



Senior Legal Hotline/Legal Services of Northern California
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VISTA opportunity with legal services program

Summer 2009

California's Senior Legal Hotline (SLH) is a host for two AmeriCorps VISTA members. The first ones began in 2006, a new one is just starting now and the next likely opening will be in December 2009, then summer 2010. The deadlines to finalize selection are approximately two months before the start dates. There is a possibility that some future placements could be in San Francisco as well as in Sacramento.

The program involves a one-year, full-time commitment. People from age 18 up can join, but most typically, participants are college grads. We are requiring that and have set a minimum age of 21 for working at SLH. We are looking particularly for people who are likely headed toward law school and thinking about careers with public interest agencies, or perhaps those enrolled in (or considering) a gerontology program. Those who have completed a graduate program in these or related fields are welcome too, as well as graduate students who want to take a year off. And some VISTA participants join as a mid-career break or even after retirement.

The purpose of the VISTA program is to provide capacity building services to nonprofit anti-poverty organizations – not direct services, though participants can be trained to do that if it helps with their other assignments, such as recruiting and supervising volunteers, for instance.

Participants receive a “living allowance” of \$909 a month. They also have health insurance, sick leave, some personal leave, relocation expenses if they come from out of town, child care assistance if applicable. They can get food stamps if they qualify otherwise. Most student loans can be deferred while they’re with the program. Expenses such as work-related travel are reimbursed (by us). And after successful completion of the year, a VISTA member is entitled to \$4,725 toward future educational expenses or past student loans, or a \$1,200 stipend. They’re not allowed to have other jobs or go to school (with some job-related exceptions) during the year.

Details about the program in general are at www.americorps.gov. Be sure to look at the VISTA section. SLH’s information can be found by searching there, but here is another version of our agency description, and below, a list of the types of things a VISTA might do:

The California Senior Legal Hotline (SLH) is a leader among U.S. programs exploring innovative ways to deliver legal help to elders.

Our mission: to help seniors prevent and overcome poverty by avoiding exploitation and fighting abuse, empowering them with key tools to achieve and maintain maximum independence, health, economic security and social productivity. We help clients connect with other services when they need more than we can do, but our main thrust is to deal directly with their issues and resolve problems.

Part of a traditional legal aid agency, SLH faces challenges serving California's immense, fast-growing elder population while striving to reach especially the poorest and those facing other special challenges like disability, isolation or limited English.

SLH seeks to raise capacity well above the current 7,000 cases a year. Paid staff are experienced, dedicated and spirited. Volunteers comprise retired and active attorneys and paralegals, law students, social workers, interpreters and others.

We need help devising methods to reach target populations; improving technological and other systems to give advocates better and faster access to legal and community resources; forging and nurturing ties with key partners; developing educational campaigns to help seniors prevent problems; initiating new projects to help improve the lives of California seniors; and finding the financial and other support needed for our work.

An ideal VISTA candidate has attended, plans to attend or is seriously considering law School, a gerontology program or some other related area, is drawn toward a career in public interest work and wants to be immersed in the field for a year. S/he is smart, energetic, creative, well-organized, highly computer literate – maybe even with some significant programming and web design skills – has great writing and public speaking ability and knows how to take on projects and follow through, finding the right balance between independent initiative and consulting with supervisors. Special interest in work with seniors and fluency in other languages are valuable additions.

VISTA members may take responsibility for many of the following, commensurate with skills and interests:

- Recruit, train and supervise volunteer advocates, interns and interpreters, developing permanent systems that will be applied long into the future. Law students or graduates may also undergo advocate training to help with substantive training and supervision of advocates.
- Help create a sophisticated intranet, with several levels of privacy protection, to give advocates quick access to substantive legal information and useful community resources, with accurate descriptions of their work, functioning and direct contacts. (Tech skills are a major plus here.)
- Revamp SLH's public web site for better access and user friendliness.
- Create new, improved outreach materials – printed and for broadcast.
- Represent SLH in community coalitions and at events; staff information tables; make presentations.
- Develop plans and conduct outreach in Southern California, still a relatively new and underserved region for SLH, and statewide to seniors with limited English and to others through faith communities. (Foreign language fluency highly valued)
- Create written and audio-visual materials for outreach and preventive education campaigns.
- Maintain regular communications with key partners; possibly help create a statewide body to oversee and promote better coordination of senior legal services.
- Research funding sources, write grant proposals and prepare reports.
- Develop a management and quality control system to exploit new technology that enables the use of volunteer advocates from remote locations.

Please get in touch if you'd like to learn more about the opportunity and, if feasible, arrange for a visit. Contact: David Mandel, supervising attorney, dmandel@lsnc.net.