

**A History of VISTA and the Politics Surrounding the Agency:
Focused on Oregon, 1964-1998**

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*Nearly everybody in their life needs somebody to help them.
I don't care whether you're the greatest self-made man...
The fact is, somebody has helped you along the way.¹*

--Sargent Shriver, former Director,
Office of Economic Opportunity

Introduction to VISTA

This paper will explore the impact of the volunteer service of Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) on the communities it has helped and the national politics that have kept the agency from living up to its potential. Often referred to as the “Domestic Peace Corps,” VISTA is a volunteer program in which volunteers actually live in the poverty-stricken community to which they are assigned, whether it be an Indian reservation in New Mexico, a barely self-sustaining rural Appalachian community, or an inner-city slum in Newark. The Peace Corps, the program that VISTA is based upon, sends volunteers around the world to work in poverty-stricken areas to work and live and to perform a variety of tasks, from working in rural hospitals to organizing school houses in areas where there previously were none. In VISTA, volunteers enlist for one year of service to perform a variety of services from organizing community centers, to tutoring high school dropouts and improving literacy skills among the poor, to working to improve living conditions in Mexican migrant camps. The agency originally shipped volunteers off to work in the far corners of the country, but this practice has been modified in recent years to place volunteers in areas they are familiar with, so they can work more efficiently. The role of a VISTA volunteer, which has not changed since it

¹ Henry Hampton, *America's War on Poverty: A Discussion and Viewer's Guide to the PBS Series* (Boston:

was put into practice, is to raise people up to a level to where they could take over the programs of the volunteer after his or her departure. Some common examples of this include the volunteer teaching a small group of people to read so they could teach others in their community to do the same, or organizing community centers that could be run by the locals after the volunteer left. VISTA served a variety of purposes in the War on Poverty, through many turbulent presidencies, and continues to do so, even though its size and funding fail to reflect its potential. As will be explained later, the agency is now a part of Americorps, President Clinton's contribution to fighting poverty. Both the Nixon and Reagan administrations have taken VISTA on something of a roller coaster ride, and it is still no larger than it was in the days of President Johnson's War on Poverty—even though millions of poverty-stricken Americans have benefited as a direct result of the agency's services. VISTA has the potential to greatly improve the living standards of millions more poor Americans, but it must be given more funding and be excluded from partisan politics if it is to make any serious progress.

Even though it has been difficult to demonstrate the success of the agency in the short-run, VISTA has taken a big step in advancing the quality of life and raising living standards in many communities that would not have had much of a chance otherwise. As will be demonstrated in this paper, there were political problems associated with the War on Poverty and several presidencies that have adversely affected VISTA, and, as a result, funding has been limited since the Nixon Administration. Before we go into any depth on VISTA, it is important to understand the context into which the program falls. The years following the advent of the War on Poverty were somewhat chaotic and

controversial, and to understand why the War was not a complete success from the start, it is important to take a look at what was happening behind the scenes in Washington.

The Politics of the War on Poverty

An event that shook the nation, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on 22 November 1963, gave way to one of the most progressive yet turbulent presidencies of the twentieth century. The vice president who would take the reigns of one of the most powerful governments in the world only a few short hours after Kennedy's death was full of ambitions and motives, but he also had goals and walked into the job in full stride. When Lyndon Baines Johnson moved into the White House, he soon realized he would be unfavorably compared to Kennedy by everyone—the media, Congress, and especially the eastern liberals, which included the still-grieving Robert Kennedy, a group that did not particularly care for the new president. It was to be a comparison he would have a hard time living up to, but Johnson was a politician's politician, he “wanted to set world records in politics, as a star athlete would in sports. ‘Get those coonskins up on the wall,’ he would tell the people around him.”² Johnson was a man with a mission—there were goals he wanted to accomplish and social legislation he wanted to pass.

The eastern liberals, of whom JFK had been the epitome, saw Johnson as having a second-rate education, as being rather conservative, and they resented the fact that he was a southerner (he grew up poor in Texas). He was not involved in intellectual circles like Kennedy had been, he was not a war hero, and he was not as young and invigorating as

² Nicholas Lemann, “The Unfinished War,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1988, 53.

the former president.³ From the day he was given the presidency, LBJ knew he would have some tough expectations to meet, but he wanted to be seen ~~a~~ having his own presidential identity, not as an incompetent working in the shadow of a fallen American hero. At the end of a briefing by a former Kennedy aide on, among other things, the progress of the antipoverty program, Johnson said to him, “Now, I want you to say something about all this talk that that I’m a conservative who is likely to go back to the Eisenhower ways or give in to the economy bloc in Congress. . . . If you looked at my record, you would know that I am a Roosevelt New Dealer. . . . [And] to tell the truth, John F. Kennedy was a little too conservative to suite ~~x~~ my taste.”⁴ A highly skilled and powerful politician who knew how to get things done, Johnson would have little trouble proving this.

Before his assassination, Kennedy had a group working on the prospects of an antipoverty program, but it is unlikely he would have launched an all out “war” on poverty. The presidential elections were rapidly approaching the following November and Kennedy had wanted to do something for the suburban middle class (who provided the majority of his votes) as well as for the poor. Had he expended all his energy fighting poverty and ignored the middle class, it would have cost him dearly in the election.⁵ The Kennedy administration, after launching the Peace Corps in 1961 and witnessing its success, also came up with the idea for a similar, domestic agency—the predecessor of VISTA—but it was quickly shot down by Congress. Following the death of President Kennedy, Johnson was obligated to continue Kennedy’s legislation as well as the poverty

³ Ibid., 38.

