It is hoped that by adopting these best practices, sponsors with VISTA Summer Associates can achieve even greater success and increase their impact.

Utilize VISTA Summer Associates as a cost savings to SFSP. VISTA Summer Associates are provided at no cost to sponsor and can increase the capacity of the sponsor to meet the needs in the area.

Utilize VISTA Summer Associates as positive role models (Near Peer Models). VISTA Summer Associates are typically high school graduates or college students, making them particularly well-suited for serving children, as they are able to connect as ‘Near Peers’. A Near Peer Role Model is a theoretically derived concept that points to role models who share similar age, sex, interests, learning level, proximity, culture and ethnicity who for some reason are respected and admired. (see Washington-Morgan Community Action)

CREDITS & NOTES

This Case Study Series was made possible by the Columbus Foundation Summer Fellowship Program. The program funded a Fellow, Melissa Papic, who was assigned to the Ohio Association of Foodbanks for ten weeks to complete an evaluation of the VISTA Summer Associate Program. Ms. Papic collected qualitative and quantitative data, analyzed it and reported the results in five case studies and this four page findings summary.

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CASE STUDY DESIGN

> Forty widely varied SFSP sponsors were separated into five groups based on organization's core mission.
> One sponsor was selected from each group (see Figure 1).
> Data collected through interviews with sponsor leadership and focus groups with VISTA Summer Associates at each site.
> Individual sponsor case studies were compiled (see inserts) from interviews and other data
> Impact themes were identified and included in case studies.

Figure 1. Map of case study sponsors and mission group.

AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associates supplied to the grantees by the Ohio Association of Foodbanks are at no charge to Ohio’s Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsors. VISTA Summer Associates serve for eight-weeks during the summer months, to provide direct services and capacity-building support to strengthen the SFSP.

The Summer Food Service Program provides free, nutritious meals and snacks to children in low-income areas. Federally it is administered by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service and statewide by the Ohio Department of Education. SFSP is vital for an effective education because well-fed children learn, act, and think better. SFSP sponsors are nonprofits acting as organizers of SFSP sites, (physical community locations). A sponsor must provide a capable staff and the ability to obtain and serve food.

CASE STUDY DESIGN

1. Figure 2. derived from Ohio Department of Education SFSP data. 2008 through 2011. 2012 data was sponsor self-reported.
4. Data provided by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) Alliance City Schools
12. Self reported. ODE data unavailable.

IMPACT OVERVIEW

The services VISTA Summer Associates provided varied among sponsors, but included outreach to increase participation, food service assistance, site supervision, and activity leadership. Having VISTA Summer Associates was found to impact sponsors in three key ways:

1. Increasing Sponsor Operational Capacity.
2. Building Relationships and Engaging the Community, and
3. Providing Sponsor Outreach and Activities.

In addition to the impact on the sponsor, serving as a VISTA Summer Associate was found to be a positive experience and is also viewed as an impact in the broader sense, benefiting society by fostering civic minded young people to become future leaders of America, which is included in the mission statement of the Corporation of National and Community Services (administor of AmeriCorps VISTA), “to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.”
1. BUILDING OPERATIONAL CAPACITY

Operational responsibilities such as securing serving sites, making or contracting for food, and supplying supervision and staffing at the sites are costly to a SFSP sponsor, especially to meet an area’s high need. VISTA Summer Associates increased sponsor serving capacity, positively impacted kitchen operations, provided better site supervision, and positively impacted program affordability with SFSP sponsors.

**Sponsor Growth:** Financial and staffing constraints that previously hindered sponsor capacity were mitigated through VISTA Summer Associates and allowed sponsor growth in both sites and participants or increased ease in meeting capacity needs. Figure 2, an example of sponsor growth after VISTA Summer Associates started working with the E.L. Hardy Center in 2010.

**Kitchen Operations:** Four of the five sponsors prepared food onsite. VISTA Summer Associates were essential to a kitchen running smoothly, quickly, and efficiently.

**Site Supervision:** To ensure the safety of the children and the respectful use of the sites, supervision is vital. Without supervision provided by VISTA Summer Associates, some sites would not remain open (exceeding capacity, site damage by participants, overuse) or would never have opened. Two examples include the sponsors E.L. Hardy Center and Washington-Morgan Community Action, which utilized VISTA Summer Associates as site supervisors.

**Affordability:** Funding constraints are a major challenge for sponsors. The VISTA Summer Associates funded through federal dollars were provided at no cost to sponsors. Having this additional help increased the sponsors ability to provide more meals over the course of the summer, while also positively impacting a sponsor’s fiscal bottom line.

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2. RELATIONSHIP BUILDING & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The opportunity for VISTA Summer Associates to engage with site participants and the greater community benefited the sponsors in encouraging participation. This also benefited the community through providing a positive role model relationship to children and gaining input from the community to improve the summer feeding programs and learn how to best meet community needs.

"Instead of just assuming you know what people need, it’s actually forming relationships and asking them what they need."

