

HealthReach Community Health Centers



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What does it mean to be an AmeriCorps VISTA in Maine?

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

These were President Lyndon B. Johnson's words to the first group of VISTA members. As part of his "War on Poverty," Johnson created the VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program in 1965 to act like a domestic Peace Corps. In 1993, VISTA was incorporated into the AmeriCorps program under the Clinton Administration. Today, more than 200,000 VISTA members have served since 1965. Every year VISTA engages more than 8,000 members to improve conditions for more than 3,000 underserved communities across the United States.



Dave Fang, AmeriCorps
VISTA member

Here in Maine, there are over 50 VISTAs throughout the state serving with a variety of organizations and humanitarian causes. HealthReach Community Health Centers selected its first VISTA in 1994, and as the current Goodwill AmeriCorps VISTA my year-long service builds upon the progress made by all my predecessors. HealthReach's mission is to provide high quality, affordable, patient-centered healthcare in medically underserved communities of Central and Western Maine. My mission is to support HealthReach by building organizational capacity and improving the health services that assist the 80 towns with insufficient resources served by our 11 community health centers.

I have helped coordinate partnerships with various health initiatives and organizations including 5210 Let's Go!, Good Shephard Food Bank, and SNAP-Ed's Teaching 10 Tips. Let's Go! is an anti-childhood obesity program implemented in schools, childcare, healthcare, and community organizations throughout Maine and neighboring states. To help spread the simple and effective Let's Go! message of 5210 (5 or more fruits/vegetables, 2 hours or less of recreational screen time, 1 hour or more of physical activity, 0 sugary drinks), I travel to all our health centers to evaluate and facilitate HealthReach's participation in the program. As "Sites of Distinction," all HealthReach sites display 5210 posters in waiting rooms and pediatric rooms, and all our providers determine Body Mass Index and use the Healthy Habits Questionnaires at every well-child visit. I also collaborate with providers at staff meetings to ensure we are continually combating weight bias and doing our best to empower patients to pursue healthy lifestyles.

Good nutrition can be difficult without easy access to healthy foods. In an effort to promote patient health beyond the confines of the clinical setting, our sites have also partnered with Good Shepherd to deliver food for food-insecure

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families. Since May 2014, 15 Good Shepherd Food Mobiles have served our sites at Rangeley, Bingham, Belgrade, and Whitefield, with 18 more scheduled for this year. These events have also been an opportunity to inform the public on other services offered by HealthReach, such as our Connector program which provides assistance for patients in navigating health insurance options. Collaboration and aid from local groups, such as the Whitefield and Oakland Lions Clubs, have been invaluable in contributing volunteers to distribute the food. Since the beginning of my service in August 2016, I've personally coordinated with over 40 passionate volunteers from an assortment of organizations. Our food mobiles in each location have accordingly increased in both outreach and participation.

Improving access to nutritious foods must also be accompanied by the right nutritional education. "Teaching 10 Tips" is a free Maine SNAP-Ed course that teaches participants easy ways to cook, eat, and shop healthy on a budget. Participants work with a professional nutritionist and receive hands-on lessons in the kitchen, and are able to bring home food, knowledge, and new recipes. I just finished leading a course in Strong, and am currently arranging ones for Belgrade, Madison, and Rangeley.

From Bethel to Albion, Richmond to Bingham, my service brings me to many different parts of Maine and offers me an unique insight into American rural life and rural poverty. I went to high school in Buffalo, New York and university in Montreal, Canada – both cities. AmeriCorps VISTA granted me this opportunity to live and work outside my comfort zone before I enter medical school. As a premed, I am especially grateful and appreciative of the service experience, professional development, and perspectives I've gained working as a VISTA for HealthReach. I believe that seeing the different plights of patients and helping them confront the obstacles they face will make me a more well-rounded and open-minded physician. The supportive environment and educational resources from VISTA allowed me to hone my leadership and communication skills while establishing and coordinating programs that will sustainably improve the health of underserved Mainers.

AmeriCorps creates countless diverse and fulfilling service opportunities every year, all with the aim to ameliorate poverty and make a positive difference in the lives of all Americans. This year-long service term is an excellent option for those who are entering/re-entering the workforce to explore and develop new skills, whether they are recent college graduates such as myself, or someone older looking to change their career path. AmeriCorps VISTA is an important and beneficial program that puts the multifaceted skills of thousands of Americans to use in advancing their local communities.

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