

VISTA Service

By Hannah Fraser



Abstract:

AmeriCorps is a federal program supporting public service that helps communities. The HungerCorps focuses specifically on addressing food insecurity, easing access to nutritious food, and providing education about healthy living. VISTA stands for Volunteer in Service to America, and their purpose is to build capacity and infrastructure at their host sites to ensure the sustainability of their poverty alleviating projects. VISTAs do things like research the community in which they serve, recruit and train volunteers, connect community partners with their host site, maintain and update websites and social media, develop curriculum, create programming, and more.

Wingate University has hosted two VISTAs so far. Both of them have worked out of the Collaborative for the Common Good, whose mission is to transform our local region by focusing on creating neighborhoods where people, places, and economies can thrive and prosper. The CCG addresses social, economic, and ecological issues through collaboration and the power of we. The work of a VISTA fits perfectly into the model of the CCG.

Purpose:

AmeriCorps VISTAs are placed in areas with a specific need. In Union County, HungerCorps VISTAs have been placed because there is a large percentage of the population that is food insecure. Food insecurity occurs when community members do not know where their next meal is coming from. Monroe, NC is also considered a food desert. That means that there is not adequate access to healthy and nutritious food. Around the campus of Wingate University, there are two Food Lions and a plethora of fast food restaurants. About 15 minutes from campus, there is a Walmart and an Aldi, but there are not any Harris Teeters, Publix, or Trader Joes for miles. Stores like Food Lion and Walmart do not have the variety of health foods that are present in the other stores that I mentioned. The constant presence and convenience of fast food leads to higher rates of

obesity, high blood pressure, and heart disease. This can be especially true for folks who work multiple jobs and do not have time to grocery shop and prepare food at home. The VISTA



assists in distributing educational resources that make it easier for busy people from lower income areas to make healthier choices in terms of food. According to census.gov/quickfacts, the poverty rate in Wingate, NC is 22.3% with the rate in Monroe, NC being 13.7%. This contrasts to the Western part of the county whose poverty rates range from 3.3-8.6% (census.gov/quickfacts). As such, the work of the HungerCorps Vista is integral to the prosperity of Eastern Union County.

Projects:

One of the goals of VISTA's service is to connect wellness, research, food systems, and service on Wingate University campus with local community partners to co-create a hub of food resources. As a VISTA, I have developed and participated in many projects.

Community Garden:

I have worked closely with Dr. Erika Niland, Head of the Biology Department here at Wingate, to develop the Wingate Community Garden. We partner with the Union County Cooperative Extension to maintain the garden, develop programming, and get buy-in from the community. One of the ways we have gotten buy-in is by leasing out the eight raised beds that are in the garden. Members of the community have rented them out at no cost and are growing their own produce. Along with the Extension agents, our garden manager assists in the maintenance of the raised beds and production garden. Our production garden currently has four different types of strawberries, and we are using wheat as a cover crop to decrease potential erosion of the soil.



Due to Covid, we have not been able to have as much face-to-face interaction in the garden as we would have liked, but recently, we have hosted open houses and garden workdays. The garden workdays provide an opportunity for folks who are renting the raised beds to work on their plots along with the Extension agents and garden manager. It also provides an opportunity for giveaways from local organizations and businesses. At our May 8th garden workday, we gave away 4-H garden kits and build-your-own bird house kits from the Union County Soil and Water Conservation Service. Over 50 members of the community visited our garden that day alone. It was a great success, and we hope to maintain that level of engagement throughout the summer.



To date, we have been able to donate nearly 17 lbs of produce to a local nonprofit called Heart for Monroe. We recently formed a partnership with the Wingate Baptist Daycare to supplement the produce that they use to feed the kids. Folks who are renting raised beds can donate whatever they will not personally use directly to the daycare. We will also be replacing the wheat with more produce for the daycare. The goal is to have the kids take trips to the garden to learn about where their food is coming from.

Food Council of Union County:

The Food Council of Union County was created in a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. When store shelves were empty and people were in need of emergency food assistance, our partners at Union County Human Services Agency were assigned the responsibility by the North Carolina Emergency Operation Center (EOC) to be the feeding coordinator for the County. One component of this job was to work to coordinate food resources and address gaps. They contacted food pantries, nonprofits, churches, schools, and restaurants to determine who was providing food assistance to those in need. During this process, it became apparent that there was a lack of coordination, communication, and collaboration amongst all of these entities. In an effort to address these issues, a food council was formed.

Around the same time, our partners at the Agricultural Center and Cooperative Extension realized that farmers were having trouble selling their produce directly to consumers. With the goal of assisting and supporting small farmers in Union County, they joined forces with developing the food council.



The goals of the food council are to provide educational resources that address wellness and nutrition, develop supportive relationships among every facet of the food system (including

farmers, producers, distributors, and consumers), and advocate for every resident of Union County by working collaboratively to bring every voice to the table.

Since its creation over the summer of 2020, I have worked with the council to create mission and vision statements, write bylaws, create a website and social media pages, approve a Board of Directors and Executive Committee, and increase membership. We will continue to reach out to the community by having a presence at the Monroe Farmer's Market. Currently, our council membership is mostly non-profit organizations, but the goal is to include every aspect of the food system and bring every voice to the table. By having a table at the Farmer's Market, we hope to draw more farmers, producers, and consumers into the food council.

Check out our website: <https://www.foodcouncilofunioncounty.com/>

Winter Break Food Distribution:

Over Winter Break here at Wingate, the dining hall and restaurants on campus were closed. There were a number of students who had been approved to stay on campus over the break due to travel restrictions, nearby jobs, and other circumstances. In order to make sure these students had access to food over the break, we partnered with faculty, staff, local nonprofit organizations, and local churches to host weekly food distribution days. Every Tuesday over the two month break, we provided either snacks, non-perishable food items, or homemade meals to the students. We reached over 20 students with this program and received exceptional feedback.



To read more about the Winter Break Food Distribution, check out our white paper:

Summary:

As the NC HungerCorps VISTA, I have been fortunate enough to work with amazing members of the campus and community to increase awareness of poverty, homelessness, and food

insecurity in Eastern Union County. The projects that I've worked on have built infrastructure and capacity to ensure sustainability in the efforts to address food insecurity on and off campus.