



Minnesota VISTA Living

A Guide to Making the Most of
Your Service in Minnesota

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Welcome to the Minnesota Literacy Council
AmeriCorps VISTA Program!



Created by VISTA member Anne Christians and the MLC VISTA Leaders

Introduction

Being an AmeriCorps VISTA member has its own unique set of challenges and benefits. This VISTA Living guide is intended to serve as a navigation tool, offering information and insight from what other service members have learned along the way. You are now part of the Minnesota Literacy Council VISTA cohort and will serve at your individual host site, but you are also part of a larger network of AmeriCorps VISTA members who have served in Minnesota over the years. We've passed on our advice, tips and tools for you to use.

This guide is not comprehensive in any way, so if you need more information or have additional questions, contact your VISTA Leader or VISTA Manager. Keep in mind that we will also be going over this guide as a group at Early Service Training in September.

VISTA Resources

IMPORTANT CONTACTS AND RESOURCES

The MLC VISTA Program Manager and VISTA Leader are here for your support, questions, information and resources as you navigate your service year. Feel free to contact them.

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Familiarize yourself with and use these websites for resources, questions and information.

- **VISTA Portal** (www.mnliteracy.org/vista): The username is "mlcvista" and "literacy" is the password. Find the VISTA Living blog, training calendars and materials, policies and procedures, forms, a VISTA cohort roster, VISTA vocabulary and other resources.
- **My AmeriCorps** (<https://my.americorps.gov>): You already created this account when you applied to VISTA. Find your service assignment, terms, benefits and letters here.
- **VISTA Campus** (<http://vistacampus.org>): Create a new username and password (these are not the same as your My AmeriCorps details). Find terms, conditions and benefits.
- **VISTA Member Handbook**: Find specifics on all VISTA rules, procedures, benefits and terms at (<http://vistacampus.org/mod/book/view.php?id=2093/chapter1.html>).
- **National Service Hotline** (<https://questions.nationalservice.gov/>): Ask questions and receive feedback about anything related to AmeriCorps by calling 1-800-942-2677.

Housing

Multiple housing resources exist to help you find a safe, enjoyable and affordable place to live. Here are some useful steps to consult and complete before you find a place:

- **Identify your price range:** Use the online *VISTA Payroll and Budgeting* form and *VISTA Budget Calculator* at <http://mnliteracy.org/vista/resources> to prepare a budget and identify monthly expenses. Your rent should be less than 50% of your monthly income.
- **Find the right neighborhood:** Read up on the ins-and-outs of moving to the Twin Cities at <http://www.livemsp.org>, then research the demographic profiles of St. Paul and Minneapolis neighborhoods at <http://www.stpaul.gov/index.aspx?nid=185> and at <http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/neighborhoods/>. For greater Minnesota searches, ask your Supervisor for suggestions of safe and affordable areas, agencies or openings.
- **Search for a place to live:** Search by neighborhood and price at www.craigslist.org, or <https://www.padmapper.com> and <http://www.rent.com> for advanced search options. Consult <http://homeguides.sfgate.com/look-going-apartment-hunting-1889.html> once you plan to tour a place, and if you are looking for roommates, contact the MLC VISTA Manager or Leader to find other VISTA members living in the area. If you plan to bus, view a MetroTransit route map at <http://www.metrotransit.org/maps-schedules.aspx>.

Transportation

The MLC will only reimburse mileage to and from required and pre-approved MLC VISTA trainings. Your host site will reimburse mileage for travel required for your VISTA project, but you will not receive reimbursement for travel to and from your host site or for VISTA social events. With that in mind, check out these travel options for the Twin Cities metro:

- **Metro Transit:** Find information and single/monthly passes at www.metrotransit.com.
- **Bike + Bus:** Take your bike on the bus, with bike racks on front (or inside the light rail).
- **Ridesharing:** Visit www.erideshare.com or rent a car by the hour at www.hourcar.org.
- **Biking:** Use www.mapmyride.com to calculate the length of your trip and then consult www.bikewalktwincities.org/maps-routes/bike-maps to plan your ride. If you want to purchase or repair a bicycle check out the Minneapolis police department bike auction at www.minneapolis.mn.gov/police/about/police_about_auctions or a listing of local bike shops at www.biketcbc.org/bikeshops/index.html. Bike shops such as Spokes, at spokesconnect.org and Cycles for Change, at www.cyclesforchange.org also offer free space, tools and workshops for repairing your own bike. Finally, take advantage of our protected, cross-city Midtown Greenway bike path at www.midtowngreenway.org.