-VISTA, Washington United Church of Christ

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3. OUTREACH & ACTIVITIES

In most cases SFSP sponsors do not simply provide a meal, but also offer site activities to engage participants and encourage participation. VISTA Summer Associates were responsible for an organization’s outreach through traditional marketing (flyers, hanging posters, speaking with community members) and through leading activities. Sponsors pointed to outreach and activities as vital to a successful SFSP, but often cannot be provided by traditional staff because of union restrictions or time and budget constraints. Activities led by VISTA Summer Associates can provide valuable life lessons and academically enrich community children during the summer to prevent summer academic ‘slip’.

**Activities Teaching Life Lessons**

Activities such as learning sign language, chess or simply playing basketball teach skills and life lessons.

"...these kids who do awful in school, who are such a behavioral problem, a discipline problem, are in love with signing. We had a talent show last week and they were so proud of themselves. Now we couldn’t do that without her [the VISTA who taught them]."

-Sponsor, Washington United Church of Christ

**Traditional Outreach & Marketing**

“We pass out flyers and we hang up flyers at the festival. I passed out flyers for two-hours, and I’ve gone to the beach before to pass out flyers. Anyplace we think there might be some kids or families that are interested in a free meal.” VISTA, Highland County Community Action

**Activities to Prevent ‘Summer Slip’**

“[We help] prepare them for the grades that they’re going into so that they get a head start on what’s come. Those are what the classes are for.”

-VISTA, E.L. Hardy Center

**Activities to Encourage Participation**

“I see some places where it’s really picked up. And I think a lot of that has to do with activities.” -Sponsor, Alliance City Schools

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IMPACT ON VISTA SUMMER ASSOCIATES

VISTA experiences have shown to have an impact on their personal skills and mindsets, influencing future endeavors and volunteer tendencies. VISTA Summer Associates knew that their work with the SFSP was meaningful, after seeing hunger and poverty in the communities they served. The VISTA Summer Associates also pointed to newly acquired skills as being beneficial, especially to future career choices, such as teaching. Overall the VISTA Summer Associates came out of the experience with a sense of civic responsibility and engagement, a key to fostering strong future leaders in the public and private non-profit sector.

**SUMMER ASSOCIATE SPOTLIGHT**

When two brothers attending Washington United Church of Christ’s summer program did not have a ride to football practice, one VISTA did not think twice before offering to help. He began taking them to every practice and when their family could not afford the team fee, he asked friends to donate money and paid for league enrollment. “He’s there- he can have that relationship with those boys that desperately need it,” said the sponsor when recounting the story. The relationship built impacted not only the brothers but also the VISTA. “They asked me if I was going to stay and watch practice. And it’s two hours that I could be doing something else, but I don’t care because I’m sitting watching practice,” said the VISTA.

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**“And I saw what [the neighborhood] used to be, and it was never great; it was never in tip-top shape, but it used to be better than it is right now. So it kind of hurts to see what it is. But it also gives you motivation to try and come out and contribute and help the community and try to make it better than what you see it as now.”**  

-VISTA, E.L. Hardy Center

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**“Doing this [service] for the summer just really made me realize again-yeah children are my passion, I really want to work with them.”**  

-VISTA, Washington-Morgan Community Action

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**“It’s not just a job, this is an experience. It’s a social investment. But it’s an investment in what you want to do, in terms of experience. You remember these things when you get into a tough spot later on in life, when you’re in your career. You remember back to this, and it may help you some.”**  

-Sponsor, E.L. Hardy Center
CAMP WASHINGTON, a neighborhood on the westside of Cincinnati, is an area off the beaten path. It is an isolated, urban community, a food desert with corner stores and gas stations as its main retail food outlets. According to census tract food desert data, 73 percent of residents in the census tract area of Camp Washington have low access to a supermarket or large grocery store, 31 percent of those low-access residents being children.11

Described as an undereducated and underemployed community, Camp Washington and its residents are in need of a support system that can provide learning opportunities, especially for the youth of the community. One AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associate described his emotional first-day response to the community’s hunger and poverty: “...we drove around to pick up the kids, on the way home I was crying because I didn’t even know. I lived 10 minutes away from this [poverty and hunger] and I had no idea that this existed.”

VISTA SUMMER ASSOCIATE ACTIVITY WITH THE SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM

Based on the accounts of the VISTAs and the sponsor, Washington United Church of Christ (Washington UCC) is a place not easily forgotten. “In fact, usually once somebody’s been involved with us, they stay involved,” said the sponsor. The church meets the nutritional, educational, and overall support needs of the community through programs and ministries. One such ministry is their summer program, a day camp with group activities, field trips, and two meals and a snack served Monday through Thursday. In order for the program to remain operational the church needs AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associates, as the camp reaches maximum capacity of about 35 children almost every day.

Feeding the Camp Washington community in some form for at least the past forty years with only a church leader, cook, and volunteers to operate the program, the church enlisted the help of VISTA Summer Associates starting in 2009. This summer the church had the help of three very mature and capable young adults. One of the VISTAs served with Washington UCC for the second consecutive year and another VISTA grew up in the church. The final volunteer experienced the real meaning of volunteering through a mission trip to Kenya and opening a food pantry in New Jersey. Yet, she finds the impact that she made with Washington UCC to be more than any she had ever experienced. “This program is unlike any other and in all of my years of volunteering and whatever community service that I have done in my life I have never seen anything like this. If this place did not have the relationship that it does with VISTA there would be a lot of hungry kids here because this program wouldn’t exist.”