⁴ Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 141.

plan, but he did not want to be seen as following in the footsteps of the former president. He would have to do something bigger and better if he was to prove that he was a New Dealer and a follower of Roosevelt rather than Kennedy. In short, what LBJ wanted to do was to “out-Kennedy Kennedy” as well as to do something beneficial for society.⁶ So he went with the poverty program, only he made it bigger and better. The following statement made by Johnson to Congress on 8 January 1964 addresses this issue and illustrates the tremendous scope of the program he would be launching:

‘Let us carry forward the plans and programs of John F. Kennedy, not because of our sorrow and sympathy, but because they are right. ... This Administration today, here and now declares an unconditional War on Poverty in America. ... Our joint Federal-local effort must pursue poverty, pursue it wherever it exists. In city slums, in small towns, in sharecroppers’ shacks, or in migrant worker camps, on Indian reservations, among whites as well as Negroes, among the young as well as the aged, in the boom towns and in the depressed areas.’⁷

There were other reasons to combat poverty than just moral and political issues, however. The cost of poverty creates an immense tax burden for the rest of the country and, though the economics of it are complex, it makes sense. According to the US Senate, in 1964 approximately twenty percent of the US population earned an annual household income of less than \$3,000, or below the poverty level, and two-thirds of those families earned less than \$2,000 annually. If those families earning under \$2,000 could have been raised to a level of earning just over \$3,000, their annual income as a group would have increased by \$7 billion. This would have stimulated the economy and would

⁵ Ibid., “The Unfinished War,” 39.

⁶ *A History of Community Action in Missouri*, Videotape, Charles McCann, Moderator John Joines, Economic Security Corporation, 1998.

have raised tax revenues, lowering the cost for everyone else. And, if a large enough portion of the poor were brought out of poverty, the need for public services such as police, fire, and health services would have decreased as well, further reducing the tax burden.⁸ Many government officials looked upon it as a long-term investment in the poor.

Johnson pushed the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) through Congress on 20 August 1964, less than a year after the assassination of Kennedy. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) was established in the Executive Office of the President as the administrative agency in charge of the VISTA and its related programs in the War on Poverty. Whomever Johnson appointed to plan out the act would be director of the OEO and head the War on Poverty, a position Bobby Kennedy wanted. The man Johnson put in charge of the program in February of 1964, however, was well qualified for the job as well as a good a choice politically, as Johnson could have made. R. Sargent Shriver was, and continued to be, director of the Peace Corps and had acquired a reputation as one of the most successful agency-heads in Washington with that position. He had gotten the huge agency up and running and had dealt successfully with Congress, the media, and the liberals. Shriver was also, in the eye of the public, a Kennedy—he had been President Kennedy’s brother-in-law and Civil Rights advisor. In reality he wasn’t quite a Kennedy, and Johnson’s choice in electing him to run the War on Poverty was also a way to one-up the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, who Johnson had been feuding with since the death of his brother. In social historian Nicholas Lemann’s words:

⁷ Jim Masters, “A History of Community Action Agencies,” *National Association of Community Action Agencies Conference Program*, 1989, 1.

Shriver was closer to embodying the Kennedy legend, as it came together during 1964, than Robert Kennedy was. Kennedys were aristocratic, handsome, heroic. But Shriver was more aristocratic (coming from an old Maryland family), more handsome (conventionally, anyway, with his barrel chest and resolute chin and jaw), more heroic (he had a distinguished though unpublicized war record, having served four years in the Navy in the South Pacific).⁹

Shriver was a highly respected and well-qualified individual in Washington, and has had many important things to say in regards to the poor. In taking on the role as director for the War on Poverty, he intended to put his experiences and insights to use. His philosophy was simple enough: He believed the US was the most capable nation in the world to rid itself of poverty. Shriver made several points which are still relevant today, arguing that the United States was the richest nation in the world, the most experienced in the field of economics, and the only nation to possess a wealth of excess food while millions went hungry.¹⁰

Shriver's Strategies for Fighting Poverty

Shriver knew that simply giving money to the poor was no way to solve the problem, but he believed the US had no excuse not to eliminate poverty. His plan for dealing with poverty, in which VISTA played a key role, raised the conditions in which the poor lived. He saw education and improved job skills as the key to accomplishing this. Shriver broke down the three main elements of the War on Poverty into job

⁸ US Senate, *The War on Poverty and The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964: A Compilation of Materials Relevant to S. 2642*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 1964, S. Doc. 86, p. 40.

⁹ Lemann, "The Unfinished War," 47-48.

