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**AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteers Come to the Aid of Local Legal Clinic**

INDIANAPOLIS—The Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic (NCLC), a *pro bono* legal clinic that provides low-income Indianapolis and Ft. Wayne individuals with access to legal services, recently welcomed fifteen AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers as part of an intensive summer program sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal government agency that administers various volunteer efforts across the United States and abroad.

Of the fifteen volunteers, twelve are currently enrolled in law school, assisting the Clinic's staff attorneys with much needed work. Will Lawson, a third-year law student from Indiana University—Indianapolis, is serving a second summer with NCLC through the AmeriCorps VISTA program. He says, "NCLC affords me a fast, practical experience of the law." Not only does working with a *pro bono* clinic provide these law students with a quick dose of how the law works in a "real-world" context, but to Lawson and others, it's providing something extra—an occasion to make a positive impact on people's lives. Firmly committed to an ideal that many students seek when deciding to pursue law school, Lawson finds legal clinics like NCLC are places where "advocacy," in the truest sense of the word, is applied everyday. "I wanted to work in a place where I could offer the most help to the most people, a public-interest law firm, and the AmeriCorps VISTA program was my window of opportunity."

VISTA, an acronym for Volunteers In Service To America, was originally created in 1965 under President Johnson's Administration's "War on Poverty" campaign. The anti-poverty initiative links volunteers with non-profits and other social service agencies that specifically focus on poverty prevention and economic stabilization. In 1993, under President Clinton, the VISTA program was formally grouped under the newly established Corporation for National and Community Service as part of the domestic service program, AmeriCorps. With President Obama's recent signature into law of the Edward M. Kennedy Act, an expression of the growing fervor in volunteerism, public service programs like VISTA are increasingly becoming attractive options for students and adults looking for professional experience through fighting poverty.

Josh Abel, NCLC's Interim Executive Director, views the partnership with AmeriCorps as "vital to meeting the needs of NCLC's growing clientele." In 2008, NCLC saw a 35% increase in services rendered from 2007, an "unprecedented amount that is surely symptomatic of an injured economy," Abel says. And as the recession wages on, he anticipates that the demand for legal aid will continue to grow. "Without the assistance provided by AmeriCorps VISTA members, NCLC would have found it difficult to meet the growing demand for our services."

In 2008, NCLC began a partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service, which allowed NCLC to secure eight full-time VISTA members for one-year of service and fifteen students through the summer. "The partnership couldn't have come at more critical time," says Abel. "With the increasing need coming our way, we needed to expand, but we couldn't afford to hire more staff. With the addition of the VISTA volunteers, however, we have a cushion to soften the blow and keep pace with our goals of serving more people with better quality."

Abel explains, "NCLC's mission is to promote justice by providing disadvantaged folks with access to critical legal services affecting the distressed communities of Central Indiana and Ft. Wayne." The types of legal services Abel is referring to includes immigration, housing and foreclosure, bankruptcy, tax, and family law. NCLC also provides their clients with access to preventive legal education in the aforementioned areas along with new programs targeting inner-city youth on financial literacy and human trafficking awareness—an effort started by two VISTA members. In the coming months, NCLC anxiously awaits the arrival of twelve more VISTA volunteers, who will serve at NCLC for the next year in a variety of capacity-building roles. With these new volunteers, Abel is optimistic: "During these critical times, our partnership with VISTA allows us to not only meet the needs of our low-income clients, but it also allows us to create innovative new programs to ensure that justice is served to these vulnerable populations."

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Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic (NCLC) is a faith-based 501(c)(3) corporation offering free legal representation and preventive law education to low income families. We accept clients from the Indianapolis and Ft. Wayne metropolitan areas whose income is at or below 125% of the federal poverty guidelines.