The camp started each day picking up the children with VISTAs providing transportation with the church’s bus and van. At breakfast one VISTA assisted in the kitchen, serving and cleaning up, while the other two VISTAs supervised and organized the children. The children then attended learning sessions, where one of the VISTAs led a community group, teaching conflict resolution, creating peace, and sparking social change. The other led a creativity group, allowing children to safely express their emotions in a creative manner. To end the day, lunch was served, additional break-out sessions were held, a snack was served, and then the children went home. Once a week, the VISTAs took the children swimming, with additional field trips throughout the summer. The VISTAs also hosted a Homework Club four days a week for two hours, giving children one-on-one tutoring attention to prepare them for the upcoming school year. The SFSP sponsor supervisor said, “We teach that the only way out of generational poverty is education.”

CASE STORY: WASHINGTON UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

SPONSOR SNAPSHOT
WASHINGTON UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
COUNTY: HAMILTON
CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT: 1
CHILDREN BELOW 200% OF POVERTY (2010): 54%
CHILDREN IN EXTREME POVERTY (2010): 19%
NUMBER OF 2012 VISTAs: 3
AVERAGE DAILY ATTENDENCE (2011): 35

“...If this place did not have the relationship that it does with VISTA there would be a lot of hungry kids here because this program wouldn’t exist.”
-VISTA, Washington United Church of Christ

...If this place did not have the relationship that it does with VISTA there would be a lot of hungry kids here because this program wouldn’t exist.”
-VISTA, Washington United Church of Christ
MAKING AN IMPACT
Because the church is completely donor funded (largely through congregation donations), the summer program depends on volunteers to remain in operation. In several instances both VISTA Summer Associates and the sponsor described how the program would not be operational without the work of the VISTAs. When the sponsor was asked to describe how the program operated before VISTA Summer Associates were granted, she responded, “Not very well. We had to hire more staff, which means it cost more to have [the] summer program and we couldn’t have as many kids as we have now...It would definitely impact the program... I don’t know how we would do it without them.” The VISTAs are needed to transport the children to the program each day, provide supervision and instruction, and prepare, serve and clean up meals, translating to several additional staff positions that could amount to thousands of dollars of cost to the church.

Relationships built between the VISTAs and participants impacted not only the families, but the community as a whole. A VISTA said, “One of the things I learned is that no one is a lost cause, including parents, including anyone who is in these kids’ lives. And if you can show the kids that you shouldn’t give up on people, they can completely change their lives. And also that they should never give up on themselves, because a lot of people do.” This relationship building is vital to not only building a stronger, more engaged community, but also to offer role models for children that might not have positive adult figures in their day-to-day lives. “It’s good to have these young people that are in college, because our kids need to get the message that, yes, they can go to college,” remarked the sponsor.

MAKING CHANGE IN THE WORLD
The feeding program in conjunction with the Washington United Church of Christ Summer Program undoubtedly impacts the community summer after summer. As one VISTA put it, “a feeding program is so important because it allows kids to do well in school, it allows them to then actually graduate, and actually go to college. And it allows them to make change. It’s not just doing good [things] for them because it’s a nice thing to do, it’d doing good things for them so that they can make real change in the world.” With the help of VISTA Summer Associates, Washington UCC is able to not only feed community children during the summer, but also offer them an education and positive, loving relationships, showing them an alternative to the impoverished environment they are growing up in. Without the VISTA Summer Associates’ service and dedication to the community’s children, a large void would exist in Camp Washington, as the program would not be able to operate at its current capacity, if at all.

“That’s what we value, the relationships. The relationships with the kids. The relationships with the family. The relationships in the community. That’s what we value.”
-Sponsor, Washington United Church of Christ

This single case is within a five-case series done to evaluate the Ohio Association of Foodbanks’ ShareCorps, a VISTA Summer Associate program. The evaluation project was funded largely part by the Columbus Foundation’s 2012 Summer Fellowship Program. Mentorship and research support was provided by Ohio University’s Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs.
Rural community action organization expands summer feeding program with VISTA Summer Associates

SPONSOR SNAPSHOT
WASHINGTON-MORGAN COMMUNITY ACTION

COUNTIES: WASHINGTON & MORGAN
CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICTS: 6 & 18
MORGAN CO. CHILDREN IN POVERTY*: 29.6%
WASHINGTON CO. CHILDREN IN POVERTY*: 23%
NUMBER OF VISTAs: 5
AVERAGE DAILY ATTENDANCE (2011): 29

Although the state of poverty in this area is serious, its roots in generational poverty sometimes create a sense of complacency and a lack of willingness to participate in helpful programs. “Parents just don’t have the urge to get their children to come. It’s just not important for them,” described an AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associate working with the Washington-Morgan Community Action Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). “Some of them [the children] come [to the SFSP site] dirty and unwashed hair, and if their parents don’t care as much to make them present themselves well, what are they feeding them? Are they getting a meal?” questioned a Summer Associate. The cultural challenge along with an added challenge of transportation are a lot to face for a summer feeding program. But Washington-Morgan Community Action recognized the need and knew that they were responsible for sponsoring this program.

