Poverty could be considered a response to the voters who placed him in power, a voting block clearly not among the OEO clientele group.

Yet according to Bruch, the assignment of VISTA to ACTION was Nixon's reaction to not being able to phase out the program.

Because they couldn't beat it in Congress, they changed VISTA's direction. Nixon's people hated OEO and they tried to administer us to death. I was constantly in trouble. I screamed back a lot. Because mail directed to me would be intercepted by the regional director, I had my friends in Washington send it to my home. That was how I was able to get the training done.

Bruch also referred to an effective chain of command through which the Nixon administration made known to subordinates its approval of certain actions taken against the VISTA program. One of these may account for a difficulty in locating project and volunteer records from the program's early years.

Destruction of obsolete records is a standard government policy, and searching for fifteen- or twenty-year-old files from CAP agencies that had little or no administrative background may be a futile task. But critics of Republican attitudes toward VISTA have suggested another reason why pre-1971 records are now so difficult to locate. These critics believe that following the shift from OEO to ACTION, early VISTA records were deliberately destroyed by Republi-

can zealots hoping to eliminate any future rallying of Democratic strength.

Speculation or fact, the truth may never be known. In a post-Watergate analysis of the political subversions carried out by Nixon appointees, the premise gains some credibility. It is further substantiated by Bruch, serving in the Austin, Texas office at the time, who recalled this scene:

When OEO changed to ACTION, the Republicans went crazy. They tossed entire files into huge roller containers kept in the halls for incineration of materials. I climbed into those bins and saved many of the records. It was a maniacal attempt, malicious on their part, to do away with VISTA services.

In terms of specific projects, the shift from OEO to ACTION resulted in a decline of CAP agencies as VISTA sponsors and a gradual move toward more moderate and well established sponsors such as state departments of energy or social services, United Way agencies, and even municipal governments.

Volunteers were no longer simply assigned to an agency or an area where poverty existed. The mid-seventies emphasis on direct services called for specific projects and Volunteer assignments. Communities needed to identify their own problems and sponsors needed to establish Volunteer job descriptions with specific time-phased goals and objectives.

Accompanying the increasing use of low income, local Volunteers, training for specific skills was primarily assigned to the sponsoring agency. Federal training had diminished to six-to-ten day pre-service orientation programs which mainly emphasized the concepts of ACTION volunteerism.

Shriver voiced his objection to placing VISTA within the ACTION structure, stating that Volunteers would never “rally around an organization chart” and that the basic fault of the program, in the Volunteers’ view, was an emphasis on “appearance of change rather than substance.”<sup>14</sup>

Nixon’s significant election victory in 1972 gave him the chance to further define VISTA according to his personal concepts of volun-

teerism. Michael Balzano, his appointee as ACTION director, implemented the idea that VISTA, originally intended to be a service organization, had been distorted by OEO, trainers and the Volunteers themselves.<sup>15</sup>

The Republican concept of volunteerism placed its support more in the private than the public sector. Nixon's attempts to restrict and gradually diminish VISTA were continued by President Gerald Ford. Ford planned for the program's complete elimination with a long range budget culminating in zero-funding for Fiscal year 1979. That plan was dramatically reversed when President Jimmy Carter took office in January 1976.

*From Carter to Current Status*  
*1976–1985*

During the four years of the Carter administration, the VISTA program was redirected toward what was considered its original principles. Sam Brown, the 1960s activist appointed as ACTION director, was chosen to revive the program. One of his initial impressions was how close VISTA had come to not surviving.

. . . there was no request in the federal budget for money for the next year and some of the Volunteers, all talented people, were being restricted more and more to administrative jobs in social service agencies. Gone was the emphasis on citizen participation. Gone was the idea of poor people helping themselves. VISTA, one of the government's most unusual programs, was on its way to becoming quite ordinary.<sup>16</sup>

Brown chose to return the program to an emphasis on community organizing. A national VISTA grants program began directing Volunteers and support resources to organized groups or networks. These groups allowed local problems to be addressed by small projects that otherwise would not have the structure to support Volunteers.

