



Answering the Call: A Summer of Service During COVID-19

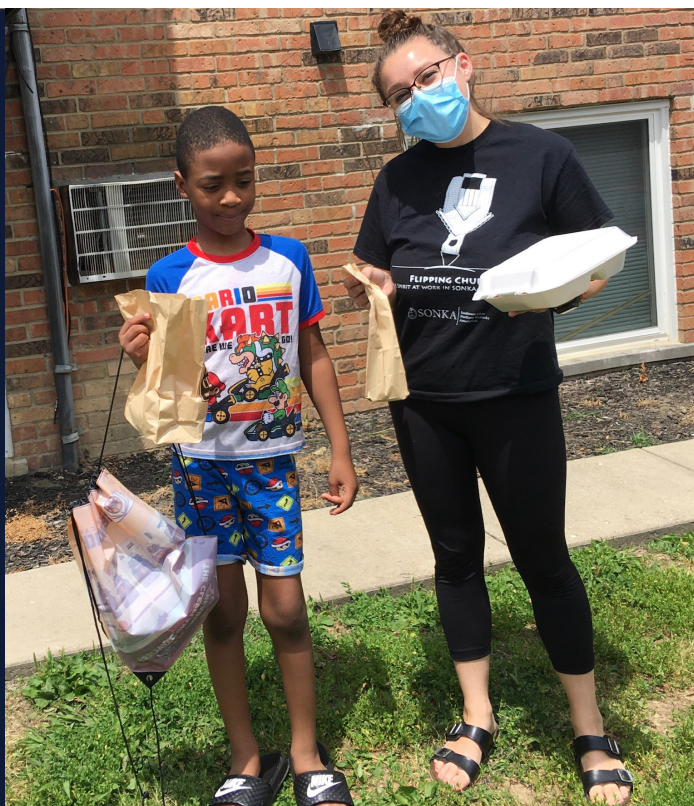
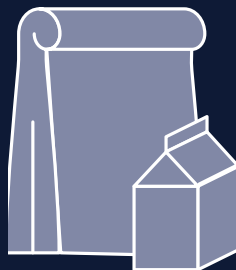
*A report on the contributions and
impacts made by AmeriCorps VISTA
Summer Associates in summer 2020*

Since we began our AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associate project in 2009, our members have traditionally served at Summer Food Service Program sites and other meal and emergency food providers to address childhood hunger. When traditional school buildings close during the summer months, children who normally rely on free or reduced-price school meals can often slip through the cracks and suffer from food insecurity. Summer Food Service Programs provide not only reliable access to free, healthy meals, but often also provide educational and recreational programming in safe, accessible locations.

Unfortunately, the onset of COVID-19 meant limitations to congregate feeding and in-person programming. Some of our longtime host site partners were unable to open their sites. All others had to significantly alter their service models to avoid close personal contact and to mitigate the spread of the virus. Ultimately, 47 members serving on our project worked hard to innovate and overcome to continue to serve kids in need!

COVID-19 health and safety protocols require social distancing, limitations to group sizes, mandatory mask-wearing and the use of other personal protective equipment and sanitization practices, and more. Summer meal sites could not provide on-site meals or programming in their traditional formats in 2020, but they leapt headfirst into launching grab-and-go meals, home delivery or community-based pick-up models, and supplemental foods to help families struggling from the impact of the pandemic keep healthy food on the table.

Our members helped their sites provide 635,832 meals to food insecure Ohio children, serving nearly 7,000 children daily!



This year, many of our members worked with their host sites to get creative and provide access to fun, informative activities remotely.

Pictured here are some of the take-home activities prepared by Emily Leatherman, serving with the New Albany Food Pantry. Emily shared this look into her service: **“The past week I have sent home ‘summer in a bag’ filled with water guns, jump ropes, beach balls, puzzles, bubbles and more! The next week we partnered with the Lindy Infante Foundation to send home ‘sports in a bag’ which consisted of one full-sized ball (basketball/football/soccer ball), jump rope, cones for drills, and booklet of different games that can be played. It was so AWESOME to see all the kids’ faces light up when they got the sports in a bag. They were so excited and thrilled.”**



Our members and their host sites go above and beyond to address the problem of hunger in their communities head-on.

Several members helped to plant, grow, harvest, and/or distribute nearly 20,000 pounds of produce to families in need.



Summer 2020 was a difficult and challenging era for America, but many of our members shared that their ability to engage in this work helped them cope and hold onto hope. Emma Gardner, who served with Franklinton Gardens, shared this poetic reflection: *“The most significant quality that stands out about my time this summer was its realness and rawness. Everything I did felt like an essential part of being human. When I showed up on a cooler morning ready to work and felt the sun shining on me, the smile that spread across my face at the feeling of her warmth was real. The sweat that literally dripped down my face while pruning and winding tomatoes in our high tunnels was real. I felt real frustration, exhaustion, confusion, and desperation about the state of our planet during this summer. But I felt real hope, contentment, enthusiasm, and joy in being reacquainted with the feeling of being human, of doing hard things with other people, of feeling all of my emotions and physical sensations fully, and in spending time with Mother Earth.”*



Our members always make a remarkable difference to their host sites and in their communities, but this year took service to a new level. Here are just a few of the many grateful testimonials from their supervisors about their impact:

“I cannot overstate the increase in capacity we had because of our VISTAs. At the high point of the summer, we were providing daily meals to over 1,800 children, a 225% increase over last summer. The members made it possible for us to keep up with the demand.”
Heart Reach Neighborhood Ministries

“The impact of the VISTAs this summer was profound. It was our most successful growing season, to date. By the end of the harvest season we expect to have donated over 1500 pounds of food – a record for our space. The team was efficient and fun, keeping their sense of humor and motivation during a global pandemic. During a time when most of the world went virtual, we dug into the earth and found joy and peace together, all while ensuring that our neighbors had fresh, nutrient-rich food for their tables. What a gift!”
Otterbein University

“We were only able to operate because of the AmeriCorps VISTA program. Since the majority of our volunteers during non-pandemic times are retired, we would not have had sufficient help to stay open. But thanks to the summer VISTA program, not only did we stay open but we also served more families than we ever dreamed we were capable of serving.” Lodi Family Center



This report is dedicated to the 47 individuals who chose to pursue their calling to give back through national service despite the obstacles and challenges presented by a global pandemic.

Thank you for choosing to spend summer 2020 as an AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associate. You made a remarkable difference and inspired all of us.