VISTA SUMMER ASSOCIATES ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM

Washington-Morgan Community Action has been operating the area’s Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) for a total of five years, two of which have operated with the help of VISTA Summer Associates. This year five VISTAs were granted to the organization, four working almost entirely with the SFSP, and one additional providing support to Community Action’s main office. Two VISTAs were granted from the Ohio Association of Foodbanks, two from Ohio Campus Compact through Marietta College, and one VISTA granted from Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development (COAD).

The four VISTAs that worked with the SFSP supervised their own sites; responsibilities included delivering and serving the meals and leading site activities. The VISTAs also assisted in the kitchen, preparing meals for the SFSP, but as one VISTA explained, they also “do the Meals On Wheels and then they have a senior nutrition program. That’s three different sets of meals that have to go out each day [and] being here helps them in the kitchen to prepare for each meal and not be really overwhelmed.” The kitchen staff told the organization’s director of nutrition programs that the VISTAs “have been a huge help... preparing those extra meals and getting them out.”

Before the VISTA Summer Associates were granted to Washington-Morgan Community Action, the SFSP operated much differently. “We rotated a different person that would go [to the site] each day, and it was difficult for us because with such low funding we need all of our staff in the building and doing our [other] programs,” explained the program director. But now that the program has experienced VISTA help, the director can hardly imagine operating without them. “We’d either have to reduce the number of sites or not be a sponsor,” she concluded. A VISTA member remarked that “a lot of kids wouldn’t be served that way” when they considered the idea of reducing the number of sites. As one VISTA reflected, “When you asked us [previously], ‘what would happen without us?’ I think the main thing is we both had blank stares on our faces. We don’t know what would happen. Who would feed them? ...we are essential to the feeding program.”
MEETING NEEDS & EXPANDING CAPACITY

The sponsor pointed to two key barriers for meeting the organization’s capacity to feed the community children: “There’s not enough staff [and] not enough funding from the nutrition program to hire an additional person to work in the kitchen.” However, the VISTAs’ help met those challenges, and allowed the program to grow, as one additional site was added for the 2012 summer program at a local pool. “We were actually able to expand the capacity of the summer program by adding an additional site [at the pool] in Beverly,” said the program director. “The pool was very excited because they said they have parents that drop their kids off all day, don’t leave them any money, and they have nothing to eat.”

VISTAs were also able to extend their impact to families and children that attended their meal site, building community relationships. “I’ve really built a relationship with a family and I think every day they’re waiting for me to get there,” remarked one of the VISTAs. The bond benefited both VISTA and child, as the VISTA declared, “The participants and workers are both getting something out of this program.”

The VISTAs and the program director pointed to the closeness in age as an advantage when forming new relationships with the children. A VISTA said, “...we are more personable with the kids, and I think they get more excited and attached to us, because we’re younger, closer to their age and fun.” The program director also said, “I think that the kids really relate well to having the same person come to the site every day. Having the VISTA, I think they bring a fresh, excited attitude to the program and I just think they work really well with the kids.”

The relationships formed with the children and families aided the organization as a form of outreach; it encouraged the children to bring their friends and family, a tactic that has helped with participation. The director noted, “If I didn’t have the VISTAs to help me with the outreach, to go around and find the kids... I don’t know how we would do it.”

IMPACT ALL AROUND

To Washington-Morgan Community Action, the help from the VISTAs is essential as they aid the organization in addressing key challenges such as funding and staffing constraints. According to the program director, “The only way we could do the summer feeding program is with VISTAs. The reimbursement [from the Ohio Department of Education] is not enough to support the program. To pay staff costs, food costs, travel costs, anything you can think of to run a program... I honestly don’t know how we could operate without them.” The VISTAs are able to impact the program and the community at large in spite of the region’s cultural and transportation challenges and provide nutritious meals when school is out. Additionally, the program has an impact on the VISTAs themselves. As one pointed out, “they [the kids] have a different perspective on life and they don’t have as much or they have different lifestyles,” and that, “this program is an eye opener for poverty. It really helps people to understand that it exists and it’s real.”
HILLSBORO, OH– In early 2009, DHL (an international shipping company) pulled operations out of Wilmington, leaving an estimated 10,000 Ohioans without jobs. The economic devastation extended to Hillsboro, a small, rural Highland County town about 20 miles southeast of Wilmington. Unemployment in Highland County rose from 6 percent in 2005 to 16 percent in 2010.13. "The executive director of Highland County Community Action said that the "recovery’s been a long way and difficult economically, which then results into social situations for our population." Those ‘social situations’ include unemployment, shifts in family dynamics, and an increased need for public assistance and programs. “I think it’s had a lot of impact on them [the children] because a lot of parents are taking jobs that require them to work nights, evenings, weekends. The kids are kind of either left alone, or left with grandparents...they aren’t used to that for the most part,” testified a representative from Highland County Community Action.

Troubling poverty indicators (see Figure 1.) exemplify the need for programs such as the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). However, the economic struggles of the area also make funding programs difficult, an issue that Highland County Community Action faces each year.

