

WSU Community Engagement Institute AmeriCorps Newsletter

10 Year AmeriCorps VISTA & 5 Year AmeriCorps State Edition



AmeriCorps 9/11 Service Day on September 20, 2024

Our Program

The Wichita State University Community Engagement Institute's (CEI) AmeriCorps Program offers capacity building services and direct volunteer opportunities for volunteers of the community who are dedicated to combating poverty in the Wichita area and across Kansas.

In this special issue of the AmeriCorps Newsletter, we celebrate the **10 Year AmeriCorps VISTA and 5 Year AmeriCorps Kansas Anniversaries!** We would like to thank the 239 AmeriCorps Members and 68 sites who have participated in the WSU AmeriCorps Program over the last decade.

VISTA Service & Life Experience Paves Way for Full-Time Position



Jackie Gilby

Growing up in Wichita, Jackie faced many challenges but emerged with a deep understanding of human relationships and the importance of authentic connections. Her journey of living on the streets of Wichita from age 17 became a turning point, where she not only survived but thrived by fostering relationships based on respect and understanding. For the past two years, Jackie served as an AmeriCorps VISTA with STEPMC, a non-profit founded in 2010 in McPherson County. She helped her site engage with community initiatives, fundraising, and exploring diverse career paths that seek to combat poverty. Her experience paved the way for her current role as a Lead-Paraprofessional at ESSDACK (Educational Services and Staff Development Association of Central Kansas) Learning Center in McPherson, where Jackie now excels in supporting students with her life experience, and dedication to helping them progress with essential life skills, community bonds, and high school diplomas.

Foundation for Success: AmeriCorps VISTA to Peace Corps



Matthew Coleman

Matthew Coleman previously served as an AmeriCorps VISTA in 2021-2022, then as a VISTA Leader with the WSU AmeriCorps Program in 2022-2023. After completing service, he joined Peace Corps Ecuador, and now serves as a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Volunteer. Matthew shares that his experience with AmeriCorps VISTA helped prepare him for life in the Peace Corps, noting that it was his experience as a VISTA Leader that proved to be invaluable. The communication and patience he developed from working with AmeriCorps volunteers helps him with planning projects and giving classes, while his work creating AmeriCorps Canva fliers has proven useful for crafting posts and WhatsApp messages to promote events and classes. He believes that the WSU AmeriCorps Program provided a foundation for his successful Peace Corps service.

VISTA Service Offers Skills for New Career and Future Goals



Rachel Pittman

Rachel Pittman served as an WSU AmeriCorps VISTA with the United Way of Reno County in 2021-2022. After completing service, she moved to Junction City, Kansas, where she currently resides. She is working as a floating manager for a convenient store in Manhattan, and is interested in returning to non-profit and community engagement work. She misses serving as a VISTA, and shares that she learned so much from her time with her site. Particularly, she notes that the skills she gained from connecting with people through her day-to-day work and participating in community events was beneficial for her professional development. Because of her VISTA Service, she shares that she was able to learn more about trauma-informed services in the Wichita community, how to successfully plan and execute a community event, and how to better serve as a leader.

It's a Wonderful Life After One Member's VISTA Service



Tori Davis

A lot has changed since Tori Davis served as an AmeriCorps VISTA in 2021-2022. She was attending graduate school at the time, pursuing her master's in social work at WSU. When service ended, she began looking for a job right away but spent the summer working at YESS Camp through Ability Point, where she made lifelong friends and got to work with amazing kids in the program. One of her main goals was to work in the school system with her degree. To date, she is happy to report that she recently completed her second year of employment at USD 259, working as an elementary school Social Worker. The most exciting thing that has happened since serving, however, is that on April 2, 2024, she became a mom to a beautiful baby boy after dealing with fertility issues for over a year. She shares that life, both professionally and personally, has been going well, and that she is busy with work and growing their little family.

VISTA & Peace Corps Service Inspires PhD Dissertation



Kiera Eckhardt

Kiera Eckhardt served in the Peace Corps as a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Volunteer, but was emergency evacuated due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. After returning to the United States, she joined AmeriCorps VISTA in 2020-2021 and served as a Refugee Mentor Coordinator for the Florida Department of Children and Families Refugee Project. After completing VISTA service, she was offered a full ride scholarship to Illinois State University's Applied Community & Economic Development (ACED) Program through the Stevenson Center, where she received her master's degree in anthropology. She was then offered admittance to the PhD program in socio-cultural anthropology at the University of Kansas. She is focusing her dissertation research on "Refugee Rights and Perspectives of Refugee Service Providers in Ecuador," which is inspired by her Peace Corps and AmeriCorps VISTA Service.

AmeriCorps Kansas Stories

In this section we celebrate the 5 Year Anniversary of the WSU AmeriCorps Kansas Program. Thank you to the more than 75 AmeriCorps State Members who have served in part-time and direct service capacities over the last 5 years. WSU receives this grant from the Kansas Volunteer Commission.

