

Americorps VISTA Information Sheet **For Projects on Montana's Food System**

Americorps VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America) is a national anti-poverty initiative that places full-time volunteers with local projects. VISTAs are college graduates that commit to a project for one year in exchange for a modest living stipend and an education award. They are trained to be community organizers that *build capacity*, and create new programs and systems that benefit people in poverty. The **Montana Campus Compact (MTCC)** is a consortium of nineteen colleges and universities that support civic engagement through campus-community partnerships. **MTCC VISTA** is one of four such programs in the state which provide an opportunity to respond to a community poverty need in four defined areas of concern, one of which includes the demand for emergency food resources exceeding supply in Montana. For more information on the MTCC VISTA program, visit: www.mtcompact.org or call Cody Lillstrom at (406) 243-5451.

How do food systems relate to poverty?

The decline of Montana's agricultural economy has contributed significantly to poverty, and sufficient access to fresh and nutritious food is a challenge for low-income citizens. VISTAs working with local organizations have been addressing this need. For example, *FoodCorps* is a group of five such volunteers that work with colleges and schools to purchase local foods, thereby supporting farmers and ranchers and offering healthier foods in schools and on campuses. In another project, a VISTA helped to complete an assessment of the Bitterroot Valley's food system, including recommendations on how to strengthen community food security. In Helena, a VISTA worked to build community gardens within walking distance of all of the city's residents, which not only creates positive community spaces but helps people to save money by growing their own food. In Glendive, a VISTA works on a *Farm to Table* project that revitalizes rural communities by building a sustainable food system. There are numerous ways a VISTA can focus on Montana's food system to fight poverty.

What does a partner organization or host site need to provide for a VISTA?

- ✚ A partner organization, which may or may not be based at the project's host site, must pay a cost match with MTCC for a VISTA. A first-year cost match is \$2,500, which increases to \$4,000 for the second year, and \$6,500 for the third and final year of the VISTA's service.
- ✚ A host site or partner organization must designate a project supervisor, responsible for completing the application packet (proposal), attending a minimum of two MTCC VISTA trainings, and overseeing the project's progress toward stated goals.
- ✚ Host sites must provide a modest workspace for their volunteer.
- ✚ A host site or partner organization must sign a Memorandum of Agreement (MOU) with MTCC.

If you are interested in applying for a VISTA, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- ✚ VISTAs are college graduates and capable volunteers, but do require a **significant investment of time** from a supervisor.
- ✚ There are two classes of MTCC VISTAs per year, one starting in January and the other in July. Proposals are due approximately three to four months before the VISTA begins. MTCC offers guidance in developing a proposal, and information can be found at www.mtcompact.org.
- ✚ VISTAs generally do not provide direct services to low income citizens, such as distributing food at a food pantry, and instead work on projects that build infrastructure to continue serving a need once the volunteer is gone. This means that a VISTA cannot be recruited to do administrative or other everyday activities at the host site.
- ✚ All VISTA projects, and especially those working on food systems, require a work-plan with clearly defined goals that can be realistically achieved in one year. As previously mentioned, these could include creating community gardens or doing a food system assessment within a defined geographic area, or increasing local foods at a specific institution. A strategy for achieving project goals is loosely defined by MTCC VISTA, which includes an evaluation of the community need, organization of community partners, and the implementation and analysis of a strategic plan.
- ✚ VISTA is one of several Americorps programs, each with their own focus and structure. In addition to poverty alleviation, strengthening Montana's food system could potentially fit into the focus of other Americorps programs, such as public health or the environment. As a year-long and full-time volunteership, VISTA is one of Americorps's most involved programs, which may or may not be the right fit for your organization. For general information on the different Americorps programs, visit www.americorps.gov and click on "*Which Program is Right for Me?*" For a list of Montana's active Americorps programs and contact information, visit the Montana Office of Community Service at www.mt.gov/mcsn or call (406) 444-5547.