VISTA ACTIVITY WITH THE SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM
With 52 percent of Highland County’s children now qualifying for free or reduced price meals during the school year, Highland County Community Action felt responsible for providing the area’s summer feeding program, starting in 2010.13. The executive director described how when other agencies backed out of organizing a summer feeding program, “we kind of took it on because when we started, it was about the time the DHL thing hit, and I think we recognized as we’ve gone through how important it is.”

Although the organization finished its third year as a SFSP sponsor, it was Highland County Community Action’s first year enlisting the help of a VISTA Summer Associate. The VISTA this past summer was a local recent high school graduate who, in addition to helping SFSP operations, hoped to personally learn and grow. The VISTA worked in the kitchen, helping with food preparation, packing, and delivery. The VISTA engaged the community by seeking program and menu feedback. And finally, the VISTA reached out at events such as festivals and parades to inform the community about the SFSP and encourage participation. The biggest challenge for the organization’s ability to operate the SFSP was constrained funding. A VISTA Summer Associate provided through the Ohio Association of Foodbanks mitigated the effects of tight fiscal constraints while also enhancing the current program’s operations and engaging the community.

**Figure 1. Percent of Children in Poverty 2001 & 2010**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percent of Children in Poverty in Highland County</th>
<th>Percent of Children in Poverty in Ohio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SPONSOR SNAPSHOT**

**HIGHLAND CO. COMMUNITY ACTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTY: HIGHLAND</th>
<th>CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT: 3</th>
<th>NUMBER OF VISTAs: 1</th>
<th>NUMBER OF SITES: 4</th>
<th>AVERAGE DAILY ATTENDANCE: 133</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

HILLCO COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP
MAKING AN IMPACT
The Highland County Community Action sponsor felt that the one VISTA has caused a noticeable impact on operations and said, “She’s been able to do the extra things that our summer workers aren’t paid to do or don’t necessarily have the time to do.” For example, the organization employs several youth from Job and Family Services who are under 18, and therefore are not permitted to operate kitchen equipment. The VISTA was able to step in to take care of those tasks.

The challenge of funding the program was addressed through the utilization of the VISTA. A sponsor representative said that without a VISTA, “it would mean a lot more work for the two summer employees that we have at our Hillsboro site. [It] would mean more funds that are coming out of our pocket. And if the funds run out, I just wonder if we’ll be able to provide the entire eight-week program for the kids.”

The executive director of the organization agreed and felt that the benefits of AmeriCorps VISTA extended out to the non-profit sector overall. "As we [non-profit organizations] are finding our funding reduced or remaining stagnant, it’s partnerships like this, that continue to exist and work together to be the means that meet the end. That work together to accomplish things—that’s vital to the survival in the economic situation we’re in across the country. These partnerships need to continue to be nurtured or renewed to exist.”

The VISTA pointed to an increased operational efficiency since her enlistment. She said that the greatest benefit of a summer associate to this SFSP was being “able to get more done so that they can provide to everyone, not just to [a] few.” She said that without her help the program “wouldn’t have all of the help they needed, they’d run out quickly. They’d run short a lot... last year when they didn’t have a summer VISTA they did run short a lot on the backpacks and the food, but now that they have this extra set of hands they can do more.”

Along with impacts on the sponsor, the VISTA gained skills through this experience. Admittedly shy, she said that through her service with Highland County Community Action, she “learned to get along with people... my cooperation skills have definitely increased from this past summer. I’ve learned to be [a] more outgoing and kinder person.” The Highland County Community Action executive director also saw her educational experience as a benefit to the organization. "We’ve educated somebody that can go out and talk not only about the mission of our organization, but what other community action agencies and other programs like yours [The Ohio Association of Foodbanks] do and how we all work together to benefit the community as a whole. It’s a good match, it’s a good program.” Through her newly acquired skills, VISTA was able to build relationships within the community; beneficial outreach for the organization. The sponsor testified that these outreach activities reach beyond the program to shed a positive light on the entire organization, saying that the VISTA was “more of a voice and a face, maybe a caring attitude that someone who’s doing paperwork or serving the food doesn’t necessarily have the time to leave and go out, talk... that one-on-one contact is important.”

Having a VISTA work with the organization impacted the efficiency and capacity of its SFSP operations, while easing the financial burden of associated with a SFSP. “It helps us [having a VISTA] that we would not have to subsidize the program quite as much,” remarked a sponsor representative. Additionally the summer was a fulfilling experience for the Summer Associate. The Hillsboro community, which persevered through an especially challenging economic environment with the DHL pull-out, has a need for VISTA Summer Associates who do not add to the cost of the program. Hopefully, Community Action will have the opportunity to continue and build this relationship into the future.

“...if the funds run out, I just wonder if we’ll be able to provide the entire eight-week program for the kids.” - Sponsor, Highland Co. Community Action

“It helps us [having a VISTA] that we would not have to subsidize the program quite as much,” -Sponsor, Highland Co. Community Action

This single case is within a five-case series done to evaluate the Ohio Association of Foodbanks’ ShareCorps, a VISTA Summer Associate program. The evaluation project was funded largely part by the Columbus Foundation’s 2012 Summer Fellowship Program. Mentorship and research support was provided by Ohio University’s Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs.
COLUMBUS, OH- Located on the northeast side of Columbus, Linden can be a hard area for a child to grow up in. Poverty, drugs, and violence are common traits of this neighborhood. As one AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associate described, “[In] this community you see all types of people. You see the homeless walking around pushing carts, you see gangs, everything. It’s poverty everywhere.”