¹⁰ Sargent Shriver, "The War on Poverty: Toward Economic Equality," *African Forum* 2, no. 2 (1966): 112.

creation, improvement of education and job training, and the creation of new social services. He outlined this plan as follows:

1. Job creation: meeting the immediate economic and psychological needs of the employable.
2. Improved education and training: creating useful workers of the currently unemployable and increasing the potential for academic achievement of all age groups on all levels of education.
3. Betterment of the overall environment: ensuring the lasting effects of success in the first two areas. This does not mean an arbitrary raising of standards to meet mythical middle-class norms. Rather, it means creating the necessary conditions for the poor to move freely in the society, without fear or impediment. It does not mean that they must accept middle-class goals and systems, but rather that they will be enabled to compete within them with a fair chance of success.¹¹

As director of the OEO until 1968, Shriver instituted many poverty programs. Many of them were successful and some were not. A few examples of successful programs (which are still functioning today, though some in different forms) are VISTA, Job Corps, Upward Bound, Head Start, health and legal services, and community action.

The central program of the OEO, which VISTA volunteers often worked closely with, was the Community Action Program (CAP). It was this program which caused the most controversy. Since Roosevelt's New Deal, several poverty programs existed in the United States—welfare, job programs, and Social Security to name a few. However, there was no coordinated effort between them, nothing binding them together.

Community action is what Kennedy's group had come up with, and, in theory, it would coordinate the services of these agencies as well as set up planning boards in local communities that would decide what the poor in each neighborhood needed. Extremely localized in design, these boards could then design poverty programs specifically for the

community they worked in, without interference from federal, state, or local governments. As will be demonstrated, Community Action Agencies (CAAs) could do almost anything and would have no central backbone, no main plan of attack. The program was to be small, efficient, and not nearly as expensive as establishing a huge, bureaucratic agency that would have been more to Johnson's liking.¹²

It was this flexibility, as well as flexibility in funding, that proved to be the CAP's major basis of criticism. One problem from the start was that community action was subject to broad interpretations. People wondered just what exactly it did or what purpose it was intended for. The slogan invented to accompany it failed to improve the situation any. "Maximum feasible participation" was the idea that CAAs would involve as many of the poor as possible to participate in the local agencies. They would tell the local boards what their problems and needs were, and the boards would design programs to fit those needs. It was a good sounding idea and was somewhat effective, but it contributed to the overall ambiguity of the program.

In the poverty programs of the New Deal, the poor had hardly been given a role in fighting their own plight, but "the OEO require[d] the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups to be served."¹³ It is interesting that the CAP was taken on a pioneering spirit and took input from the poor whom it was helping, but this was perceived by many local powers as an organizing of the poor, which made many state and local politicians very nervous. VISTA volunteers were often requested by local CAAs and the two agencies, to this day, work closely together. They share same

¹¹ Ibid., 113-1114.

¹² Lemann, "The Unfinished War," 47.

¹³ Shriver, 118.

goal—to raise the people in local communities to a level to where they, and sometimes the CAA, could take over the programs set up by the VISTA.

‘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 communities where that need was the greatest. VISTA taught us the importance and power of people building from within.’

--President Clinton, 1994¹⁴

A Look at VISTA from the Inside-Out

While running the Peace Corps, Sargent Shriver had been exposed to various elements of poverty on his travels around the world. He went to a leper ward in Malaysia in the early sixties visiting volunteers when he found a charming, attractive young girl working, taking care of people who were in such bad shape that some were even missing limbs. Reflecting back on seeing this, Shriver said, “and I thought to myself, no one could get this girl to work in that ward just by offering money, to go in there everyday and all day for two years for a pay check. That girl was working in the leprosarium not because I told her to or anybody else told her to. She worked there, I think, for love, sentimental as it may sound.”¹⁵ Whatever unique energy he found in the Peace Corps, he successfully duplicated in VISTA, the “domestic Peace Corps.” There was something more to the story than just a will to help people—the lengths volunteers would go to in

¹⁴ AmeriCorps*VISTA, *30th Anniversary* (Washington, DC: Corporation for National Service, 1994), 1.

¹⁵ Sargent Shriver, “Students and the War on Poverty,” *Colorado Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1968): 8-9.

fighting poverty were astounding, as is illustrated by the following experience of Shriver's:

I was up in Alaska over the last Fourth of July visiting VISTA volunteers in the town of Nome. ... Down in the middle of [the] slum area was living one VISTA volunteer. He had a house that wasn't as big as a Hollywood bathroom. One little wood-burning stove in it. One window, one chair, and a wooden bed. The shack was made out of corrugated tin backed up with wallboard or paper. He lived there at 40 degrees below zero, day in and day out! You ask yourself, why? What's he trying to prove? If you asked him he probably could not answer. The right words have been used too often—too cheaply. The only way that he—and others like him—can express their minds, hearts, or souls is through action.¹⁶

VISTA was a program that brought out the best in its people, who were working for something more than money—there was more motivation than just earning a paycheck at the end of the month. For some there may have been a natural tendency to want to help those in need, or a satisfaction in seeing the people they have been working with making changes for the better because of their own efforts. For others it was a way to gain a new insight to life, an experience to remember. VISTA volunteers ranged in color and in age from 18 to over 80, but the most common were white, college-age men and women. For many college students, sick of school or having recently graduated, joining VISTA was a good way to take time off to experience life in a different light.

