

South Cumberland Plateau VISTAs Programs

The area of need we plan to address is focused on the three-county area that makes up the South Cumberland Plateau (SCP), located in the heart of South Central Appalachia. The SCP comprises parts of three counties: Grundy, Franklin, and Marion counties, with most of Grundy County as its largest component. SCP's history is steeped in the traditions of Appalachia. Coal mining, logging and agriculture have been the primary industries of the area. Grundy County is specifically targeted as having the greatest need in this area. The Appalachian Regional Commission categorizes Grundy as a distressed county, Franklin as transitional and Marion County at-risk. (<http://www.arc.gov/data>). Almost half of Grundy County children live in single parent households

(<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/tennessee/2013/grundy/county/outcomes/overall/snapshot/by-rank>). In what follows, we focus primarily on the statistics from Grundy County, since it is the largest portion of the SCP and SCP-wide data are not typically available.

Economic Opportunity. With a three-year average unemployment rate of 12.6% and a poverty rate of 30.60%, the composite of economic statistics leave Grundy County ranked nationally as 3049th out of 3110 counties in terms of economic status. (http://www.arc.gov/reports/region_report.asp?FIPS=47999&REPORT_ID=45). With a poverty rate nearly 206% of the national average, 30.6% of residents of Grundy County live in poverty (http://www.arc.gov/reports/socio_report.asp) including 45% of its children, more than three times the national average of 14% (www.countyhealthrankings.org). There are only enough jobs in Grundy County to employ about 20% of the adult population, and the average commute time for those who do work is in excess of 40 minutes. Out of 2343 students in Grundy County schools, 1893 are economically disadvantaged (http://www.tn.gov/education/research/dataavailablefordownload_000.shtml).

Healthy Futures. The recently released Robert Wood Johnson Health Ranking places Grundy 95th of the 95 counties in Tennessee; neighboring Marion County follows close behind. (www.countyhealthrankings.org). Grundy's premature age-adjusted mortality rate is also the greatest out of Tennessee's counties (<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/tennessee/2013/measure/additional/127/data/desc-2>), with a value of 663 compared with the Tennessee average of 432. Health issues include many of those chronic conditions associated with poverty including diabetes (11% affected) and obesity (30% affected). Head Start data shows the prevalence of these conditions even in young children. Contributing to this early onset of chronic illness, there are no county or town recreation departments, and while the schools have organized sports, the community has no summer recreational activities. The systems which so many communities depend on to provide after school programs, physical activity for all age groups, summer camps and programs, arts activities, fellowship for the community's elders and such basics as transportation and medical services, are underfunded, inadequate, or in some

cases do not exist in a sustainable way.

Education. Educational deficits loom large in this picture, with 65.0% of those 25 year or older having completed at least a high school degree, compared with 83% in Tennessee and 85% nationally (<http://www.arc.gov>). This weak high school completion rate is accompanied by only 7.8% having completed a college degree or higher, in contrast with 23% in Tennessee and 28% nationally. 26% of Grundy residents have some college, compared to more than 60% in Tennessee and 70% nationally (<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/tennessee/2013/grundy/county/outcomes/overall/snapshot/by-rank>). Learning disabilities are 40% more common than in the rest of the state. 21.5% of Grundy county students have learning disabilities. (http://www.tn.gov/education/research/dataavailablefordownload_000.shtml). Achievement data for 2012 reveals that only 30.3 percent of Grundy students are proficient or advanced in math vs. 44.5 percent in the state. Reading numbers are similar with 36.8 percent of Grundy County students proficient or advanced vs. 49.9 percent in the state.

This program intends to serve low-income communities with a specific focus on unemployed individuals, low-income adults, and low-income youth.

• Why the needs are not being met now.