Low education attainment along with an environment of violence makes it difficult to escape, and are some causes of the widespread generational poverty. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsor supervisor at the E.L. Hardy Center described ‘the grip’ of the area.

“There’s a saying in the neighborhood, ‘escape being in the grip.’ They’re in the grip of the drug dealers, of the drugs, of the social mores and everything. They’re just in the grip... they gotta [sic] act tough, they don’t let anybody disrespect them, they gotta [sic] get them back. They’re in the grip. It’s a different world.”

However, in spite of the rough surroundings, hope remains for future generations. Local organizations, such as the E.L. Hardy Center, take children off the streets and bring them through their welcoming doors to provide a safe environment with educational activities and nutritious food.

VISTA ACTIVITY WITH SFSP
Undoubtedly a summer feeding program in a poverty-stricken neighborhood like this must be challenging, but the E.L. Hardy Center’s SFSP has managed to thrive. The program was overseen by a director, employing two assistant program directors, and site supervisors to administer the program. Seven food trucks and three site monitors traveled to the 39 sites to deliver the food and offer additional assistance as needed. Some of the SFSP sites had their own traditional programming, while others were housed simply in the middle of an apartment complex or neighborhood area. The E.L. Hardy Center offered a day camp, with about 250 community kids transported to the center every day to participate in outdoor activities, engage in classroom instruction, and receive two meals. AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associates supervised the day camp and assisted teachers or center staff in providing educational instruction. The responsibility resting with the VISTA Summer Associates’ day camp supervision was significant. As many of the children attending the day camp had behavioral issues, some past destructive behaviors have put the safety of other children at risk.

“The only requirement we really have is that they behave themselves to a certain extent, and some of them cannot,” said a VISTA. The VISTAs served as mediators, redirecting any destructive energy towards organized activities, ensuring a positive and safe environment. “Some of the kids in the beginning came and acted up, [but] once we get them involved and get them active and give them something to do, they help us out and actually make our lives easier,” observed a VISTA. Other VISTAs also served to the capacity of site supervisors out in the community, taking on all the responsibilities associated with administering a feeding site (serving, cleaning up, meal counts, etc.).
**IMPACT AND EXPANSION**

When the program director with the E.L. Hardy Center recognized the great level of need for a large summer feeding program in the area, he knew that expanding his program was essential. But at the time a limit on the number of feeding sites per sponsor was in place. His solution? Make the existing sites bigger. “If I have more eyes I can deal with more kids. And it worked out perfect,” explained the sponsor when asked why he first applied for VISTA Summer Associates in 2010. “We’re able to reach so many more and without really over extending ourselves. We started out and we had 23 kids and it’s grown to this year we fed over 5,000 meals [total as a sponsor] a day. So they [the VISTAs] have allowed the reach out, to do so much more.”

The additional “eyes” that the director secured through the VISTA members helped the sponsor to address behavioral issues which in the past jeopardized the safety of the center’s program participants. “Having extra hands anywhere is a tremendous help, because there’s all kinds of conflict. There’s all kinds of revenge. There’s all kinds of stuff going on. And we need people just to watch,” explained the program director. The VISTAs prevented and addressed issues as they arose, keeping the children safe and teaching life skills.

VISTA supervision is key to fostering a safe and positive environment different than the neighborhood outside of the center.

Beyond their oversight duties at the center, the VISTAs acted as role models, especially as many of the children come from single-parent homes, without consistent, positive relationships with male and/or females figures. “Their confidence level is really low. We just try to build them up as young men, young women, so they can know what to do out there,” a VISTA said. The program director said the VISTAs have “given them [the children] an alternative. They offer a different way to talk, they offer a different way to relate to each other. They offer instruction without yelling or cruelty.”

The VISTAs have found that forming relationships with the children motivated them to respect authority. One of the VISTAs noted, “I think that bonding with the children is a way they respect you and listen to you.” Another observed, “There’s no such thing as a bad kid. But you have to give them patience and give them time to get used to you and once they do they’re not a problem at all.”

The program made a profound impact on the VISTAs themselves. Some of the VISTAs were originally from the area and have seen or experienced poverty firsthand, but for others this was an eye-opening experience, leading to expressions of gratitude and fulfillment by working with a program that fundamentally affects the lives of the center’s participants. “You can tell the kids are truly hungry, because they ask, “Can I have seconds?...thirds?’.... For some of the kids this is really a blessing for them. Because if it wasn’t for programs like this, they would, not probably, they would go hungry... I think it’s a powerful program, to the fact that it gives children a chance to eat.”

The support of committed VISTA Summer Associates has given the E.L. Hardy Center the opportunity to spark social change in an area that has experienced generational poverty, perpetual violence, and steady decline. With the increase in supervision provided by the VISTAs, more sites and thus more children in the area, are engaged and in many cases have continued with the center’s programming through the school year. “The food and fun is a come-on. Then we can get into teaching the importance of education, the importance of brotherly love, the importance of being able to express yourself in an acceptable way,” said the program director, explaining how the impact of the summer feeding program operated with the help of the VISTA Summer Associates extends beyond feeding to social change.