The VISTA experience was not an easy one, and volunteers were told that from the start. As President Johnson, in his message to the first group of VISTAs on 12 December 1964, said, “your pay will be low; the conditions of your labor often will be difficult. But... you will have the ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

fellow man.”¹⁷ Throughout the sixties, the VISTA training program was a six-week, intensive, live-in program that consisted of workshops, classroom seminars, as well as fieldwork meant to simulate situations the volunteer might face in the field. The training program was meant to prepare volunteers for a wide variety of tasks, as well as to weed out the ones who were not up for the job. During training, volunteers received a low stipend intended for personal expenses (in 1968 it was 95 cents per day)¹⁸ which would increase upon completion of training to a low monthly living allowance of fifty dollars in 1968;¹⁹ the stipend for volunteers currently ranges from \$590-750, depending upon the location of the volunteer.²⁰ The intention of such a low monthly living allowance was to make volunteers feel like they were a part of the poverty-stricken community in which they were living and working.

Training centers were established in different regions across the country, from New York to Atlanta to Chicago to Eugene, and whichever training center a volunteer was sent to reflected the region he or she would be assigned to work in. The volunteer, however, would have no idea where they would be going until completion of the training. For example, a volunteer attending training at the University of Oregon could be stationed anywhere in the western region, whether it be in rural eastern Oregon, Hawaii, or Alaska. Requests for volunteers were made by local CAAs, tribal or village councils, or other local organizations when the need for a one became apparent. Duties of volunteers consisted of just about anything, from teaching illiterate adults to read, to organizing

¹⁷ Deb Potee and John Zelson. “Brief History of VISTA.”

<<http://www.libertynet.org/zelson/living/hist.html>> (20 October 1998).

¹⁸ Office of Economic Opportunity, *VISTA Volunteer Handbook* (Washington, DC: OPR), 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ AmeriCorps*VISTA, “How to Become a AmeriCorps*VISTA.”

community groups, to working with legal services volunteers to exercise tenants' rights in a big-city slum.

VISTA volunteers were sent to poverty-stricken areas across the country, most common of which were urban settings, rural areas, Appalachia, migrant camps, and Indian reservations. Ghettos and city slums contained nearly half of the nation's poor in 1967, or an estimated five million families. Twenty percent of the average American city was a slum or depressed area, and 45% of the nation's crime and 55% of its juvenile delinquency was coming from the ghettos.²¹ One fourth of all VISTA volunteers were sent to work in urban slums, and the volunteers' jobs consisted of whatever services were needed in their area. Some of the tasks volunteers worked on included training people for jobs, organizing apartment-building cleanup projects, talking dropouts into returning to school, helping to organize neighborhood clubs, teaching both adults and children how to read, as well as establishing day-care centers and testifying before city officials on behalf of slum-building residents.²² Many of these projects could easily be taken over after the volunteer's departure by locals, fitting in to the VISTA ideology of "a hand up, not a handout." Oftentimes volunteers would be faced with situations in ghettos where they would be working primarily with minorities who might have had a hard time accepting a middle-class white person coming in and trying to change things. Volunteers were prepared for dealing with these issues in training, but it was up to the volunteer to utilize his or her own skills as best they could to deal with their situation—some things people could never be prepared for until coming face to face them, and then it was up to the

<<http://www.friendsofvista.org/how2bvol.html>> (27 October 1998).

²¹ Office of Economic Opportunity, *VISTA Serves* (Washington, DC: Office of Economic Opportunity, Community relations Division, 1967), 1.

volunteer to do whatever they could to make the best of the situation. But that was, and continues to be, the job of VISTA volunteers, going in to communities and making the best possible use of the skills they brought with them.

A good example of a volunteer who worked in an urban setting is Richard Bruno, who has been, since his graduation from VISTA, an instructor of history at Portland Community College (PCC). Bruno graduated with a Masters degree in history from the University of Ohio in 1968, and because his draft deferment ran out, he was obliged to perform some kind of service for the country. Where he grew up, in Boston, he said you were expected to either join the military or perform some kind of service for the country—"nobody questioned that, it was automatic."²³ He couldn't join the service because of his poor eyesight, and he objected to the war anyway. While studying in Ohio, he had chosen to minor in Southeast Asian history and quickly came to realize that the Vietnam War was not a war he wanted to support. While he was opposed to fighting in the war, he did not oppose joining the Peace Corps or VISTA as a service to the country. He originally wanted to join the Peace Corps, but when he found out he would be sent to the jungles of Malaysia rather than to Indonesia where he had wanted to go, he opted for VISTA.

After being accepted into VISTA, Bruno was sent to the University of Oregon for training. He spent his first three weeks in training in Eugene, where he attended lectures, discussions, and saw poverty experts speak. He spent five days in Grants Pass learning about the poverty programs, and three or four more in Springfield living with a poor

²² Ibid.

²³ Richard Bruno, interview by author, 22 November 1998. All subsequent quotes and references to Bruno and his experiences are taken from this interview, unless otherwise noted.

family of which the father had been hurt in a sawmill accident. The family was paid for taking Bruno in, and he was able to experience living with a poverty-stricken family. For him, it did not have much effect because he had grown up poor. However, he said that for most new VISTAs who were often from wealthier families, it would have been a learning experience. Most of the other VISTA trainees, a good mix of men and women, were recent graduates of good colleges and universities, but very few had graduate degrees and practical experience. Bruno said his real training came on the job in Salem, Oregon, where he was placed.