As is often the case in rural America, the SCP suffers from a limited patchwork of social services, stressed, underfunded school systems, and limited access to health care. (Susan Nall Bales and Joseph Grady. "Talking Rural Issues," The FrameWorks Institute 2005.) Traditions of coordination of services on the plateau have not been well developed and cooperation between the three counties that make up the SCP limited. The three housing service organizations do not coordinate service; the five food pantries do not coordinate services; there is no economic development corporation. The only federally qualified health clinic has its home office in a different county. That office has not sought to develop community ties to enhance access to health care or health care education. The largest service agency, MountainTOP, only recently moved its headquarters to Grundy County. Its community development interests are serious, as is its history in working with the most needy families in Grundy County, but its increased community development efforts have a short (approximately three year) history. Beyond lack of coordination, key services are missing: there is no secondary hospital on the plateau. Grundy County has no central population center, and the primary population of service areas of Franklin and Marion Counties are off of the plateau in their respective population centers. Recent efforts to discuss these coordination issues have emerged in creation in 2012 of the South Cumberland Community Fund (SCCF), the first such organization dedicated to community development on the SCP and in 2014 of the South Cumberland Plateau Health Network.

With the support and collaboration of the SCCF, The University of the South

(hereafter Sewanee) proposes to develop the South Cumberland Plateau VISTAs Program, in which it will serve as an intermediary VISTA sponsoring organization that helps engage VISTA members in the SCP-serving organizations that otherwise would not have access to such resources. The program will focus on Economic Opportunity Healthy Futures, Education and Environmental Stewardship.

Strengthening Communities

This SCP VISTA project builds on current local efforts and is intentionally designed to partner with already existing, promising programs that are poised to do more to reduce poverty through their specific programs. The project requests **ten VISTAs assigned to specific community partners** (as listed below), with full cost share for 2.5 VISTAs, with an added CNCS-supplied support VISTA Leader, for **eleven VISTAs altogether**.

The focus of the **Economic Opportunity** program in the short-term is supporting affordable, safe housing for low-income residents. This program builds on an already existing separate housing (MountainTOP, Mid-Cumberland Ministries, Housing Sewanee) and small energy audit program (Housing Sewanee) to develop an SCP-wide program and energy audits and weatherization program. This first will help to keep residents safe, healthy, but will also save them money in their energy bills. The program will, in addition, support **Environmental Stewardship** through energy conservations education and support. This program will build on the Babson Center's VISTA income program to find another way to save money.

For the longer term, we will develop a local non-profit focused on economic development, using expertise at Sewanee in business and entrepreneurship. We will embed VISTAs in an examination of best practices for economic development in rural areas, such as those developed through Yellow Wood Associates, and funded by the Ford Foundation, to develop businesses and jobs on the SCP. This program will support current economic development projects such as the Mountain Goat Trail project, a rails-to-trails project, forecast to bring \$1,200,000 to the SCP each year. Our effort will also build on successful business plan and economic analysis projects offered to local non-profits by the Babson Center for Global Commerce, which is also developing a plan for development of a local Community Development Corporation or Community Development Financial Institution. Stemming from this work, the Babson Center is poised to become a leader in developing local economic development capacity.

The objective of the **Healthy Futures** program will be to develop the capacity of the South Cumberland Plateau Health Network to assess unmet needs through an expanded volunteer program and improve its capacity know about those through computer data systems. The Grundy County Health Council (GCHC) will seek to expand existing physical activity and nutrition programs to all of the schools in Grundy County, and the Chattanooga-area Food Bank work with local food pantries build a communication system to coordinate services and a food labeling system and related education program to offer healthy food and nutrition education to their low income clients. MountainTOP will coordinate the collection and organization of

community data.

The thrust of the **Education** program will be to expand early education and family support programs through its Discover Together Family Co-op, which offers early childhood interventions as well as parental and support for pre-Head Start families; improved after-school tutoring and enrichment support in elementary schools; expanded summer enrichment activities through Camp Discover and MountainTOP. Supported by Scholastic, Yale University, and Sewanee, these programs all build on the importance of developing individual and community resilience in rural communities as a stepping-stone to improved education and health outcomes.