Health Benefits

All VISTA members receive health benefits (*not* insurance) through Seven Corners. For a full guide to your health care benefits visit americorps.sevencorners.com. Otherwise:

- **Take note of these facts and tips:**
 - Seven Corners does not cover preexisting conditions or preventative measures.
 - If you have health problems it is critical to find a general practitioner approved by Seven Corners. To do so, visit the link above and click on 'Provider Network.'
 - Before seeking out or receiving a service, call the toll free number below or visit <http://americorps.sevencorners.com/precert.htm>, if possible, to ask an agent whether or not Seven Corners will cover or pre-certify the procedure.
 - Hold onto your benefits card, as you may need to reference it in the future.
 - If you have **any questions** about your benefits or coverage, contact Seven Corners toll free at 1-866-699-4186 or review the VISTA Health Benefits Guide at http://mnliteracy.org/sites/default/files/vista_health_benefits_guide.pdf.
- **Seek out free and sliding-scale resources:**
 - For a listing of free and low-cost medical, dental and mental health services available statewide, use the toll free Health Access Line at 1-866-489-4899 or http://mn.bridgetobenefits.org/MN_Low_Cost_Health_Care_Directory.html.
 - Find additional resources and providers for preventative health services (such as flu shots and vaccines) at www.ohealthcenter.com, plus dental services at www.dentalclinics.org/sta/minnesota and mental health and wellness services under the 'VISTA Living' heading at <http://mnliteracy.org/vista/resources>.

Budgeting

Consider exploring these free online resources for budgeting tips and tools:

- **VISTA Payroll & Budgeting:** A VISTA-specific form at mnliteracy.org/vista/resources that includes your VISTA pay schedule, stipend details and a VISTA budget calculator.
- **Mint.com:** A free and secure financial planning tool at www.mint.com that allows you to itemize spending, track balances and payments and set up reminders for your bills.
- **VISTA Campus:** An AmeriCorps website at www.vistacampus.org that offers a budget calculator, tips for living on the VISTA stipend and resources regarding VISTA benefits.
- **The Simple Dollar:** A blog at www.thesimpledollar.com that explains all the concepts you need to know and addresses money management in easy-to-understand terms.
- **AccountAbility Minnesota:** A website at www.accountabilitymn.org (plus clinics at 12 metro area sites) that offers free tax preparation and financial planning services.

Food Assistance

To learn more about applying for and utilizing food assistance programs visit the:

- **MN Food Helpline:** Call 1-888-711-1151 between 8:30am-4:30pm on Monday-Friday to learn about assistance programs (formerly “food stamps”). Screen for eligibility, get assistance in completing the application, locate resources in your community and find referrals for other public food programs you and your family might be eligible for.
- **MN Department of Human Services:** Visit mn.gov/dhs to find information about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and instructions on applying for food assistance in your county. Look under the tab ‘People We Serve’ and ‘Adults,’ and then click on the ‘Economic Supports’ tab and once again on ‘Food and Assistance.’
- **Hennepin County website:** To find details about applying for food assistance, visit <http://hennepin.us/portal/site/HennepinUS/menuitem.b1ab75471750e40fa01dfb47c4cf06498/?vgnnextoid=bce3a6f0833f3210VgnVCM20000048114689RCRD>.
- **Ramsey County website:** Visit www.co.ramsey.mn.us/hs/financialassistance.html.
- **Rice County website:** Visit <http://www.co.rice.mn.us/departments/social-services>.
- **Stevens County website:** Visit <http://www.co.stevens.mn.us/index.aspx?nid=886>.