Some of these organized groups served as “umbrella agencies,” placing Volunteers in local projects while the larger, more organized agencies provided administrative support. Other groups were national organizations such as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, ACORN, and others.

The policies of this new approach were stated in the *VISTA* Guidance Papers, published in 1978 by the Office of the Program Director. The proper role of a Volunteer, the document stated, would be working to empower groups to influence the decisions that affect their lives. The goal of improved conditions for the poor would result from an increased access to decision making through cooperative efforts.

The basic concept of the Guidance Papers was that empowerment leads to decisions that provide control. In other words, the poor must develop the capacity to help themselves. Projects approved for *VISTA* sponsorship could, for example, work to create a library, but Volunteers could not serve as the librarian. Volunteers could create a mechanism for tutoring high school drop outs, but they could not themselves simply provide a tutoring service.<sup>17</sup>

For Marge Tabankin, *VISTA* director during this period, this was a reaffirmation of the principles which led to the program's creation—"assisting the poor to break the bonds of dependency by working through the democratic process."<sup>18</sup>

During the Carter years, the program weathered a renewed assault of criticism resulting from its return to community organizing, and in January 1981, a budget of thirty-four million dollars (highest in the program's history) supported nearly five thousand Volunteers nationwide at approximately nine hundred anti-poverty community projects.

But administrative support was soon to swing back in the other direction. Tabankin's assessment of the program's challenge in the 1980s, published six months before the Reagan administration took office, predicted that only positive, long range planning would be able to surmount a looming economic crisis.

The 1980s will challenge grassroots organizations to take the initiative. Self-help groups . . . have to go on and develop positive alternatives, a vision of the kind of place the neighborhood ought to be a few years down the road. They have to put in place the structure and the programs necessary to fulfill their visions. . . . The challenge of the 1980s, both for *VISTA*

and the grassroots, self-help groups VISTA works with, is to keep working and innovating in the face of economic retrenchment.<sup>19</sup>

The challenge was issued in a more threatening manner by James Burnley, first VISTA director under the Reagan administration, who claimed the program had in recent years “funded and supplied Volunteers to numerous left-wing groups.” He went on to state that VISTA “wasn’t worth its cost, wasn’t eliminating poverty, and isn’t a proper function of the Federal Government.” Burnley’s tirade also included the boast that he was working as hard as he could to be “the last VISTA director.”<sup>20</sup>

Those remarks are difficult to fathom in light of Volunteer ability to mobilize resources far above the costs of their training, placement, and support. Program analysts have estimated the average cost per Volunteer at approximately \$7,700 with an average Volunteer mobilization of more than \$26,500 in funds and services otherwise not available to low-income communities.

Nevertheless, VISTA’s record budget of 1981 has been reduced to seventeen million dollars. As of June 1958, there were 2,400 Volunteers assigned to 450 anti-poverty projects across the nation. Public and Congressional support has again refused to allow the program to be abolished, but the Reagan administration has been attempting to change the agency’s focus.

Current emphasis has been moving it away from advocacy and organizing and toward the provision of community services such as food banks and literacy programs. Suzanne Wise, VISTA director appointed in January 1985, said the program is trying to meet basic human needs but avoid having Volunteers involved in confrontation situations in communities.<sup>21</sup>

According to Mimi Mager, VISTA has been more changed by the Reagan administration than by any other, especially by its appointment of people who are set on killing the program. Wise is the fifth VISTA director since 1981, and the program is suffering from a changing perspective of what it ought to be, Mager said.

In the past, local communities addressed the problem. Now this administration says unless you’re working in A, B, or C, don’t come looking for

VISTA assistance. Now Washington is telling local communities what the problems are. This is directly in conflict with the philosophy of VISTA.

The lack of administrative support is also reflected in reduced recruitment efforts that are ignoring a population base with a willingness to volunteer its services, Mager added.

