



Surviving Emotionally, Financially, Physically, and Mentally as an AmeriCorps VISTA and Single Mother

By Takeallah Rivera



AmeriCorps VISTA is an anti-poverty program established by Lyndon B. Johnson and his “Economic Opportunity Act” of 1964. As an AmeriCorps VISTA at Rainier Valley Food Bank, my overall duty is to fight the war on poverty through volunteer mobilization and resource development, all while learning valuable employment skills for the future. For struggling millennials and college graduates, serving as a VISTA is one of the few job opportunities to offer a steady income, health benefits, and life insurance. As a single mother of a 14-month old, I have always longed to serve as a VISTA, but felt as though the low wages would prohibit me from doing so. However, after interning at five different organizations and failing to find gainful employment after the birth of my son, I decided to take a chance as a VISTA! Serving as a VISTA and being a single mother simultaneously is a trying task, but I have developed ways to make it work for us!

1. Utilize Community Resources!

As a VISTA, there is an array of resources readily available to assist you throughout your service term! When I began my service term, I applied for housing assistance, Washington Apple Health, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) Benefits, WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) Food Assistance, and TANF (Temporary Assistance For Need Families.) allowances. One perk of serving as a VISTA at a food bank is unlimited access to food and other supplies! I rarely spend money on my lunch- I simply grab a salad or fruit out of the cooler at work! Also, I am able to access cat litter, cat food, flea and tick medicine, and toys for my cats, Jellybean and Louis, as well as diapers, wipes, and snacks for my son, Jimi. As a participant of the Nurse Family Partnership program since my pregnancy, I am given the privilege of visiting with a Pediatric Nurse bi-weekly, who also supplies my son with essentials,

such as clothing, developmentally appropriate toys, and diapers. For my electronic needs, I acquired a laptop for \$99 and a year of unlimited internet service for \$120 through “Interconnection.” I even managed to get a bicycle, helmet, and bike lock for \$10 through a local organization called “Bike Works”, that specifically serves low-income individuals. Most of all, through my relationships with my co-workers and volunteers at the food bank, I have resources for any miscellaneous item I may need, such as a hand-me-down winter coat for my son, and babysitters for when I have important errands to run, am working late, or just simply need to rest and recharge.



2. Budget, Budget, Budget!

As an AmeriCorps VISTA, I am paid a total of \$480 every two weeks, after taxes. Due to our low wages, AmeriCorps VISTAS are automatically eligible to receive TANF (if they have children) and SNAP benefits. In total, my monthly income is \$1,692, which is not much for a family of two in Seattle. Therefore, strict budgeting is crucial to my survival as a VISTA and single mother. During the start of my service term, I purchased a small notebook and budgeted my income based on housing, internet, insurance, telephone, daycare, food, and miscellaneous expenses. At the start of every month, I review my budget, make any necessary changes, and track my spending for the previous month and log it into an Excel spreadsheet. I am especially cautious about my food purchases. In shopping preparation, I make a grocery list before every grocery store trip and strictly abide by the list (to avoid spontaneous “Ooh, that looks good!” purchases). After all of the necessities are purchased, if there is money available, I utilize a portion of it for “Ooh, that looks good!” purchases, such as candy, cupcakes, and chocolates.



3. Do-It-Yourself

Being an AmeriCorps VISTA and single mother is the perfect time to become a so-it-yourself-er! Through reading and online research, I have learned to make my own laundry detergent, soap, shampoo and conditioner, cough syrup, and other essentials, which saves hundreds of dollars a month! I also do my own manicures, pedicures, and hairstyling, which is an excellent option to expensive salon visits.

4. Become friends with The Goodwill and The Dollar Tree!

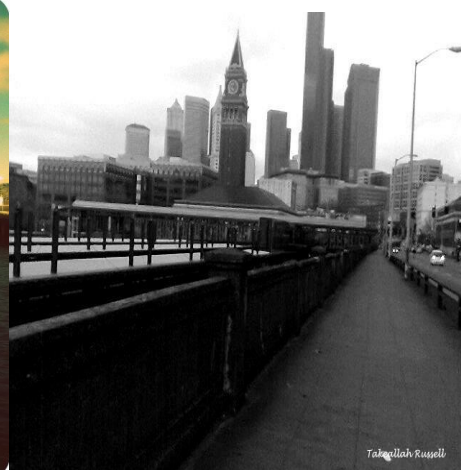
The Goodwill, The Dollar Tree, and I are not only friends, we're life partners! Combined, these two stores have everything my son and I need, and at a low-cost! The Goodwill supplies us with quality clothing, shoes, books, DVDs, and age-appropriate toys for my son, while The Dollar Tree secures cleaning products, office supplies, personal hygiene products, and food. On a regular basis, I take only \$30 and shop at Dollar Tree for toilet paper, medicine, baby wipes, toys for my son, and makeup and hygiene products. Dollar Tree even sells organic cough syrup for toddlers! With occasional exceptions, I do not shop anywhere else for our necessities!



(Photos of a recent Goodwill haul for myself and my son. I spent approximately \$60 dollars!)

5. Prioritize Self-Care!

With the day-to-day pressures of constantly serving others, it is very easy to place personal needs on the back burner. Since I serve at my site Tuesdays-Saturdays, I declared Mondays, “Me-Time Mondays.” I take my son to daycare, disconnect from the internet and my cell phone, take walks in nature, do some yoga, read, and sleep! Taking Mondays to myself plays a huge role in being emotionally, physically, and mentally able to keep up with my busy schedule. I also carve out room in my budget for movies, trips to the children's museum, aquarium, and zoo for my son and I, purchasing books and DVDs, a monthly professional manicure and pedicure, and occasional yummy take-out food and drinks.



(Photos I have taken during my “Me-Time Mondays.” During this time I spend alone, I

discovered that I have an interest in photography!)

6. Get Moving!

Serving as an AmeriCorps VISTA and parent full-time can be extremely exhausting, but it is important to maintain a regular exercise routine for health and happiness. Taking a daily walk around the neighborhood on my lunch break, practicing yoga, and bicycling around Seattle have proven to be stress-relieving activities that keep me energized and motivated to do my jobs as a VISTA and mother. When I am not in the mood to be outdoors or leave my home, I connect to YouTube and do some weight-lifting and yoga exercises from there. Purchasing weights is unnecessary because I have a 30 pound toddler I can lift! Plus, this makes for excellent Mommy/Son playtime!

7. Plan Ahead!

I won't be a VISTA forever, so upon completion of PSO (Pre-Service Orientation), I began brainstorming about my next career move. In my spare time, I research various graduate programs, intern at Women, Action, and Media (WAM!), do freelance writing, volunteer at various organizations, and develop my doula business, "Burning Bra Birth Services." Having my hat in different rings gives me the confidence and connections I need to easily transition into the next phase of my career. Also, utilizing the regularly scheduled AmeriCorps VISTA webinars has proven to be a great tool in helping plan my life after AmeriCorps!

Through my tireless efforts, I have proven to myself and to others that being a VISTA and a single mother is, indeed, possible. I am extremely grateful for this opportunity to improve the lives of others, improve my life, learn valuable employment skills, and interact with open-minded, highly educated individuals. If you are considering serving as a VISTA, but are having reservations, fear no more! It's doable, and a life-altering opportunity!