He had three weeks of on-the-job training in Salem with two other VISTAs, Alice and Roy Jon. The group had been requested by the Community Resources Office (CRO), part of the local CAA, to pick up where another group of VISTAs was leaving off. The work of the trainees was closely monitored by the CRO during the training period, and it reported directly to the state VISTA office. The old VISTAs also helped to prepare the new group for their jobs, but Bruno said his initial reaction was that he was “disappointed at how little the other VISTAs had accomplished.” They were supposed to develop a tutoring program and a teen recreation program, but they had not gotten very far in meeting these goals. This was one of the initial problems with the agency, Bruno said—many volunteers were not cut-out for the kind of work they were expected to perform, and it was not until later that the agency began to better-screen the volunteers it hired.

The main goals Bruno had when his group took over were to develop a tutoring program for high school dropouts and to “do something for young adults,” as there was “nothing for the older youth to do except hang out in bars.” The issues the VISTAs were

concerned with were drugs, alcohol, and teen pregnancies. The goals of the volunteers were set by the Community Resources Office, and young adults were the main focus.

Though his BS was a teaching degree, Bruno's first experience with tutoring came from tutoring a Korean nurse, who needed to pass the GED to get certified to work in the United States. After successfully helping her pass the test, he tackled the tutoring program, which was geared for high school dropouts and would be free of charge. To get the program off the ground, he was given resources and guidance from VISTA, and went to Portland Community College to see how they ran their programs. To find clients and volunteer tutors for his program, Bruno placed adds in local newspapers, called retired teachers, and talked to church groups. He then matched tutors up to clients based on their experience and the needs of the clients. Eventually, he had 65 volunteer tutors involved in the program and had to find someone who would run it full time. The CRO hired Janet Coleman, Bruno's future wife, to take over the job. As he put it, "the VISTA mission was to work yourself out of a job," and he had accomplished just that.

A project that all three of the Salem VISTAs worked on was setting up a coffee house for young adults. There already was one in the neighborhood, but there were lots of drugs and booze going around inside, as well as other illegal activities. Young adults needed a "legitimate" place to go to hang out, Bruno said. The First Methodist Church of Salem donated its basement for the project and paint was donated by a local hardware store. The volunteers were able to paint and clean the place up with the help of some Willamette University students. After opening its doors, they hired musicians from Salem, Portland, and Eugene to perform and a "hippie musician" named Ray to manage

the coffee house. The place was only open on weekends to those eighteen or older, but it was successful—as Bruno recalls, Ray was turning a small profit when he left VISTA.

Other programs Bruno helped to establish were recreation programs for kids. One was a once-per-week hang-out in the basement of a church for black teens, which there were few of in Salem. Dances were held on the weekends and music was performed for the youth. Another was a summer recreation program for low income children. Crayons and other such materials were donated to the program and high school girls were hired to run it. This was not too successful, as the park Bruno was using was in a poor location. However, Roy Jon set up a similar program in a better location and got a good turnout. To advertise these programs, they printed up leaflets and distributed them throughout the neighborhood, mostly door to door.

In all of his programs, Bruno was continuously “working [himself] out of a job,” as was his goal. When asked about the overall success of them, he said there was “no question the tutoring program had an enormous impact on people’s lives.” Helping dropouts to get GEDs, a role currently filled by Community Colleges, gives them a much better chance of getting jobs or getting back into school. The success of his work with young adults and teens was “pretty hard to judge, but it helped to keep kids from getting into trouble they may have otherwise.” Bruno also believes that part of the success of these programs was that they showed community leaders just how much could be accomplished to better the community. The fact that many of them continued to be run by the community after his departure in July, 1969 is, in his words, “the best measure of success you could possibly ask for.”

Despite his successes, Bruno admitted that there were some problems with VISTA in the early years. There were a number of volunteers who came from upper and middle class backgrounds and good schools who lacked the social skills to work successfully with low income people. VISTA, Bruno claims, “did not do a good job of filtering the people coming into the program.” It was “such a new idea” and there were bugs, but “there was lots of enthusiasm” in the agency and in its volunteers. Another minor problem he saw with the agency was that there was very little contact and follow-up with the volunteers by the administrators—the structure was loose.

Another form of poverty VISTA volunteers dealt with was rural poverty, which was concentrated mostly in the southeastern part of the US, and afflicted nearly 16.5 million Americans in 1967. Most of them were living in small communities or villages, often in the South: “. . . A Southerner’s chance of being poor is roughly double that of a person living elsewhere because of the South’s chronic rural poverty.”²⁴ Nearly half of all 4,000 VISTAs were sent to rural areas, and half of those were placed in the South and Appalachia. Jobs for volunteers consisted of rebuilding old school buildings, tutoring children, and holding night classes for working adults. They started farmers’ cooperatives, recreation programs, and counseled parents on family planning and on their children with disabilities. One of the main efforts of VISTA in rural areas was, however, dealing with illiteracy. In one case, a young volunteer held reading classes for unemployed coal miners in a broken down old school building.²⁵ In what was America’s second wealthiest county, Montgomery, Maryland, there were two poverty pockets, in one of which was Toby Town, where “87 Negroes live[d] in ‘12 shanties, one junked

²⁴ Ibid., 4.

automobile and a packing crate.’’²⁶ One VISTA helped the community to install a new water pump and build a sanitary outhouse. She also turned an abandoned building into a community center and arranged to have tutors working with the town’s 25 children.

