

Letters Delve Into VISTA Alaska

The Hon. Keith H. Miller
Governor of Alaska
Pouch A, Capitol Building
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Dear Governor Miller:

At its last meeting, the RurAL CAP Executive Committee passed a motion requesting that the Executive Director, through appropriate avenues, initiate procedures to have an impartial state and federal investigation conducted of the VISTA Program in Alaska. Much has been said and written about the program recently and the Committee felt that all sides of the story should be put out in the open and in a form that would guarantee everyone's integrity.

It is my personal feeling that the VISTA Program in Alaska has never reached its full potential. Hundreds of volunteers have passed through the State and the overall impression given by villages about the program seems to be a negative one. RurAL CAP certainly has a vested interest in this program as it could significantly increase the outreach capability of our agency. However, it does not seem that the VISTA Volunteers are here long enough or trained well enough to be of much use in our efforts to help low income people become involved in the decisions that effect their every day lives.

I think it should be noted that the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP, Inc.), which functions as a quasi-delegate of RurAL CAP, has requested that the controls of VISTA in their area be turned over to the Association. They have said that unless this is done, they will accept no more VISTA volunteers in their area. It is a very strong statement and I think indicates the frustration with which many villages view the program. We support the AVCP's efforts in this circumstance and will be giving them assistance in writing programs for funding from the VISTA office.

The Alaska Federation of Natives also has requested that the State of Alaska take appropriate steps to turn the VISTA Program over to the control of local people. The AFN stand is based on their desire for the Native people of Alaska to have significant input over programs which are designed to change the conditions under which they are presently living.

Therefore, once again, I would like to emphasize both the Executive Committee's desire and my own, that all the pros and cons of the present VISTA Program be aired in an open and impartial hearing. Anything you can do to see that this comes about will be sincerely appreciated.

Sincerely yours,
Byron I. Mallott
Executive Director

January 29, 1970

To the Editor:

In response to the article concerning the VISTA Program in Alaska:

I was among 31 other volunteers who came to Fairbanks in June, 1965 to participate in the Alaska VISTA I Program. After six weeks of training 25 of us were sent to villages which had written specific letters of request for volunteers.

During our year(s) in the rural communities of Alaska, we tried to be resource people. If anyone in the area wanted information on projects or state and local affairs, we tried to supply it. If we didn't have access to the material, we wrote to an extremely well-organized office in Fairbanks, directed by Gerald Miller, former Peace Corps Volunteer in Ecuador. Our questions were usually answered within a few days depending on our location.

One important factor in our attempting to do our best was the attitude of our office. No one told us what to do, how to do it, what kinds of projects to involve ourselves in, what information to pass along to the members of the community—in other words, Mr. Miller considered his volunteers to be adults and therefore capable of using their best judgment. We were never told not to write letters to other volunteers, especially if it were in the best interests of the people. Having our director's trust and confidence helped us to be even better volunteers.

During our termination conference, we discussed the same changes for the program that are

still being batted back and forth now. So Mr. Allen's ideas are not new ones. Language training was felt to be of great importance; a two-year program better than the one year (also that those two years should be spent on one community); more technical skills should be made available if needed. These suggestions have been ignored for over five years, by the Governor's Office. Now when eight volunteers remind the VISTA-Keith Miller Office that the original objective of the entire program was and is local control, they are fired for insubordination!

Blanche Andrews had every right to write the letters she did; they were written for the communities' benefit, not hers. She has nothing to gain. I worked with the Peace Corps too in Bolivia for two years. Upon my return to Alaska, I was shocked to discover that the VISTA directors were quietly fired if they didn't swallow the Hickel line; now it is the Miller line. I would like to point out to them, that if they are so afraid of the volunteers informing the rural areas of their rights, then they certainly should screen the volunteers better. The people in Juneau should indoctrinate very naive young people to come up and go into the communities without a commitment.

Gerald Miller resigned from VISTA in 1966 because the Governor's Office "forced" the program under its control. I can only surmise that Mr. Hickel and now Mr. K. Miller and their "friends" were afraid of informing rural areas of what is happening in Alaska.

Mr. Allen's statement on agreeable disagreement frightens and angers me. If 170 volunteers had obeyed the commands from the office, eight volunteers could not have spoken the truth. As a result of speaking the truth, "agreeably," eight were fired. If we expand this example to VISTA directors, should they also speak up, where will they go?

As for Mr. White's generous contribution on the objectives such as education—there are al-

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ready schools in the rural areas. What kind of education does he mean?—the kind that gets you fired? Since when can you predict a “realistic goal” for a community when you aren’t even there?

I stand with the other eight volunteers; that makes nine of us. I wonder how many more aren’t afraid?

Gary Ann Keim
VISTA I