Organizational Capability

Since 2010, Sewanee has rapidly developed its Bonner Leaders and Canale Service internship program, which focus on placement of interns with local agencies, training interns, supporting site supervisors and engaging local community partners in capacity building strategic planning. As an outgrowth of that new program the University has developed an Office of Community Engagement with a director who oversees these programs and all other community engagement efforts at the University. The Office of Community Engagement now supervises 35 service interns who do service work annually and will supervise 50-60 by 2016. In addition, the majority of Sewanee's 1,500 are at some point in their matriculation engaged in community outreach, and the Office of Community Engagement is involved in organizing their work.

Through Tennessee Campus Compact, the Outreach Office supervised two AmeriCorps VISTA members, who developed student service opportunities with community partners. Five Bonner AmeriCorps Education Awards were given to students developing enrichment curricula in after school programs, a high school tutoring program in Grundy County High School, and training programs for Bonner and Canale Service interns and volunteers.

Contingent on CNCS's acceptance of this proposal, Sewanee will hire an experienced community organizer, an Assistant Director of Community Engagement, who will manage all aspects of the program, and who will also serve as one-third of the time as Director of Community Organization Capacity Building for the SCCF. He or she will report to Director of Community Engagement at Sewanee and to the president of SCCF.

Sewanee VISTAs will be fully integrated into their community partner organizations, where they will spend 85% of their work time. All community partners receiving VISTAs have committed to offering space, phones, computer support, and supplies. VISTAs will spend the remaining 15% of their work time at Sewanee, engaged in volunteer recruitment, training as well as training student service interns to take leadership roles in these projects. Although most of their time will be at community partner sites, space will be dedicated for their time on campus, and computers, and phones will be provided. Staff working in the Office of Community Engagement will work with the Assistant Director of Community

Engagement to identify opportunities volunteer training and recruitment, and with the Director of Community Engagement to partner VISTA projects with supportive academic course work.

Sewanee regularly engages in collaboration with other entities, from consultants to subawardees on federal grants. Our financial systems are fully equipped to manage these relationships. We comply with all requirements of the Internal Revenue Service. We file annually a Form 990 and secure an independent audit. In preparation for this annual reporting, we have financial processes in place to govern payments to third parties. Memoranda of Agreements will be signed with each community partner to insure compliance with VISTA rules and to clarify responsibilities of all parties involved in this project.

The Assistant Director of Community Engagement will work directly with all partners to ensure that all rules and regulations of VISTA and requirements of the MOAs are followed. The Assistant Director of Community Engagement will work with all VISTA members, regardless of their placement, will manage required reporting, and will supervise the collection of project data to ensure that program objectives are being met and that the partner organizations are learning from the experience to build their capacity to deliver services both during and after the project.

Although the partner organizations have separate areas of expertise, our overarching goal is to have as many shared performance measures as possible. For example, where the goals of Grundy Health Council overlap with those of CAFB, we will seek to develop a shared measurement standard. We see the direction about how best to proceed with this a by product of ongoing discussions at the beginning of the project.

The SCCF has pledged to ensure that the cost-share for the project is covered. When partner organizations cannot cover the cost-share for VISTA members whose work takes place at their location, the Community Fund will provide assistance. In addition, Sewanee has applied for grants from private foundations to support the cost share and provide other training to make sure that our collaborators are fully prepared to engage in a Plateau-wide program of capacity building.

Intermediary Justification

We provided statistics above about the needs above at the beginning of the narratives section. The need for an intermediary emerges from the history described above. Recent experience of SCP Community fund is that for the most part it is offering support for community partner that need capacity building to function more effectively as first line organizations on the ground, rooted in their plateau communities, and poised to develop ways to increase their capacity to address poverty. In addition, some of these organizations lack the financial resources to

support the cost share requirements for a VISTA, or the training and reporting requirements. So Sewanee and the Community Fund developed a plan for the University to develop and manage a VISTA program with the advice and financial support of the Community Fund. That will include the University's commitment to provide emergency cash advances when needed.

