Hello VISTAs!

First of all: Thank you for staying on the phone line throughout the whole conference call and not complaining once. I really appreciate your patience. I also want to reintroduce myself briefly so that you can discredit the rumor that your VISTA Leader is a robot. My name is Swati Karandikar (pronounced Swat + e) and I recently finished my first year of VISTA service in San Antonio, Texas. I served for a NeighborWorks America host site (just like you) where my task at hand was to create a personal finance education related curriculum for low to moderate income families. As if today, I have served as a VISTA Leader for only two weeks and therefore from time to time, I will call some of you and ask you for your suggestions and resources so that we can expand and strengthen this NeighborWorks VISTA Program network.

**Before** you do anything, **please** email me your work and or gmail **email,** work and personal **phone number** and your **VAD** **if** you haven’t done this already.

*Orientation details:*

1. **Living on a Stipend:** Money management skills do not come to all of us easily, and living on a VISTA stipend can really put those skills to a test. Before you submerge yourself in your work, it is important that you take care of yourself. I would **recommend** signing up for **SNAP**, asking your host site to provide you with some sort of **compensation/reimbursement package (keyword here is asking),** finding an **affordable place** to live. VISTA Land has few resources on how to live on a stipend, but [this](http://www.vistaleader.info/how-tos-2/) link also serves as a nice starting point. For all the **paperwork that proves you need and qualify** for these services log onto MyAmericorps.gov portal and you can find **appropriate letters under “My Service Letter” section**.
   1. For budgeting and money management skills check out [mint.com](http://www.mint.com/) (this is legitimate).
2. **CNS (or CNCS) AmeriCorps VISTA Resources:** I highly recommend exploring [vistacampus.org](http://www.vistacampus.org/) . This is relatively a new site in the sense the CNS staff has been **actively adding professional growth** related material for all VISTAs. Especially in the beginning of your term, take your time and browse through all the material that is available here. I strongly recommend surfing through **“The Work”** section under VISTAs.
3. Please become familiar with [The VISTA Member Handbook](http://www.nationalservice.gov/help/vistahandbook/chapter1.html). It covers **all the benefits and rights** offered to us VISTAs. Feel free to contact VISTA Member Support Unit (VMSU) if you have any questions. They are an awesome support unit and if you talk to them about Austin, Texas they will automatically take care of you.  Their contact information is **Toll-free Office Number: 866.473.5733 or** [**VISTAMemberSupportUnit@cns.gov**](mailto:VISTAMemberSupportUnit@cns.gov)
4. **Open Hours or Office Hours:** For now I am going to **hold off** the Google group idea, but instead focus some of my energy in getting to know all of our VISTAs and their needs so that I can coordinate better. So instead, I will be **available** to chat through gchat and gtalk on **Thursdays between 1:00 pm EST to 4:00 pm EST and on Fridays between 11:00 am EST to 3:30 pm EST**. No one is required to go online and sit through these open hours. The idea here is that since we all don’t share a same space, these hours can serve as a virtual office for people to come online and ask FAQ’s, brain storming related questions, bounce off ideas, look for resources and what not. Add [nwavista@gmail.com](mailto:nwavista@gmail.com) to your chat list so that we can connect!
5. **VISTA Land**: This Is a website **specifically** created for VISTAs in the NeighborWorks VISTA Program. All VISTA related events, community development related content and training resources are constantly updated here. I am currently learning how to blog, so **PLEASE** let me know when something looks funny or a link is not working. The website: <http://vistaland.yolasite.com/>
   1. New Updates include: **Your Free E-learning Codes** for NeighborWorks America Courses (other community development professionals have to pay for these!!), Giving and Receiving Feedback, Planning for VISTA Service, and Orientation Powerpoint. All of these files are attached to this email already.
6. **Leaders for Communities:** Please come join us on [Leaders for Communities](http://www.leadersforcommunities.org/group/strategiesthatwork?xg_source=activity) and specifically explore the “Strategies That Work” group on it. Please utilize this website as a main tool to find out about effective strategies and innovative initiatives.

If you have any questions and or comments, please feel free to call me or email me.

Thank you and welcome again!

Swati Karandikar

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