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Stepping outside the bubble
IU students getting real-world experience as summer VISTA workers

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Rebeca Hernandez learned a lot about working in social services and a lot about homelessness this summer as a VISTA worker with Martha's House, the Bloomington shelter agency.

"The most important thing I learned," the Indiana University student said, "was to be able to see the big contrast of the Bloomington community as soon as you step off this campus."

Hernandez is one of four IU students who did 10-week summer stints with the VISTA program. And she's not the only one who said the experience opened her eyes to the reality of poverty in the Bloomington area.

"I learned there's a great need and IU can be a great resource for a lot of things this town is in need of," said Katie Schluntz, who worked at Monroe County United Ministries.

VISTA, or Volunteers in Service to America, is a 1960s-era antipoverty program sometimes called the domestic Peace Corps. It's now part of the AmeriCorps national service program.

Most VISTAs do a year of service, earning a small stipend and a grant to help pay for college. That's the case with Colleen O'Rourke, a 2005 graduate who works at IU's Community Outreach and Partnerships in Service Learning office. She said VISTAs are expected to work with agencies on "capacity building," helping set up activities that will be self-sustaining.

"The idea is that you're supposed to work yourself out of a job," she said.

She helped set up the first-time summer VISTA program for IU students this year. Besides Hernandez and Schluntz, VISTAs were:

- Patricia Mota, who worked with multicultural ministries at St. Paul Catholic Center and Mujeres en Conexión, a program for Hispanic women.

- Lauren Jones, a recent graduate who worked with Wellspring, a Martinsville agency that helps homeless families.

Mota, a senior, researched grants, helped facilitate communication between agencies that provide similar services, set up a speaker series and got to know Latino families.

"I definitely love this community service work," she said. "You see that people appreciate what you're trying to do."

Jones, who is starting medical school, helped Wellspring look for funding to renovate a historic building to house nonprofit organizations, said Laura Wright, the agency's executive director.

"She did a tremendous lot in a short time, and we've got some promising leads," Wright said. "I think we're off to a good start."

Hernandez, who's starting her second year at IU, wants to study medicine and work in public health. She said her summer work provided insight into how much poor health...
care contributes to homelessness.

When she runs into Martha's House clients on Kirkwood Avenue, she said, “They're like, 'Hey, Rebeca.' I sit down with them; we go to the library and study for their GED classes. I've never been disrespected by them once.”

Schluntz, a junior who helped organize a Hurricane Katrina relief trip by IU students last winter, worked on a campaign with supermarkets to replenish the food pantry at Monroe County United Ministries. She plans to use her IU connections to build support for the agency from student government, fraternities and sororities and other groups.

"The main thing I learned is, when you step outside of the bubble of IU, you can learn a lot," she said.

Volunteers in Service to America
There are four local Indiana University student VISTA workers this summer:

• Rebeca Hernandez: Martha's House, the Bloomington shelter agency.

• Katie Schluntz: Monroe County United Ministries.

• Patricia Mota: multicultural ministries at St. Paul Catholic Center and Mujeres en Conexion, a program for Hispanic women.

• Lauren Jones: Wellspring, a Martinsville agency that helps homeless families.

On the Web
For more information about VISTA, see www.americorps.org/about/programs/vista.asp.