Appalachia has always been a little behind the rest of the country in terms of progress made in the twentieth century. Once home to coal miners and railroad workers, this isolated region is now one of the poorest areas in the US, and in 1967 one of every three families lived on an income of less than \$3,000, putting them below the poverty line. An estimated one million people lived in counties with no hospitals, and many children in the region had never seen a dentist.²⁷ VISTAs in Appalachia developed community councils, taught the unemployed to read and write, and paved the way for communities to build new roads and bridges. One anonymous twenty-year old volunteer, Eleanor, in reflecting on her time spent in an Appalachian community in the foothills of Kentucky, admitted she didn’t get done as much as she would have liked during her stay. When she first arrived, she saw that people had been dumping garbage in the creeks for generations. She decided to make this her first objective, thinking it might only take a few days to clean up. Nine months later she had secured a truck and had talked a county judge into bringing a bulldozer in to build a dump. She also admitted that the people she worked and lived with, however poor they were, were happy the way they lived—they didn’t realize their own potential, as she put it.²⁸ Eleanor learned the hard way that fighting poverty was not always easy, but she was making progress in helping get them on the track of raising their standard of living.

²⁵ Ibid., 5.

²⁶ Ibid., 6.

²⁷ Ibid., 8.

Migrant workers were also in need of the kinds of services VISTAs provided. In 1967, one fourth of all seasonal agriculture work across the US was being performed by migrants, earning an average of \$1,000 a year. Migrant families were the most under-educated group in the country, and the average child had only finished the fourth grade. In order to survive, many of these families were forced to travel to wherever the crops were growing at that time of year, making it difficult for children to attend school. Instead of going to school when they were not traveling, children were often needed to work with the family in the fields. The job of VISTAs who worked with migrants, therefore, often came down to educating them. After the farm work was done for the day, volunteers often tutored teenagers who had gaps in their education, worked with preschoolers to prepare them for school, as well as taught adults carpentry, sewing, English, and other skills to get along in American society.²⁹

Indian reservations, home to the people who once ruled this magnificent land of abundant resources, are now all too often home to some of the poorest people in the nation. Because of the poverty on reservations, disease, malnutrition, and high infant death rates have always been a problem. In 1967, the average life expectancy was 42 years of age. Family income averaged \$1,500 on reservations, half that of the poverty level and one-fourth that of the national average. Education averaged eight years, while the national average was twelve. Most Native Americans lived in households with no running water, safe heating, electricity, and their floors consisted of dirt. By 1967, VISTA was able to send volunteers to nearly half of all reservations in the US. That year, the Navajo reservation in Arizona, the largest in the country, was home to over fifty

²⁸ Anonymous, "VISTA in Appalachia: 'I'm Sure I'll Come Back...'" *VISTA Volunteer*, 11 July 1967, 21.

VISTAs. Conducting preschool classes, teaching health and homemaking classes for Navajo housewives, and teaching adult-education classes at night were the main duties of the volunteers. One volunteer, Sue Langs, developed a preschool which would be run by the Navajo when she left. She also worked as the bus driver, teacher, and cook for 35 four and five years olds in the program she developed. Before she left the reservation, she secured the services of a Navajo teacher and five aides to take over the program.³⁰

For many young people, joining VISTA was a way to explore other avenues of life they previously had not had a chance to. One such volunteer, Jerralynn Ness, an Oregon native, studied art and architecture in college and had been working for three years after graduating. She had done volunteer work in Tualatin, where she grew up, and had been thinking about joining the Peace Corps when the opportunity to join VISTA arose. She liked the idea because she could do volunteer work full-time and stay in the local area. After being accepted in 1973, Ness went into training. By this time, VISTA's budget had been cut enough by the Nixon administration, as will be explained later, so that the training lasted only five days in contrast to six weeks during Johnson's presidency. In Ness's words, the training was "vague" and was "more of an orientation to VISTA" than an actual training program, but there was a strong sense of enthusiasm among the volunteers.³¹ Her real training came on the job, which happened to be at the Washington County CAA in Hillsboro, of which she is now the Executive Director.

When Ness went to work at the agency, she was able to examine the needs of the people she was to work with and molded her job to best meet those needs. The people

²⁹ OEO, *VISTA Serves*, 9

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

she worked with had low incomes and often depended upon welfare for survival. She was amazed with the CAA because it held community meetings and actually respected and listened to the poor, the intended purpose of maximum feasible participation. Part of Ness's VISTA assignment involved working with retired people who failed to qualify for social security, but were instead getting SSI checks from the Welfare office. At the time she was working, the federal government was going through a transition and these folks began receiving their monthly checks through the Social Security Administration, but there were problems. As Ness described it, "checks were getting lost and people were falling through the cracks." Her assignment was as a community organizer, but she was also the advocate of many low-income people in Washington County. She taught and helped them to take the steps they needed to work within the system and to exercise their rights as citizens. She also established a paralegal service and represented people at welfare, food stamp, and social security hearings. On top of all this, Ness wrote and published a handbook for consumers, *Welfare Rights and Responsibilities*, which was handed out to clients at the CAA.

