

## **VISTA Connects Upper Peninsula**

*By Brandon Seng, Communication Manager, ConnectMichigan Alliance*



Michigan's Upper Peninsula is home to a developing partnership that could potentially create thousands of volunteer opportunities. The United Way Volunteer Center in Sault Ste. Marie has recently opened a satellite volunteer center on nearby Lake Superior State University's campus. This partnership provides powerful connection, impacting both LSSU and its surrounding community. Students will benefit through service-learning volunteer opportunities created by the center, and a link will be established between the campus and those they serve.

Sara Dombrowski, a former LSSU student is taking the lead to create volunteer opportunities for the students on campus. Sara knows how to get the students excited, and looks forward to continued service in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Over the last two months, Sara has been working to forge relationships with the LSSU community and develop a database in which she can match students with volunteer opportunities.

"There is already a great tradition of volunteering on campus," she said, "my goal is to create opportunities to touch every student on campus who wants to make a difference."

In 2004, the Points of Light Foundation and Volunteer Center National Network launched a three-year initiative to engage 75 VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America) members per year to serve in Volunteer Centers across the country. Sara is currently serving as one of 30 VISTAs hosted in 16 of Michigan's local volunteer centers. VISTAs are responsible for recruiting volunteers and developing organizational capacity for new or existing programs to meet community needs.

"This is something we've had as a goal for at least five years but never really tackled it because we didn't have the capacity or the resources," said Kristina Beamish, director of the Volunteer Center. Through the Points of Light Foundation's VISTA opportunities, we now have the capacity to take those first steps with the college."

The partnership of LSSU and the Sault Ste. Marie United Way brings together two organizations dedicated to serving their community. Currently there are 11 Volunteer Centers on college campuses that are affiliated with this initiative, making the LSSU center the 12th.

"Without this VISTA position we would not be able to have a Volunteer Center on campus," said Michelle Thalacker, Director of Student Activities for LSSU. "The

VISTA opportunity allows us to create and develop service and service-learning on campus.

The Volunteer Centers of Michigan is excited about the opportunities presented by this unique partnership. Look for stories regarding the development of this initiative in future VCM publications.