1) The Babson Center for Global Commerce (BCGC), a unit of The University of the South **(1 VISTA)** As an affiliate of the University, the Babson Center has been in existence for six years and has predominantly been student-centric focused but has made many of its programs available to the public. The Babson Center has, working with students, provides limited community support such as:

- a) Consulting services and market analysis for The South Cumberland Farmers Market in Sewanee, TN
 - b) An economic impact study and analysis for The Mountain Goat Trail in Monteagle, TN
 - c) Establishing and managing of an IRS Voluntary Income Tax Assistance (VITA) site in both Sewanee TN and Monteagle TN to assist low income families prepare Earned Income Tax Credits forms.
- (<http://business.sewanee.edu/news/>)

The goal of this project is to create a sustainable economic development organization in the area to serve as a source of economic development which includes training, consulting, and in some cases financing of businesses in the local areas to stimulate and create jobs, provide pre-job and on the job training and education and to consult with businesses (both for profit and not for profit) to review and develop business plans, cash flow, create basic financial literacy in how to manage and run a business or organization to support businesses and organizations that in turn will provide job opportunities to help individuals work their way out of poverty and disadvantaged situations. As an undergraduate business education program, the center does not currently have staff to set up such an organization, but does have the capacity to oversee such a project. The VISTA serving at the BCGC will focus on implementing the Babson Center senior students' business plan for such an organization currently being developed (to be completed in May 2014) through developing supportive network of volunteers, grant writing, assembling educational materials, while the BCGC, with the support of the SCCF, will develop a governing board. The resulting organization will be taken over by its governing board at the end of the end of the project.

2) Chattanooga-area Food Bank (CAFB): **(2 VISTAs)** Mobile Food Pantries for Local Schools. This project seeks to address the child food insecurity during out of school

time hours when they are at greatest of food insecurity by increasing access to fresh and healthy foods through mobile food and/or on-site food distributions. The child food insecurity rates in our target counties, Marion and Grundy, are 29.8% and 34% respectively, well above the national average of 25%.

The CAFB currently partners with several local elementary schools in both counties to operate a back pack program that provides supplemental food for children at risk of weekend hunger. Limited financial and human resources have prevented the CAFB from engaging all of the elementary schools in each of our target counties. Through this project, the CAFB seeks to engage school officials, teachers and community-based organization in a process to evaluate the current programs and examine the viability of expanding the current weekend meal model and/or implementing alternative evidence-based strategies like mobile pantries and on-site school pantries to address the unmet need. The project will engage two VISTA volunteers to facilitate community conversations, identify opportunities to address unmet needs, including expanding the existing weekend backpack model and/or implementing alternative Feeding America -tested mobile distribution strategies like mobile pantry. We will assign one VISTA to each of our target counties to coordinate the planning process in that county and work with staff to implement program expansions in that county. Once the community has agreed on the preferred model, the VISTA will be engaged in identifying the local and Sewanee volunteer resources and financial resources to support the expansion and ensure its sustainability. The VISTA will receive support from the CAFB's Development Department to identify and secure funding from institutional and individual donors. At the end of this three-year project the CAFB's Development Department will work with a team of dedicated Sewanee service interns to manage and support the network.

3) Discover Together (DT): **(2 VISTAs)** A collaboration of Sewanee, Scholastic publishers, and Yale University, Discover Together is a community engagement program that proposes to increase child and family resilience and social and community connectedness through a literacy-based curriculum developed for the South Cumberland Plateau. The program targets two-to-three-generation impact, changing perceptions of low-income families, and focusing on early childhood and school age child/family support and involvement through an innovative and sustainable community-collaboration approach. There are three components to DT: 1) Discover Together: A Place for Families (Family Coop), providing a child-centered component and peer-to-peer support systems for parents/caregivers of children ages 0-5; 2) Camp Discover: Me, My Community, My World, a school-home-community program for children ages 6-8 featuring intentional

programming alternating between in-school book/literacy activities and community "discovery" field trips; and 3) the Discover Learning Lab bringing families, community volunteers, and teachers together around school projects and school year continuation of Camp Discover themes and activities. With only one paid part-time staff person, Discover together has not been able to increase its visibility, volunteer recruitment and training, and community feedback/assessment mechanisms.

