

VISTA PROJECT NARRATIVE

A. Executive Summary

The availability of affordable and environmentally benign energy is an on-going concern in Humboldt County. All residents and businesses are being negatively affected by rising energy costs, and the impact is most serious for low-income residents who must expend a disproportionate amount of their limited funds on energy purchases. A variety of resources are available to assist with conservation and efficiency efforts, but the general public is often unaware of them.

The Redwood Coast Energy Authority (RCEA) is requesting an AmeriCorps*VISTA volunteer to serve as an “Energy Education and Outreach Coordinator,” to help provide energy conservation and efficiency information assistance to residents in Humboldt County.

B. Needs and Activities

1. Humboldt County’s economy has historically been natural resource dependant, and in recent years has been in a protracted condition of distress as it struggles to adapt to declines in the local timber and fishing industries. This transition has been hampered by the high costs of doing business in a remote rural area. For instance, Humboldt’s energy costs are among the highest in the country.¹ The *Background Technical Report* for the County’s *Draft 2025 General Plan Energy Element* shows that in 2003 over \$319 million was spent locally on energy, the majority of which left the county, further stressing economic recovery. In general, incomes in Humboldt County are low. Based on 2004 census data, 15.4% of Humboldt County residents are at or below the poverty level. The 2002 local median income was \$31,546, which is less than 200% of poverty, a typical threshold for income-eligible program assistance. This suggests that a large number of Humboldt residents are eligible for programs designed to serve low- and moderate-income populations.

Out of concern for the long-term availability of affordable and environmentally benign energy, the Redwood Coast Energy Authority (RCEA) was created in 2003. Its purpose is to develop and implement sustainable energy initiatives that reduce energy demand, increase energy efficiency, and advance the use of clean, efficient and renewable resources available in the region. One of its activities, the *Redwood Coast Energy Information Center (RCERC)*, serves as a one-stop-shop for energy efficiency information for Humboldt County residents.

The majority of funding for RCEA comes from the Public Goods Charge (PGC), a small utility bill surcharge mandated by the California Public Utilities Commission. From 2004 through 2006 RCEA was funded as an “information” program, and developed a significant infrastructure and organizational capacity for delivering public energy efficiency and conservation information. Available RCEA resources included a toll-free *EnergyAnswerline*, displays and literature at the RCERC, a public energy library and energy tool bank, a comprehensive web site, regular free workshops, portable displays at community events, and support for classroom-based energy education activities. In 2006 there was a public policy change which de-emphasized use of PGC funds for information programs, resulting in a shift of RCEA’s activities towards direct implementation of efficiency projects which have measurable energy savings. Much of RCEA’s information and education infrastructure had therefore been under-utilized due to unavailability of supporting funding. In recognition of the importance of availability of energy efficiency information as a

¹ As an example, in March 2008 regular gasoline was selling in Humboldt County for \$4.79/gallon, well above the national average of \$4.08.

necessary pre-cursor to motivate people to adopt energy efficiency and conservation, beginning in August 2008 RCEA has sponsored an Education and Outreach VISTA who has helped to fill this critical void.

School-based activities play an important role as an information channel to low- and moderate-income homes, and by providing information at an early age, help to build a long-term culture of energy efficiency. Prior to 2006, local schools enjoyed both a Green Schools Program (provided by Strategic Energy Initiatives, Inc.) and a Solar Schools Program (provided by RCEA through a US DOE Million Solar Roofs grant). These programs offered curriculums, teacher support and other resources. Both programs ended due to lack of funding. RCEA has been frequently contacted by local teachers requesting similar resources, and it is now working towards doing so through the service of an Education and Outreach VISTA.

This VISTA will work to improve and expand RCEA's public information and education efforts, assists RCEA staff with the operation of the *Redwood Coast Energy Resource Center*; develops fact sheets and other literature promoting available local resources; develops and coordinates public workshops and other training opportunities; coordinates information displays at community events; and is developing a plan to work with local educators to increase delivery of energy-related curriculum and classroom activities for K-12 students. These efforts will help to connect low- and moderate-income residents with information and locally available programs to help reduce their energy use and expenditures.

C. Strengthening Communities

1. Describe how the new infrastructure or organizational capacity created by your project will bring individuals and, ultimately, the community out of poverty.

This VISTA position will develop systems and infrastructure which will allow RCEA to continue and expand delivery of energy education information to the public, particularly low and moderate income households, enabling them to reduce money spent on energy. This will provide a direct economic benefit to the service recipients as well as a positive multiplier-effect as dollars that would otherwise leave the community for imported energy purchases are allowed to recirculate through the local economy.