Ness considers herself lucky to have been placed at the Washington County CAA, as she was able to design her own position and work closely with people, community groups, and the Welfare and Public Service systems. In her words, her "assignment allowed for [her] to make a bigger impact than average," and she is grateful for that. She was amazed by the participation of the poor at community meetings, and how willing people were to take a stand when they were shown how to, as well as to exercise their rights in working within the system once they knew how. Ness admitted the experience

³¹ Jerralynn Ness, telephone interview by author, 8 November 1998. All subsequent quotes and references

definitely had an impact on her at a personal level because previous to her joining VISTA she hadn't really known what she wanted to do in life. After finishing her year of service, she took a position at the Washington County CAA, where she worked for ten years until becoming the Executive Director. Since then she has been able to make her vision of what she believes the CAA should be into a reality.

A much more recent graduate of VISTA, Beth Dasher, illustrates for us the fact that the agency is still alive and kicking, even after thirty years. Dasher graduated from George Fox University with a degree in psychology in December 1995. Her lifelong goal is to become a counselor, working with needy women in the community.³² When she saw an opportunity to join VISTA after graduating, she recognized it as a chance to gain valuable experience in working toward that kind of a career. Because it was not exactly what she wanted to do, career-wise, and because she did not know if she could survive on the \$600 per month stipend that VISTA paid, Dasher said she had a very difficult time deciding whether or not to join. She is now very grateful for deciding to join, as she thoroughly enjoyed the experience and decided to stay on for a second year, training VISTAs and working with a half-sized case load. After finishing her VISTA service in July 1998, she accepted a position on the administrative side of Opening Doors, the local agency she worked with as a VISTA.

Dasher's training consisted of a three-day orientation to VISTA, in which she was able to meet and network with other volunteers, and two weeks of on-the-job training. Since Dasher was the only volunteer in her training able to speak some Spanish, she was

to Ness and her experiences are taken from this interview, unless otherwise noted.

³² Beth Dasher, telephone interview by author, 3 December 1998. All further quotes and references to Dasher and her experiences are taken from this interview.

given the job of working with Mexican migrants who often spoke only Spanish. This was difficult, she said, because she was not by any means fluent. Her original placement was at an office that had been set up in an extra elementary school room in Tualatin. Later, the office was moved to the Washington County CAA in Hillsboro. Working with low-income, pregnant Hispanic women, she taught them to get onto health plans and how to take advantage of the resources available to them, which they generally knew little or nothing about. A lot of what she did involved helping the women get onto the Oregon Health Plan, helping find payment plans that would work for them, and helping them find places to get food in the community when they needed it.

One of the main challenges Dasher faced came from the fact that the local program she was working with, Opening Doors, was brand new and had almost no community recognition. However, after sticking with it for a while and working with other local agencies, such as the Washington County CAA, she was able to accomplish much more than she had expected. In her own words, the “program just grew and grew.” Another problem she faced was sticking to the VISTA ideology—clients were needy and could often be difficult. Some clients “wanted [her] to do everything for them,” like filling out health care forms and finding sources for food. Even though it would have often been easier for her to do these things for them, she had to stick to her goal, which was to teach them how to do these things themselves. As she put it, “if you give a man a fish, he can eat for a day, but if you teach him how to fish, he can eat for a lifetime.”

An interesting experience of Dasher’s happened on Thanksgiving-eve of 1996. At approximately three in the afternoon, she received a phone call telling her about a woman who had just broken down on freeway near Woodburn (a town thirty miles south of

Portland). The woman had heart problems, no money, and was with her two young teenagers. She was on her way to Dallas, Texas from Seattle for the Thanksgiving weekend and the brakes on her pickup had frozen-up, leaving her stranded in a foreign state where she had no friends or relatives. The woman called local churches, Community Action offices, towing companies, and even the Beaverton Police to find help. Finally she called Opening Doors, the last place she could think of to find help.

As a VISTA, Dasher had a twenty-four hour, seven-day a week responsibility to her job, even though she had the day off. Five other people from Opening Doors worked with her to try to raise money and to find a solution to the woman's predicament. While they were working, a coworker and friend of Dasher's called six towing companies before finding one that would donate its time to pick up the woman's car. After that, they were able to get money from Saint Francis Church in Sherwood to have the car worked on at Les Schwab, which agreed to fix it, charging only for parts. Dasher then made contact with someone who ended up housing the woman and her kids for the next two days and giving them a Thanksgiving dinner. It is experiences like these, knowing that you have reached out and visibly helped someone in need, and dedicated volunteers like Dasher that have made VISTA a successful poverty program. Like many other volunteers, she said there were many rewarding experiences during her time with VISTA, and she occasionally receives calls from former clients thanking her for helping them.