To apply for food assistance or an EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) card:

- **In Hennepin County:** The best way to apply is to set aside a few hours and go directly to Human Services at 330 S 12th Street, Minneapolis MN 55404. Go early in the day and week, as this is when lines are shortest. When you enter the building, ask to be assigned a case number. You will go through a series of stations and then interview with your assigned case worker. If you qualify, you will get an EBT card the same day.
- **In Ramsey County:** The process is similar. Visit the Government Center East building at 160 E Kellogg Blvd, St. Paul MN 55101 and follow the same steps explained above.
- **In Rice County:** Visit Government Services at 320 3rd Street NW, Faribault MN 55021.
- **In Stevens County:** Visit Human Services at 400 Colorado Avenue, Morris MN 56267.
- **In any county:** You need to **bring the following things with you**...your Social Security number, proof of income (a pay stub or a service notification letter that your VISTA Manager can get for you), an estimate of the amount in your savings and/or checking accounts and proof of all your expenses (receipts of your rent, utilities, loans, etc.).
- It may be helpful to **view the application** before you go in. See an application here: http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/idcplg?IdcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&Redirected=true&dDocName=id_002555.
- To continue receiving benefits you will need to **complete paperwork** every six months and **reapply** every year. Learn more at any of the county websites listed above.

Eating Cheaply

Farmers' markets are a cheap and healthy way to stock up on fresh produce. Plus, many now accept EBT (food assistance) cards, and some will even match the first \$5 spent using your EBT card! Learn more at www.stpaulfarmersmarket.com/about/ebt. Check out the:

- **Minneapolis Farmers' Market:** www.mplsfarmersmarket.com.
- **St. Paul Farmers' Markets:** www.stpaulfarmersmarket.com.
- **Greater Minnesota Farmers' Markets:**
 - **Austin:** www.localharvest.org/austin-area-farmers-market-M6318.
 - **Morris:** www.morrisareafarmersmarket.com.
 - **Faribault:** mnprairieroots.com/tag/faribault-farmers-market.
 - **Northfield:** www.local-farmers-markets.com/market/2590/northfield.
 - **Mankato:** www.mankatofarmersmarket.com.
 - **All MN Farmers' Markets:** www.mda.state.mn.us/mngrown.

Co-Ops are another EBT-friendly option for getting healthy food. Prices are high because of the local, organic and fair trade goods, but it can be affordable to buy in bulk. See:

- **Twin Cities and statewide co-op listings:** www.coopdirectory.org.
- **Greater MN:** www.pdtfoods.org (Pomme de Terre Foods, Morris), www.justfood.coop (Just Foods, Northfield) and www.mankatocoop.com (the Mankato Co-Op, Mankato).

For everyday groceries and pantry essentials, chain stores usually offer the best prices and selection. View the statewide locations of Minnesota's large, affordable grocery staples:

- **Rainbow Foods:** www.rainbowfoods.com.
- **Econofoods:** www.econofoods.com.
- **Trader Joe's:** www.traderjoes.com.
- **Festival Foods:** www.festivalfoods.net.
- **Cub Foods:** www.cub.com.
- **Aldi Foods:** www.aldi.us.
- **Costco:** www.costco.com.
- **Target:** www.target.com.

Sometimes it takes a little extra inspiration to make delicious, filling and creative meals on a budget. Here are a few food blogs that focus on easy and inexpensive recipes and ideas:

- **Budget Bytes:** Focuses on food that is quick and satisfying and breaks down each meal with the cost of individual ingredients and servings. Visit budgetbytes.blogspot.com.
- **\$5 Dinners:** Offers recipes for meals costing approximately \$5. The site also contains information on kitchen tips, coupons and gardening. Visit www.5dollardinners.com.
- **BrokeAss Gourmet:** Breaks down the price of each ingredient and highlights meals for less than \$20. Great for potlucks and entertaining! Visit www.brokeassgourmet.com.
- **Poor Girl Eats Well:** Shows different combinations of food staples that you can buy for \$25 at various locations, plus price-per-serving meals. Visit www.poorgirleatswell.com.