This single case is within a five-case series done to evaluate the Ohio Association of Foodbanks’ ShareCorps, a VISTA Summer Associate program. The evaluation project was funded largely part by the Columbus Foundation’s 2012 Summer Fellowship Program. Mentorship and research support was provided by Ohio University’s Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs.
VISTA Summer Associates working with urban school district keep summer feeding sites open and aide in growth.

ALLIANCE, OH- As a northwestern Ohio urban area, Alliance is described by residents as a tight-knit community. This tight-knit nature might be surprising to outsiders, as the community is densely populated with more than 22,000 residents within nine square miles; 2,500 persons per square mile. About 77 percent of school-age children in Alliance are enrolled in free or reduced-price school meals, a dramatic level above the state average of 44 percent. An AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associate supporting the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) at Alliance City Schools described the area’s situation by saying, “I feel like there’s no ‘high class’ in Alliance. We’re all equally poor.”

VISTA SUMMER ASSOCIATES KEEP SITES WITH THE SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM OPEN

For more than 20 years, Alliance City Schools has operated a SFSP. Every summer, district employees prepare and serve the meals to area children. However, due to union restrictions food service workers with the school district are not able to provide sites with activities or enrichment in conjunction with the meals. Because of this limitation, children were often left to entertain themselves, a safety issue that forced locations to close or consider closing. As the head of the district food program explained, “the food service person wasn’t there to supervise, or couldn’t really supervise, so things would happen. And soon a community center would say they didn’t want us anymore, and then there was a void on how we could feed the children.” In 2009, Alliance City Schools requested and was granted two AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associates to address this issue, and has enlisted the help of VISTAs with their SFSP every summer since.

This summer with six VISTA Summer Associates granted, they worked in pairs at 7 of the 19 sites to assist in food delivery and distribution, supervise the eating periods, assist with clean-up, and lead site activities such as dodgeball, capture the flag, and scavenger hunts. Two of the VISTAs also worked at a community center in the morning, leading and participating in organized activities such as basketball, volleyball, and reading to the kids a few days a week. When VISTAs were not out at the SFSP sites, they also assisted in the kitchen (food preparation, kitchen clean up, etc.) and performed outreach and marketing activities.

The VISTAs with Alliance City Schools this summer ranged from a recent high school graduate to an incoming college senior. All of the VISTAs grew up in or around Alliance. Unanimously the VISTAs all expressed a great interest in working with kids, and felt that they were well-suited for the position being local residents, familiar with the community. One VISTA testified to the benefit of growing up in the area by saying, “I’ve been here my entire life, so [for] a lot of them, I know older siblings, or I know their parents, or I’ve seen them around before.” A combination of being youthful and coming from the same area allowed the VISTAs to connect more easily with the community’s children and created an opportunity to personally impact each child participating in the program.
MAKING AN IMPACT

With a kitchen capacity to serve over 1,700 students daily during the school year, the issue that the sponsor faces is not one of capacity but one of engagement. VISTAs have been able to address this as well as the issue of site supervision. As the unionized food service workers were not obliged to provide supervision at the SFSP sites, the VISTAs have certainly met that need, as the sponsor noted, “…we haven’t been kicked out of site since we’ve had the VISTA program.” Additionally the needs of the community’s children extend beyond the physical to also social, which can be met by the summer feeding program. Many homes lack daytime parental supervision during the summer, which caused one VISTA to note “what you give them emotionally they might not get at home… so that’s why they act the way they do.” Being that the VISTAs are young, and grew up in the area, they could most easily relate to the children. Relationship building was described by the

“VISTAs are a positive role model while keeping order and a respectful atmosphere at the meal sites. This has helped us remain at community sites where behaviors were jeopardizing our potential use of the site for SFSP.”
- Sponsor, Alliance City Schools

VISTAs and sponsor as an important aspect of the summer programming. VISTAs engaging the participants would encourage participation, and also the VISTAs served as positive role models to the SFSP participants, further promoting a sense of security at the sites.

VISTA 1: I feel like they actually listen to us...
VISTA 2: Right, because we’ve built relationships with a lot of kids that we see every day, so they listen to us more...
VISTA 3: They’re used to it now; the structure is more so there, they have boundaries now, so it’s like, ‘okay I know I’m not supposed to do this.’

Through VISTA led activities, the summer feeding program can be turned into a social interactive experience; the ‘thing’ to do in the summer. Making an effort to reach out to all of the children regardless of family income is an approach that the sponsor felt would be best suited for this program because a majority of the children, 77 percent, qualify for free or reduced price meals. By lowering the stigma and emphasizing the activities, it makes the program less about ‘accepting a free meal’ and more about having fun while also being fed. This is believed to increase participation as the children may feel less self-conscious about attending a SFSP site, and feel encouraged by VISTA leadership and involvement at the sites. “They [the parents] want them to have community contact, contact with other kids, with an adult, with activities, and a balanced meal…” emphasized the sponsor, “So come to meal program. It’s free for everyone, no income issue.”