VISTA: Three Decades of Riding a Political Roller Coaster

Much has changed since the outset of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, but the level of poverty in this country has not been allowed to change dramatically. Budget cuts

and the diversion of government attention have redirected the nation's energy, once focused on dealing with the poverty problem. Political issues and the Vietnam War contributed to placing the poverty programs onto the back burner in the political arena. Many programs have survived, but they are not sufficient in size and funding to accomplish LBJ's original goal to "...eliminate poverty in the mist of plenty."³³

Despite budget cut over the years, VISTA has managed to survive since 1964. Under the Nixon Administration, VISTA, the Peace Corps, and the senior volunteer programs were merged into ACTION, a new federal agency. According to *Washington Monthly*, Nixon's purpose in creating ACTION and putting Johnson and Kennedy's volunteer agencies under one roof was to deactivate the programs the Democrats had built up.³⁴ To a large extent, he was successful. One problem the President had with the volunteer agencies, especially the Peace Corps, was that many volunteers openly condemned his war policies, and the agencies were "not going to harbor 'radicals' as long as Richard Nixon had something to say about it."³⁵ One of the things he did to the Peace Corps was to begin hiring volunteers with technical skills rather than those trained in the liberal arts. These people, however skilled they were, tended to be older and less adaptable to other cultures and environments. The number of volunteers in the agency fell, from 15,000 in 1966, to 6,000 during his administration. Training time was cut in half, and the Peace Corps become, according to one official, "a placement service for other countries' technical needs."³⁶ The OEO was dismantled during the Nixon years and

³³ AmeriCorps*VISTA, *VISTA 30th Anniversary*, 1.

³⁴ Joseph Nocera, "Sam Brown and the Peace Corps: All Talk, No ACTION," *Washington Monthly* 10, no. 6 (1978): 34.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

many of its programs were cut from budgets or transferred to other administrative agencies. Surprisingly, VISTA saw its highest number of volunteers, 4,800, in 1973, even though it was suffering in terms of federal funding. In 1975, President Ford proposed a “long-range budget culminating in zero funding for VISTA by 1979,” but thanks to the Carter administration the agency managed to survive and even flourish in the late seventies.³⁷

The budget-slashing Reagan years failed to keep VISTA in a good state for very long, however. At the time of his presidential nomination, Reagan stated, “Let us pledge to restore, in our time, the American spirit of voluntary service, of cooperation, of private and community initiative, a spirit that flows like a deep and mighty river through the history of our nation.”³⁸ During the first year of his presidency, 1981, he was quoted as saying, “Volunteerism is an essential part of our plan to give the government back to the people. . . . Let us go forth and say to the people: join us in helping Americans help each other.”³⁹ This sounds surprisingly similar to the idea behind VISTA, but during that year Reagan drastically cut the agency’s budget. For the fiscal year of 1981, VISTA had a national budget of \$30 million. In 1982, it was down to \$16 million. The level of volunteers was also directly affected, as there were 4,800 in 1980 and 2,500 by 1982.⁴⁰

All of this was happening despite what Reagan had told the public, despite the fact that nearly three-fourths of all VISTA programs were being continued after the volunteers left,⁴¹ and despite the fact that a report was released in 1981 that showed the

³⁷ AmeriCorps*VISTA, *30th Anniversary*, 6.

³⁸ Ann Hulbert, “VISTA’s Lost Horizons,” *New Republic* 187, no. 9 (1982): 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁰ AmeriCorps*VISTA, *30th Anniversary*, 6.

⁴¹ Hulbert, 19.

annual cost of a volunteer was \$5,700, while the average amount of funding and services they mobilized were valued at \$26,500.⁴² In spite of his rhetoric and his attempts at dismantling VISTA for good, the agency has survived to see the light of another democratic presidency.

In September of 1993, President Clinton signed the National and Community Service Trust Act, creating the Corporation for National and Community Service. In the following April he merged ACTION with the new agency. In September 1994, the Clinton Administration created Americorps, the new volunteer agency under which VISTA and several other volunteer programs are currently administered. In order to prove himself a New Democrat, Clinton originally planned on accomplishing three goals with Americorps. He wanted to: “make college or vocational school more affordable for everyone [volunteers get \$4,725 to put toward education], cure social ills, and make better citizens of the young participants.”⁴³ However, he ran into political problems early on, and had to limit the scope of the program. The armed forces complained that too many young adults would join Americorps rather than the military, and many ex-servicemen complained that the educational benefits of Americorps were better than those of the GI Bill. Clinton also faced a Republican congress and senate.⁴⁴ Even though he was forced to keep the program small, it was still something of a success. The important thing is that VISTA is still alive and is still accomplishing the same goals it always has.

After three decades of suffering through the arena of partisan politics and consistently proving itself worthy of proper funding, the agency has managed stay intact,

⁴² AmeriCorps*VISTA, *30th Anniversary*, 7.

⁴³ Anonymous, “National Service: Mr. Clinton’s Darling,” *The Economist*, London, 17 September 1994, 28.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

though limited. In 1997, VISTA volunteers numbered 3,368, and several million people (nearly two and one-half million in the area of education alone) reported directly benefiting from the program in the areas of education, housing and homelessness, community and economic development, health and nutrition, public safety, services for those with special needs, and the environment.⁴⁵ This is not to mention the innumerable unrecorded services volunteers continue to perform and the sacrifices they continue to make. Considering the value of the services provided by VISTA volunteers, it makes one wonder why the agency has not been given a higher priority by those in power. The sheer monetary value of VISTA's services and the quantity of people benefiting from those services are both excellent political reasons to expand the scope of the program, not to mention the moral obligation of helping those in need.

⁴⁵ Americorps*VISTA, "1997 AmeriCorps*VISTA Accomplishments: Executive Summary." <<http://www.friendsofvista.org/accomp97.html>> (27 October 1998).