One final resource is www.fareforall.org, a community service that sells cheap bulk food.

Entertainment

There are lots of fun and cheap ways to stay busy in Minnesota all year long. For ideas and details, follow the VISTA Living blog at <http://mnliteracy.org/vista> and see the list below.

MOVIE THEATRES

- **Riverview Theater** (Minneapolis, www.riverviewtheater.com): Second-run movies for \$3 and only \$2 on Tuesdays. 3800 42nd Avenue S, Minneapolis MN 55406.
- **St. Anthony Main** (Minneapolis, www.stanthonymaintheatre.com): Great historic theatre with \$5 tickets on Tuesdays. SE 115 Main Street, Minneapolis MN 55414.
- **U of MN Student Center** (St. Paul, www.spsc.umn.edu): Free film showings as well as concerts, lectures and more. 2017 Buford Avenue, St. Paul MN 55108.
- **Woodbury Theatre** (East St. Paul, www.woodburytheatre.com): \$4 tickets before 6pm and \$6 tickets after 6pm. 1470 Queens Drive, Woodbury MN 55125.
- **Roseville AMC** (Roseville, www.amctheatres.com/rosedale/): Blockbusters, IMAX, 3-D films and \$5 tickets before noon. 850 Rosedale Center, Roseville MN 55113.
- **Hopkins Cinema 6** (Hopkins, www.manntheatresmn.com/theatre.php?ID=11): \$2.50 tickets anytime and \$2 on Tuesdays. 1118 Main Street, Hopkins MN 55343.
- **CineMagic7** (Austin, www.cinemagictheatres.com/theatres/4): \$6.25 matinee tickets and lots of snack specials. 1302 18th Avenue NW, Austin MN 55912.
- **Northwoods Cinema 10** (Owatonna, www.cectheatres.com/theatre/?tid=70): \$6.50 tickets before 6pm, 3D theatres. 300 Allen Avenue, Owatonna MN 55060.
- **Morris Theatre Co-Operative** (Morris, www.morristheatre.net): Regularly showing current films. 12 East 6th Street, Morris MN 56267.

MALLS AND SHOPPING

- **Mall of America:** Boasts an amusement park, movie theatre, aquarium and 400+ stores. It is also on the light rail line. 60 East Broadway, Bloomington MN 55425.
- **Southdale Shopping Center:** Anchor stores like Macy's, J.C. Penny and Marshall's, in addition to over 120 specialty stores. 10 Southdale Center, Edina MN 55435.
- **Rosedale Shopping Center:** Same anchor stores as Southdale, but is also attached to the Roseville AMC theatre. 10 Rosedale Shopping Center, Roseville MN 55113.
- **Burnsville Center:** South of Minneapolis, this is the nearest full shopping mall to Northfield, Faribault and Mankato. 1178 Burnsville Center, Burnsville MN 55306.
- **Northbridge Mall:** Includes a movie theatre, Anytime Fitness, Herberger's, Shopko and restaurants. Nearest to Austin. 2510 Bridge Avenue, Albert Lea MN 56007.
- **IKEA:** Known for inexpensive house wares (i.e. furniture, cooking utensils, bedding and décor). Next to the Mall of America. 8000 Ikea Way, Bloomington MN 55425.