The age of volunteerism has not passed, and the opportunities for service are different, not fewer, than what they once were, Diana London believes. She contends that VISTA has been a flexible program and able to adapt to changing trends. A need did not previously exist for current VISTA projects such as food banks and shelters for the homeless. Because these projects reflect how federal anti-poverty funds are spent, VISTA has had to follow where the poverty funds were allocated, London said.

For Bruch, though he continues as an ACTION employee, the current status of VISTA is too far removed from what he believes to be its most effective operation.

I am for the elimination of the program now. Yet I love VISTA and my life has been significantly changed by it. But the times have changed too much. Various administrations have destroyed or gutted how it should work. Without the budget and philosophy to make it work, I see it now as almost fraudulent. You spend 90% of the time just fighting to keep it alive.

But VISTA continues, and more than eighty thousand Americans have served as Volunteers since the program began. In its present form and probable future transformations, it will continue to provide the "change agents" whose goal is simply to help people help themselves. Flexibility has been key to VISTA survival among changing political views.

At the program's core remains the commitment to place Volunteers directly in the poor communities, a placement that has created life-long dedication to fighting poverty. At the present time, the programs that seem to work best are those that exhibit the broadest base of community support.

For a state program director like Bob Torvestad, current policy requires he approach his job with a different attitude than ex-

hibited by earlier staff. He sees himself as much less idealistic than earlier administrators.

I'm not so concerned about what could or should work, no pragmatism or wonderful objectivity. It's more a learning of things that do or don't work and who can do them. Programs need to know what they're about and have the continuity to wait on us. If you need immediate service, we're not your resource.

## Notes

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3. VISTA, *15th Anniversary Book*, June 1980, Pg. 26.
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5. Ben Seligman, *Permanent poverty: An American Syndrome*, Pgs. 168–170.
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9. Victor Ray, Pulaski County EOA executive director, *Arkansas Gazette*, April 6, 1966.
10. *Arkansas Gazette*, July 4, 1968.
11. VISTA, Pg. 26.
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13. Pass, “VISTA, 15 Years. . .” Pg. 4.
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15. Pass, “VISTA, 15 Years. . .” Pg. 4.
16. VISTA, Pg. 6.
17. *VISTA Guidance Papers*, Office of the VISTA Director, March 1978. Pgs. 3–6.
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19. VISTA, Pg. 62.
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21. *The New York Times*, July 9, 1985.