DT Project 1: Develop a Community Ambassador Network. **(1) VISTA** will develop and recruit a network of community and student volunteers that will comprise a community ambassador network, based on New Haven's MOMS project (<http://newhavenmomspartnership.org/index.aspx>), designed to engage in basic assessments of goals and needs connected to early childhood education in their community, track the impact of DT on their community, and as needed or requested, participate as volunteers and assistants in the DT components. Other responsibilities for this VISTA member will include grant writing as well as developing training modules and materials. During this three-year project the DT will work with a team of dedicated Sewanee service interns to support the VISTA and to prepare to manage the network once the VISTA project is completed.

DT Project 2: Develop a DT Guide Network. **(1) VISTA** will develop a local network, a guide team, of local agencies who then become the key decision makers and design partners in the continued growth and sustainability of Discover Together in Grundy County. Currently Discover Together involves a partnership with the Tracy City Elementary School and the Tracy City Methodist Church as well as Sewanee, Yale Child Study Center, and Scholastic, Inc. Under the guidance of this group, and the paid staff of DT the VISTA member recruit team members, convene the guide team, structure the initial meetings, develop a working manual for team, will also be responsible for seeking out potential grants. During this three-year project the DT will work with a team of dedicated Sewanee service interns to support the VISTA and to prepare to manage the network once the VISTA project is completed.

4) Grundy County Health Council (GCHC): **(2 VISTAs)**

Project 1: Develop Education and Communication Network. Attached to the Grundy County Health Department, but functioning as an independent non-profit under the umbrella of the Grundy County Board of Education, The GCHC has as its mission to foster health in Grundy County. Since inception in 1992, the council has served the county by organizing Remote Area Medical (RAM) clinics, free chronic disease self-management classes, funding walking trails, having health fairs, health

education in the schools, and providing free Reversing Diabetes seminars. But it has only one paid staff person, the Public Educator, with several initiatives underway, but with limited community support and channels of successful communication, with 19% of adults being illiterate, access to Internet and paid subscribers to its newspaper limited. The Health Council will partner with churches and establish a health education support and communication network.

The **(1) VISTA** serving the GCHC on this project will make contact with local churches and other organizations that are not active in the county and develop a communications and support network through the churches. Part of that project will include volunteer recruitment and training, writing a training manual, and grant writing and fundraising to support the project. During this three-year project, the Public Health Educator will work with a team of dedicated Sewanee service interns to support the VISTA and to prepare to manage the network once the VISTA project is completed.

GCHC Project 2: Extend Physical Activity and Anti-Tobacco Program to all Grundy County Schools. Activ8 Grundy is an initiative started in 2013 to get the students in the after school programs more active and better educated about healthy nutrition. In the last year over 150 students in three schools participated in this program. Due to limited staffing in the Health Council, it has not been possible to extend this program to the rest of the county schools. The Health Council has also received tobacco litigation money to develop a Tar Wars and Teens against Tobacco Use programs in the county schools. This sort of Peer to Peer education has been proven effective for prevention among early adolescence. The **(1) VISTA** serving the GCHC in this project will help develop this network. Part of that project will include volunteer recruitment and training, writing a training manual, and grant writing and fundraising to support the project. During this three-year project, the Public Health Educator will work with a team of dedicated Sewanee service interns to support the VISTA and to prepare to manage the network once the VISTA project is completed.

5) MountainTOP: (2 VISTAs)

Project 1: Weatherization Project. Mountain T.O.P. is a 38 year-old, non-profit organization located in Grundy County that partners with families to repair homes. The **VISTA #1** serving on this project at Mountain T.O.P. would be formalizing a weatherization partnership with Build Sewanee and Mid Cumberland Mountain Ministries as well as work with Southeast Tennessee Human Resource Agency, which has a weatherization program serving 10 counties, including Grundy. The goal of this partnership is to create a system of evaluating the energy efficiency of homes

and finding resources to address weatherization needs. The VISTA would create this system, train volunteers to help with energy audits and weatherization, write training manuals, homeowner manuals, and recruit volunteers, as well as set up a system for coordinating existing programs for energy evaluation and making home repairs. From the US Department of Energy, it is known that low-income families pay an average of 18% of their annual income for energy, compared with 5% for other households. 23% of families in Grundy County live below the federal poverty line. The energy conservation resulting from this project will decrease the cost of energy for families in need while improving the health and safety of their homes, as well as reduce the cost of maintenance. This, in turn, will help families become more economically stable and will protect the environment.