Entertainment

MUSEUMS

- **Mill City Museum** (Minneapolis, www.millcitymuseum.org): A scenic museum built amid mill ruins along the Mississippi. Adult tickets are \$11, or \$9 with a college ID.
- **American Swedish Institute** (Minneapolis, www.asimn.org): A beautifully restored mansion, shop and new Swedish café. Adult tickets are \$7, or \$4 with a college ID.
- **Museum of Russian Art** (Minneapolis, <http://tmora.org>): Stunning art nestled into a Spanish Colonial style mission. Adult tickets are \$9, or \$5 with a college ID.
- **Bell Museum of Natural History** (Minneapolis, www.bellmuseum.umn.edu): Great interactive exhibits. Adult tickets are \$6, or \$4 with a college ID. Free on Sundays.
- **Weisman Art Museum** (Minneapolis, www.weisman.umn.edu): A renowned piece of architecture holds early 20th century and contemporary art. Admission is free.
- **Minneapolis Institute of Arts** (Minneapolis, www.artsmia.org): Tours, lectures, film, exhibits, a museum shop and frequent young-adult events. Admission is free.
- **Bakken Museum** (Minneapolis, www.thebakken.org): A creative space dedicated to science, electricity and magnetism. Adult tickets are \$7, or \$5 with a college ID.
- **Walker Art Center and Sculpture Garden** (Minneapolis, www.walkerart.org): Free admission Thursday nights from 5-9pm and on the first Saturday of every month. Adult tickets are \$12, or \$8 with a college ID. The sculpture garden is always free.
- **Science Museum of Minnesota** (St. Paul, www.smm.org): Has an Omnitheatre and great exhibits. Huge discount on tickets if you bring your EBT card or WIC folder.
- **James J. Hill House** (St. Paul, www.mnhs.org/hillhouse): Art gallery and enormous mansion on historic Summit Avenue. Adult tickets are \$9, or \$7 with a college ID.
- **Historic Fort Snelling** (St. Paul, www.historicfortsnelling.org): Relive the battles of historic Minnesota at this 1820s fort. Adult tickets are \$11, or \$9 with a college ID.
- **Spam Museum** (Austin, www.spam.com): Free, interactive and totally awesome.
- **Northfield Historical Society** (www.northfieldhistory.org): Learn about this college town and the Defeat of Jesse James. Adult tickets are \$4, or \$2 with a college ID.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES

- **Hennepin County library system:** Visit www.hclib.org.
- **Ramsey County library system:** Visit www.rclreads.org.
- **St. Paul Public library system:** Visit www.sppl.org.
- **Greater MN public libraries:** Visit www.ci.northfield.mn.us/Index.aspx?NID=223 (Northfield), www.faribault.org/library/ (Faribault), www.morris.lib.mn.us (Morris), www.austinpubliclibrary.org (Austin) and www.beclibrary.org (Mankato).

Entertainment

ATHLETICS

- **Gym memberships:** Groupon (www.groupon.com/minneapolis-stpaul) often offers membership deals, some athletic studios like Corepower Yoga have a trade system for free classes (www.corepoweryoga.com), and Twin Cities YMCA/YWCA locations (www.ymcatwincities.org) have scholarships. It's worth asking about!
- **Intramurals:** If you're looking to join a team, start with the Parks and Recreation leagues in either city at (www.minneapolisparcs.org) or (www.stpaul.gov), or look up team openings and options at Cities Sports Connection (www.cscsports.com).
- **Spectator sports:** We've got the MLB Twins (<http://minnesota.twins.mlb.com>), the NFL Vikings (www.vikings.com), the WNBA Lynx (www.wnba.com/lynx), the NBA Timberwolves (www.nba.com/timberwolves), the NHL Wild (<http://wild.nhl.com>) and the MN Gophers (www.gophersports.com). Not to mention Swarm lacrosse (www.mnswarm.com), MN United FC soccer (<http://mnunitedfc.com>), St. Paul Saints baseball (<http://saintsbasesball.com>), MN RollerGirls and North Star Roller Girls derby at (www.mnrollergirls.com/) and (<http://northstarrollergirls.com>).