## **VISTA POLICY AND CONCEPTS**

*VISTA Service Philosophy*

*Volunteers as “Change Agents”*

*Training*

*OEO and ACTION Criticism*

*Empowerment vs. Direct Services*



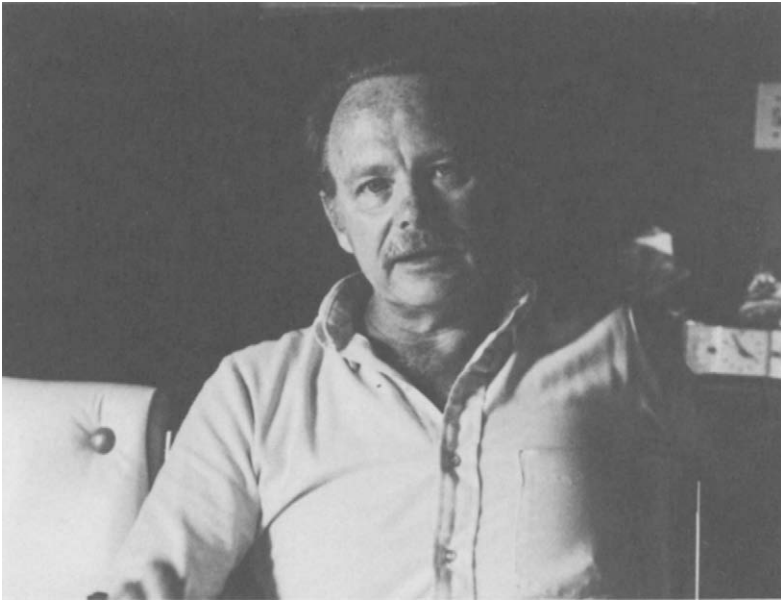
## *VISTA Service Philosophy*

To view the essence of VISTA policy in the concept of self-help or maximum feasible participation of poor people in the decision-making process is to focus on the end result of VISTA service more than the service itself. This establishes the program as another "means to an end." VISTA certainly had the goal of readjusting economic levels in society, but it was the techniques VISTA brought to its mission and whom those techniques influenced that made the program so unique.

Social welfare programs that promote passive acceptance of handouts, that encourage people to be recipients rather than producers, are based on the concept of preserving the status quo. They are stop-gap measures that postpone a degeneration of conditions but do little to improve them.

W. L. "Sonny" Walker, a former Arkansas OEO director, has commented on the appeal of these types of programs to the American public.

. . . [the programs] make us proud because we have temporarily kept the peace, stopped the fires, bandaged the wounded, hired and silenced the aggressive, and provided the sedative to put the poor to sleep and dream an impossible dream and then to awake to the reality that things haven't changed. . . . We must inject a spirit of honesty and sincerity of purpose into the programs.<sup>1</sup>



Joe Bruch, Arkansas program officer

VISTA's spirit of honesty and sincerity was embodied in the Volunteers living in poverty communities. Beyond the initial benefit of closing the gap between community values and the Volunteers' middle class backgrounds, VISTA living arrangements forced a Volunteer understanding and identification with the people served.

Many consider this the real genius of the program, for it is one of very few such arrangements that deliberately blurred the line between giving and receiving. In many cases, Volunteers spoke of gaining as much as they gave, of learning new values which have directed them far beyond their original year of service.

Most important to the community, however, was the personal level of communication the Volunteers could bring. Available assistance programs were no longer hidden within foreign environments of county courthouses or social services offices. The Volun-

## VISTA SERVICE PHILOSOPHY

teers, according to former Arkansas program officer Freeman McKindra, were like a walking resource to the community.

People began to see the Volunteers as someone who could get help out. Available 24 hours a day, they became part of the institution. They made it easier because they were living there.

Most communities were very good at sifting out what they needed to do and what resources were required, but very few had knowledge of available programs to help them, McKindra said. This lack of knowledge was due in part to a lack of outreach staff among the agencies offering help.

Housing support, for example, was readily available through the Farmers Home Administration or Housing & Urban Development, but there was no way of making the connection between the federal agencies and the people. Volunteers who could bridge that gap became extremely valuable to their communities, McKindra said.

By living among the poor on their meager stipends, Volunteers had to rapidly shed any false motivation which might have brought them to their service, any "arms length" attitude about helping the poor but not getting personally involved. Self help was the ultimate goal, but personal involvement was the VISTA's unique contribution to national anti-poverty efforts.

Ted Wilson, former VISTA supervisor of a six-county area in east Arkansas, commented on his role of providing Volunteers and projects with administrative support.

My approach was that I let the Volunteers find out for themselves what they were and weren't able to do. . . . I really did not have answers to the multitude of problems they encountered, which frustrated me as well, as I felt a responsibility to provide them. . . . I feel I made it possible for the Volunteers to develop and utilize what skills they had with the least amount of interference.

Personal involvement of Volunteers provided the motivation to poverty communities and individuals. In some cases, it was a young VISTA worker whose palms grew callused from working a chopping

## VISTA POLICY AND CONCEPTS



Freeman McKindra, Arkansas program officer

hoe in the fields of Mississippi County, who sweated in a community cannery to store her harvest for later distribution. In other cases, it was an urban planner in Pulaski County helping to hoist a recycled railroad tie into place for part of a community playground.

The essence of VISTA service is more than self-help. It is the ac-