From the US Department of Energy, we know that low-income families pay an average of 18% of their annual income for energy, compared with 5% for other households. 23% of families in Grundy County live below the federal poverty line. This energy conservation resulting from this project will decrease the cost of energy for families in need while improving the health and safety of their homes, as well as reducing the cost of maintenance. This, in turn, will help families become more economically stable and reduce their carbon footprint. Focused on keeping running its full time year-long home repair program, Mountain T.O.P. has not had the staff to develop a weatherization program or set up collaborations with the local housing agencies that are able to do that. During this three-year project, the Program Manager and VISTA will work with a team of dedicated Sewanee service interns to support the VISTA and to prepare to manage the network once the VISTA project is completed.

Mountain T.O.P Project 2: Develop a Data Collection and Assessment System. Mountain T.O.P offers summer camp opportunities for children ages 6-17 in Grundy County, TN. Throughout the 6 weeks of camp, Mountain T.O.P. strives to teach resiliency through various skills and experiences. Present staffing, which has the Program Manager also doing community outreach, has not allowed for the development of this program. The **VISTA #2** serving with Mountain T.O.P. on this will evaluate the effectiveness of both the home repair and summer camp programs through setting up a volunteer network for interviewing and collecting data about the outcomes of each program and for determining service needs in MountainT.O.P.'s service area.

The (1) VISTA working on developing a Data Collection and Assessment System will help Mountain T.O.P. build capacity in both its home repair and day camp programs.

The capacity building will be two-fold: delivery of services and community outreach. With evaluations, each program will be refined to meet needs in the service area. With outreach, Mountain T.O.P.'s services will be offered to a broader area. With both outreach and evaluation, the VISTA will develop processes that will easily enable MountainT.O.P. to have access to data it needs understand its community, compete for grants, improve its services, and communicate more effectively with the communities it serves. the Program Manager and VISTA will work with a team of dedicated Sewanee service interns to support the VISTA and to prepare to manage the network once the VISTA project is completed.

6) South Cumberland Community Fund (SCCF): **(1 VISTA)** The SCCF, a non-profit organization under the umbrella of the Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga, will have its first paid staff member, the Director of Community Organization Capacity Building, at the inception of this VISTA project. Until now, despite having a capacity building mission, it has not been able to direct any specific capacity building projects of its own, but with this opportunity seeks to do for its members what they have asked for: establish training for grant writing and grant management.. Its **(1) VISTA** will seek funds for this training and will set up a grant writing network, made up of residents, University of South alumni, and college student volunteers with research, grant writing and writing expertise, and run and organize training, workshops and development of manuals to support the community organizations listed above as SCP VISTAs sponsors in their listed VISTA projects. As such, this VISTA project will support the same project goals indicated above: Economic Opportunity, Education, Environmental Stewardship, and Healthy Futures through development of this grant writing network. This network will achieve self-sufficiency in three years, allowing the SCCF to continue supporting the network with its paid staff. After the three year project , the network will be supported by a Sewanee service interns who have received training by the project VISTA.

These organizations have been selected because of their successful track records in the goals identified by VISTA, the promising projects they have proposed to engage in with VISTA support, but also in their need to develop capacity.

Memoranda of Agreement will be signed by Sewanee and each community partner with a full specification of all requirements laid out by CNCS for VISTA sponsorship. The Director of the VISTA program will have the responsibility for training and meeting regularly with the VISTA supervisors in each of these organizations to offer training and to make sure that the organizations are conforming to the MOA and

staying on track with their project goals.

We have asked our local partners, as they are able, to provide the cost-sharing expense (\$2650) as indicated above and job-related travel expenses for each VISTA. The SCCF will offset some of these charges. Sewanee will manage these funds and act as the responsible fiduciary in relation to CNCS.