OTHER ENTERTAINMENT

- **Guthrie Theater** (Minneapolis, www.guthrietheater.org): Concerts, live events and shows in a renowned river-side building. Rush tickets are \$15-40, regular are more.
- **Minnesota Orchestra** (Minneapolis, www.minnesotaorchestra.org): Known for the musicians and gorgeous Orchestra Hall. Offer student, discount and rush tickets.
- **Minnesota Opera** (St. Paul, www.mnopera.org): 50% off all rush tickets, plus \$10 tickets for dress rehearsals and discounts on Tuesdays/Thursdays with a college ID.
- **ACME Comedy Company** (Minneapolis, www.acmecomedycorpany.com): \$5 on T or TH with a college ID, free for you and five guests during your birthday month.
- **The Depot** (Minneapolis, www.thedepotminneapolis.com): Bar and indoor skating rink. \$8 for adults, \$2 off on Thursdays with a college ID and skate rental for \$7.
- **Como Zoo and Conservatory** (St. Paul, www.comozooconservatory.org): Visit the zoo, amusement park, conservatory, gardens and Lake Como. Admission is free.
- **Jesse James Bowling Lanes** (Northfield, <http://jessejameslanes.com>): Cheap shoe rental, bowling and food/drink deals on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday nights.
- **Minnesota State Parks** (statewide, www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks): Free public hiking trails, wilderness areas, recreational sports areas and camping facilities.
- **Brewery Tours** (Twin Cities): Check out Summit (www.summitbrewing.com), Surly (www.surlybrewing.com) or Grain Belt Breweries (www.grainbelt.com) for tours.

Entertainment

FINDING THRIFTY THINGS TO DO

- **MLC VISTA Living blog** (<http://mnliteracy.org/vista>): Your VISTA Leader regularly posts cheap/free events, deals and professional development and social activities.
- **MLC VISTA Facebook page** (<https://www.facebook.com/mlcvista>): Just like with the MLC VISTA Living blog, your VISTA Leader will post lots of fun and thrifty ideas.
- **Online deal programs:** Search for daily discounts on events, restaurants, activities, and more with **Groupon** (www.groupon.com), **Crowd Cut** (www.crowdcut.com), **LivingSocial** (www.livingsocial.com) and **365 Deals** (<http://365deals.mn/>).
- **City Pages** (www.citypages.com/): Browse the Twin Cities event calendar for art, music, festivals, literary events, comedy, sports, dance, theatre and happy hours.
- **Vita.mn** (www.vita.mn/): Get updates on music, food, drink, movies, fashion, arts and “Best of” nominations in this self-proclaimed Twin Cities “going-out guide.”
- **Metromix** (<http://twincities.metromix.com>): Just like City Pages and Vita.mn.
- **InterCorps Council of MN Twitter:** Follow (@ICCoFofMN) to learn about deals and free events promoted by other service members on the weekly ‘Thrifty Thursdays.’
- **Other Twitter handles to follow for thrifty entertainment ideas:**
 - **MN Places** @minnesotaplaces
 - **MSP Magazine** @mspmag
 - **Groupon** @groupontwincity
 - **Twin Cities Daily Planet** @tcdailyplanet
 - **City Pages Street Team** @citypagesstreet
 - **Thrifty Hipster MN** @thriftyhipster

Savings and Deals

VISTA members are notorious for discovering deals, coming up with creative ways to save and making the most out of the living stipend. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- **TC Free Market:** Goods and service listings for people who want to give or get free reusable goods for the home, garage and garden. Visit www.twincitiesfreemarket.org.
- **Freecycle:** A community for giving and trading free things. Visit www.freecycle.com.
- **Thrifty Hipster:** Giveaways and free events listings. Visit www.thriftyhipster.com.
- **Steals and Deals:** The Star Tribune shares money-saving tips, half-priced gift cards and listings of local, online and garage sales. Visit <http://deals.startribune.com/minnesota>.
- **City Pages:** A catalog of the “Best of the Twin Cities.” Visit www.citypages.com/bestof.
- **MLC VISTA 2013-2014 Google Group:** Your VISTA Leader will invite you to join a VISTA Google Group just for our cohort. Find ideas and share your own finds with others!