
Overview of Church-Based Volunteer Host Sites



**PRESBYTERIAN
DISASTER ASSISTANCE**

Hope through hospitality

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Visit <http://vimeo.com/user6857107> to view a video version of this document.

I. Introduction

After a disaster there is a need for housing for volunteers who come into the area to assist the community in its recovery. There is a short-term need for early response volunteers such as Red Cross, AmeriCorps, FEMA Corps and others. Sometimes this early, short-term need can be easily met by providing a gym floor for the volunteers to sleep. There may also be a long-term need for volunteer work-teams that come in to muck out, repair, and rebuild. Hosting these volunteers requires more planning and more services and is more complicated than just providing a place to sleep.

Well-run volunteer host sites are essential to disaster recovery. Successful volunteer host sites provide a warm, welcoming, safe and sanitary environment for volunteer work teams. This document is intended to provide information for those called to host long-term volunteer work teams.

Volunteers want to come to a site where people welcome them and provide a real opportunity to help the community rebuild itself. They want to spend their days doing well-planned work and to have opportunities to meet with the people of the community or congregation.

The enclosed information is to help a church or other group to discern their sense of call to the ministry of hosting, and to evaluate their commitment and capacity to carry out all the necessary dimensions of hosting. While every disaster is unique, hosting sites face many common planning, organizing, managing and care challenges. A number of National Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) partners stand ready to support a church or group through the discernment process, to train the church community in elements of hosting, to utilize a call center to schedule volunteers and to provide materials that might be helpful.

Any group contemplating becoming a hosting site for volunteers serving in disaster recovery should begin the process of discerning its role in the community's recovery effort by assessing its sense of call. In disaster response it is always wise to pre-determine who will be helped, how they will be helped and for how long they will be helped.

When your session, deaconate, board or committee and the congregation of the church are satisfied that they are being called to use their gifts as a volunteer host site, you will then decide how best to organize people and resources available to create a hospitality system that provides adequately for volunteers' needs and establishes an environment in which meaningful work can be done to help the community rebuild after a disaster.

In order to offer volunteers a fruitful work experience—and to put their gifts to best use in the community—careful planning is essential. Volunteers want to come to a site where people welcome them and provide a real opportunity to help the community rebuild itself.

They want to spend their days doing well-planned work and to have opportunities to meet with the people of the community or congregation. One of the worst things a volunteer team can experience is to feel as if they are wasting their time because work is not well coordinated. It is always better to keep the teams busy rather than let them sit, even for short periods of time. ***Do not begin hosting until you have jobs lined up for the volunteers.***

There are a few secrets to success for a volunteer host site.

- 1) Hard work
- 2) Dedicated volunteers from the hosting organization
- 3) Close attention to details
- 4) Strong interpersonal relationships between the hosting group (church members, staff, community, etc.) and the homeowners

To become a long-term volunteer host site requires serious discernment on the part of the group regarding the commitment of time, energy and space it demands. Burnout comes easily in this ministry. Every effort should be made to bring all involved parties on-board *before* making a commitment to the task. It is crucial to include as many people as possible in the daily duties of hosting volunteers so that people can enjoy the many blessings of hospitality ministry without overworking any one person.

II. How to Become a Volunteer Host Site

A. Discern the Call and Capacity to Host

The congregation or group leader and representatives should assess a congregation's sense of call, appropriateness of facility and commitment to long-term recovery. If those are affirmed, a steering committee should be appointed to assess need, the church's capacity and present a proposal to the church's governing body and the congregation.

This document offers information the steering committee needs to consider in developing their plan to become a volunteer host site. It also offers some suggestions about possible approaches to the decisions that need to be made in the following categories:

- 1) Roles and responsibilities
- 2) Financial support for volunteer host site
- 3) Accommodations for volunteer teams
- 4) Feeding of volunteer teams
- 5) Logistical details
- 6) Tools and building materials
- 7) Sharing information with volunteers
- 8) Interaction with survivors and self-care for volunteer teams
- 9) Record keeping
- 10) Relationships with congregation, neighborhood, and community

B. Connect with a Long-Term Recovery Group

It is critical for a volunteer host site to take an active part in its community's Long-Term Recovery Group (LTRG) or Unmet Needs Committee. An LTRG is a collaborative, interfaith, interagency group from the community which aims to meet people's unmet needs after they have suffered damage to their houses. LTRGs usually have a construction management, unmet needs and case management committees that can supply work opportunities for volunteers.