With Alliance City Schools’ SFSP, the VISTAs were valuable in leading activities to promote good behavior, enticing children to attend, and teaching valuable life skills. Additionally, the outreach and kitchen help that the VISTAs provided were appreciated and recognized as important contributions to the operations of the summer feeding program. “VISTAs are a positive role model while keeping order and a respectful atmosphere at the meal sites. This has helped us remain at community sites where behaviors were jeopardizing our potential use of the site for SFSP,” responded the sponsor to an online survey, showing that most importantly having the VISTAs has allowed Alliance City Schools to continue operating in the neighborhoods that arguably need the program the most. The sponsor at Alliance City Schools also made it very clear that they wanted VISTAs to continue with the program by saying, “Keep bringing the VISTAs on. Don’t take my VISTAs away!”

“Keep bringing the VISTAs on. Don’t take my VISTAs away!”- Sponsor, Alliance City Schools
BREIFING NOTE: IMPACT OF VISTA SUMMER ASSOCIATES ON THE SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM

PURPOSE: The purpose of this note is to inform state legislators of case studies done to evaluate the impact that VISTA Summer Associates have on Summer Food Service Programs across the state of Ohio. As funding for national service programs is under scrutiny, it is important to clearly state the need for national service members and the benefits they provide, having a positive impact on those that they serve.

CURRENT SITUATION: During the summer of 2012 the Ohio Association of Foodbanks granted 169 VISTA Summer Associates to a total of 40 Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsors. The VISTA Summer Associates served over an eight-week period, working to create and expand SFSPs. Activities of VISTA Summer Associates included food preparation, delivery, and clean up, feeding site supervision, activity leadership, and sponsor outreach.

CASE STUDY EVALUATION: Five sponsors were chosen to participate in case studies based on characteristics of: type of organization, size, and the area’s child poverty rates. Data collection consisted of sponsor leadership interviews and VISTA Summer Associate focus groups at each sponsor site. Individual sponsor case studies were compiled from interview and focus group data, as well as U.S. Census data and other demographic information.

From the case studies VISTA Summer Associates were found to impact sponsors in three key ways: increasing sponsor operational capacity; building relationships and engaging the community; and providing sponsor outreach and site activities. Additionally, VISTA Summer Associates were impacted personally, which benefits society in a broader sense, by fostering civic minded young people to become future leaders of America.

1. Increase in Operational Capacity
   - **Sponsor Growth:** Financial and staffing constraints that previously hindered sponsor capacity were mitigated through VISTA Summer Associates and allowed sponsor growth in both number of sites and participants or increased ease of meeting capacity needs.
   - **Kitchen Operations:** Four of the five sponsors prepared food onsite. VISTA Summer Associates were essential to a quick and efficient kitchen.
   - **Site Supervision:** Without supervision provided by VISTA Summer Associates, some sites would not remain open (exceeding capacity, site damage by participants, overuse) or would never have opened.
   - **Affordability:** Funding constraints are a major challenge for sponsors. The VISTA Summer Associates funded through federal dollars were provided at no cost to sponsors. Having this additional help increased the sponsors’ ability to provide more meals over the course of the summer, while also positively impacting a sponsor’s fiscal bottom line.
2. **Relationships Building & Community Engagement**

   VISTA Summer Associates and sponsor leadership alike pointed to the importance of building relationships with children and families in the community as it promotes a sense of connectedness between the SFSP and community residents. Relationship building was also found to encourage participation and provide community children with a role model relationship. Community engagement allowed for an opportunity to gather community input to improve the SFSP and learn the best ways to address the needs of the community.

3. **Outreach & Activities**

   VISTA Summer Associates provided traditional marketing and outreach activities for the sponsors as well as activity leadership. Activities and programming led by VISTA Summer Associates was viewed as beneficial to sponsors by encouraging participation. They were beneficial to the communities’ children by teaching life lessons and aiding in the prevention of summer academic slip.

4. **Impact on VISTA Summer Associates**

   Overall VISTA Summer Associates felt that the work they did was meaningful and had a positive impact on the community children. They also pointed to newly acquired skills and affirmations of future careers through their summer experience. And lastly, VISTA Summer Associates expressed a strong sense of civic responsibility for their community, and found this as an opportunity to give back and make a difference.

For additional case study details please see Papic, M.,(2012). *The impact of VISTA summer associates: A series of five case studies*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Association of Foodbanks

**NEXT STEPS:**

All sponsors that participated in the case study evaluation pointed to negative consequences for their Summer Food Service Program if VISTA Summer Associates were not granted next summer. It is vital that national service programs such as AmeriCorps VISTA and AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associates receive continued funding support. **On July 17th, the House Appropriations Committee released a draft funding bill that called for dramatic cuts (about three quarters of funding) to the Corporation of National and Community Services** which would eliminate funding for programs such as AmeriCorps, the Volunteer Generations fund, **VISTA**, National Civilian Community Corps and the Social Innovation Fund. This is the third consecutive year that such a proposal has been made. Do not allow this bill to go through. **Advocate for and support our nonprofit partners and communities** across the nation that depend on AmeriCorps VISTA and other national service members to strengthen their programs in ways that they could not otherwise afford, by advocating and supporting these programs administered by the Corporation of National and Community Services.