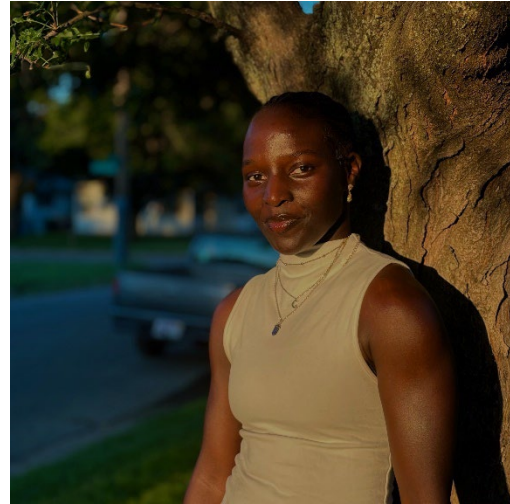
AmeriCorps Member Develops Leadership Skills During Service



Lexi Silva

Lexi Silva served as an AmeriCorps Kansas Member this past summer at Legacy Works. She volunteered in the garden, helping children to learn beneficial techniques for growing plants and food. Though she is majoring in Aerospace Engineering at WSU, Lexi is grateful for the leadership development she experienced at Legacy. Since her service, she is more comfortable leading groups and has been better with problem solving in group situations and workplace settings.

AmeriCorps Member Comes Out of Her Shell While Serving



Rodah Bengi

Rodah Bengi served as an AmeriCorps Kansas Member with Peace Connections this past year. Her goal with service was to make a positive impact on the Newton area, while also supporting herself in school. Through her AmeriCorps service, she learned more about the world of non-profits, and their vital role within the community. She shares that being able to work with people of all ages and backgrounds has been an eye-opening experience, and that she was even able to speak with retired professors, who offered valuable insight and wisdom into her degree program in Mechanical Engineering. She believes that her service experience has allowed her to get out of her comfort zone and try something new, wherein she accredits her newfound confidence in herself and her goals to her work with Peace Connections and the WSU AmeriCorps Program, which she says has helped her to embrace her full potential.

WSU AmeriCorps Sites

The WSU AmeriCorps Program would like to thank the following sites who have hosted AmeriCorps Members over the last decade.

Alternative Gifts International
Arts Partners
Bartlett Arboretum
Breakthrough (Episcopal Social Services)
Bridget's Cradles
Center for Public Health - WSU CEI
Children First CEO of Kansas, Inc.
Circles of Greater Topeka
Circles of McPherson County
City of Wichita - Atwater Neighborhood Resource Center
Communities In Schools
Community Village Lawrence
Consumer Credit Counseling Service, Inc.
Dress for Success Wichita
El Dorado Main Street
Family Promise of Greater Wichita
Genesis Foundation for Fitness & Tennis
Girl Scouts of the Kansas Heartland
GoodLife Innovation, Inc.
Guadalupe Clinic
Harvey County CASA
Heartland Community Health Center
Humankind Ministries
Hutchinson Public School District
ICT Food Rescue
IMPACT Center - WSU CEI
Jewish Family Services
KanCare Ombudsman
Kansas Food Bank
Kansas Health Matters
Kansas Judicial Branch - Eviction Resolution
Kansas Nonprofit Chamber

Kids Need to Eat, Inc.
KPTS
Lawrence Community Shelter
Lawrence-Douglas County Housing Authority
LegacyWorks
Manhattan-Ogden USD383 McKinney-Vento
McAdams Academy
McPherson Housing Coalition
Midwest Battle Buddies
Morning Star, Inc. CRO
Museum of World Treasures
Peace Connections
Prevention Initiatives - WSU CEI
Project Access/Central Plains Health Care Partnership
Psychology Department - WSU
Rainbows United, Inc.
Raise My Head Foundation
Rise Up for Youth
SafeHope
Sedgwick County Departmental Disability Organization
Sedgwick County Health Department
Shocker Neighborhood Coalition
Stafford County Economic Development
Steps to End Poverty of McPherson County
Student Involvement - WSU
The Center
The Kansas African American Museum
Thrive of the Heartland
United Way of Reno County
Urban League of Kansas, Inc.
Van Go, Inc. - Lawrence
Wichita Fellowship Club, Inc.
Wichita WIN
Wichita's Littlest Heroes
WSU Community Engagement Institute

New WSU AmeriCorps Program Staff



Olivia Vest

Introducing Olivia Vest, our newest staff member on the AmeriCorps team at Wichita State. Olivia will be supporting our AmeriCorps State members as an AmeriCorps Projects Specialist. She previously served as an AmeriCorps Volunteer in Service to America (VISTA), then as a VISTA Leader with CEI from 2018 to 2019. With a deep passion for service, and a background in grant writing, volunteer recruitment/management, and community collaboration, Olivia is elated to return to this work. In her free time, Olivia can be found surrounded by her community; she loves live music, antiquing, camping, gardening, watching documentaries, and cooking/hosting for her loved ones. Olivia can be reached at: olivia.vest@wichita.edu or (316) 895-0737.

Interested in Serving with the WSU AmeriCorps Program?

To be eligible for service, applicants must be at least 18 years of age (17 for AmeriCorps State positions), and a U.S. citizen or permanent resident. To apply visit my.americorps.gov and search “WSU”.

We currently have five openings:

- Four part-time positions in public health in Wichita. Three positions are with the Sedgwick County Health Department, and one is with NAMI Wichita.
- One full-time VISTA position in Winfield with the First United Methodist Church.

For more information about the WSU AmeriCorps Program, please contact:

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