2. How will you involve the community to ensure the sustainability of the proposed project?

RCEA strongly believes in networking and partnerships to help leverage scarce resources, and endeavors to find areas of overlapping mutual interest with local community organizations for collaborative efforts. This VISTA position will help to develop and support those relationships. Also, RCEA has an institutional culture of continuous improvement, which includes time for reflection and incorporation of feedback received from clients served.

3. How, if at all, will you collaborate with other national service programs (AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, RSVP, NCC) in order to support the proposed project?

RCEA Energy Education and Outreach VISTA will network with other local VISTAs, all of whom also serve the target population, to ensure that locally relevant energy efficiency information is available to their service recipients.

D. VISTA Assignment Description

1. During project year AmeriCorps*VISTA member will:

- Develop and maintain energy displays at the Redwood Coast Energy Resource Center.
- Manage the RCERC Energy Library and Energy Tool Bank.
- Develop energy brochures, fact sheets, and FAQ's.
- Moderate RCEA's on-line community energy forum.
- Edit and publish a monthly electronic RCEA newsletter.
- Coordinate an evening energy and sustainability issues seminar program.
- Coordinate and staff RCEA portable display at community events.
- Institute and facilitate quarterly meetings of an "Energy Educators Stakeholders Group."
- Present materials to local schools explaining energy efficiency curriculum options that meet state and federal content standards.
- Develop a data base of interested schools and teachers.
- Coordinate RCEA's "Solar Schoolhouse Activity Kit" loan program.
- Plan and schedule at least one in-service training for local teachers.
- Edit and publish a quarterly electronic newsletter for teachers.

2. Recommended Skills and Qualifications: A successful VISTA member will have the following recommended skills and qualifications:

- An interest in assisting the public to reduce their use of and expenditures on energy through promoting energy conservation, efficiency, and the use of renewable energy.
- Excellent written and oral communication skills.
- Basic computer literacy, including use of Microsoft Office Suite, data entry and reporting, email, and the Internet.
- A professional appearance and demeanor.
- Good organizational and time management skills.
- A valid California driver's license and a properly registered and insured safe and operational personal vehicle.
- Previous experience working with the public, presenting workshops, developing marketing material, and knowledge of energy issues are desirable but not a requirement.

E. Project Management

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2. RCEA Board: RCEA is a Joint Powers Authority, which is a special type of local government. RCEA's members include the County of Humboldt, all seven of Humboldt's incorporated cities², and the Humboldt Bay Municipal Water District. All of these jurisdictions are governed by an elected council or board (e.g. City Council, Board of Supervisors), and a representative from each of these bodies serves on RCEA's Board. These bodies regularly receive public input, including from the low income community, and are accountable to the electorate. As a public agency, RCEA is governed by the Brown Act, and all RCEA Board meetings are publically noticed in advance and open to the public. There is a public comment period at the beginning of each meeting where citizens can share their ideas or concerns.

F. Organizational Capacity

- 1. In-Kind Resources:** The success of this VISTA placement is very important to RCEA, and we will provide all resources reasonably necessary to accomplish the proposed activities. These resources include (but are not limited to): training; workstation at the Redwood Coast Energy Resource Center in Eureka; access to telephone, computer and Internet; personal email account; business cards; necessary materials and supplies; and a \$100/month housing allowance.
- 2. Current Activities:** The mission of RCEA is "to develop and implement sustainable energy initiatives that reduce energy demand, increase energy efficiency, and advance the use of clean, efficient and renewable resources available in the region." In furtherance of this mission, RCEA is currently participating in a local government partnership with Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) known as the Redwood Coast Energy Watch.
- 3. Accessibility:** This position will be based at the Redwood Coast Energy Resource Center in Eureka, which is ADA compliant (facility access, restroom facilities, etc.). RCEA will make every effort to provide reasonable accommodations for qualified persons with disabilities.

PART III. ATTACHMENTS

Please submit the following attachments with your project narrative or soon after.

- List of Board of Directors, or governing body (not applicable if public entity).
- List of Advisory Council Members if already selected. If not, the list must be submitted before the end of the first quarter of the project.
- Copy of Articles of Incorporation (not applicable to public entities).
- Organizational chart.
- Tax exempt status: either IRS determination or copy of application to IRS for exemption (not applicable to public entities).
- Copy of Supervisor's Resume and Job Description.
- One letter of commitment from the proposed board of directors. The letter should describe the type of support and/or resources the partner organization will contribute.

² Arcata, Blue Lake, Eureka, Ferndale, Fortuna, Rio Dell, and Trinidad.