By being active with LTRG partners, the volunteer host site learns how many families will have unmet needs and what long-term means for this disaster. Experience indicates that long-term typically means **two years** or more. In a federally declared disaster, FEMA Voluntary Agency Liaisons (VALs) will help form LTRGs and provide data from their assessments; local organizations will know what only local people can know. Based on the level of unmet needs, the church and LTRG can determine how much volunteer housing will be needed and for what length of time.

For information on LTRGs, download materials from the following websites:

<i>Long-term Recovery Manual</i>	www.nvoad.org
<i>Managing and Operating the Faith-Based Disaster Recovery Organization: A Capacity Building Guidebook for Boards of Directors and Program Managers</i>	www.cwserp.org
<i>Community Arise Training Materials, Part 2 Long-Term Recovery</i>	www.communityarise.com/classroom.htm

C. Involve Church Leadership

After the steering committee has answered all the key questions and decided to host volunteers, the plan should be presented to the church leadership. *Do not go forward without the full commitment of pastor, leadership, and the congregation.*

III. Steering Committee Points to Consider

A. Personnel Needed for Host Site Coordination

Early in the process the steering committee needs to establish policy and identify personnel needed to help run the volunteer host site. Personnel needs should be determined once the steering committee has a general operational plan. People working at the host site may need training in disaster recovery and host site management. It is important that you have people who will commit to the project for the long term. An individual can fill these essential roles although it is recommended that this be a team of persons that rotate terms of duty to prevent burnout. For these roles, the term “host” will be used for the rest of this document.

(For more detail on host site roles, see part IV)

B. Financial Support for Volunteer Host Sites

The steering committee must assess funds and financing of volunteer host site. Funding any ministry, especially in tough economic times, is a challenge. Any time a church handles finances it is a good idea to set up a good and easily understandable accounting system from the very beginning. When people donate to disaster response programs, they want to know that their hard-earned funds are going to the need for which they were donated. Some questions may include:

Many organizations with experience in hosting volunteer work teams suggest charging approximately \$25/night/person.

1) How will you fund the host site operation?

- Ask for donations from the congregation and community?
- Seek and apply for grants? (Many grants will require a separate bank account, generally accepted accounting practices, and full disclosure and transparency in managing funds.)
- Cover expenses by charging per diem donations from the volunteers?

2) How much will you charge the volunteers?

Some may ask, “Why charge anything at all?” The main reason to charge volunteers is to prevent them from being a burden upon the disaster stricken community—including the host site.

How much your volunteer host site charges will depend upon what is to be provided for the volunteers. For example, if all three daily meals are provided the charge should be more. The daily charge should reflect the service the volunteers will receive and offset the expenses of maintenance, providing hot water, bunks, electricity, water, Wi-Fi, some staff reimbursement, etc. Note: Most teams that have experience working in disaster areas are accustomed to paying a per diem fee per volunteer. When the program is run efficiently, and the church does not charge the host site for space, utilities, etc., there will most likely be some funds left over to help cover other expenses. Note: It is always easier to have just one price option. It prevents miscommunication and possible hard feelings. Beware of charging too little. If you don’t charge enough to cover your expenses, you may be unable to continue hosting. The steering committee needs to determine how to handle excess funds.

It is always best to collect funds as soon as politely possible after a group arrives. As they get busy during the week, this can be overlooked. It would be good to mention that funds are expected upon arrival in the information you send to prospective teams.

3) Are you prepared to provide receipt of donations? It is recommended that you have an approved plan to handle per diem receipts and donations. Many volunteers arrive with gift cards, cash, tools and other items or a combination of these.

C. Accommodations for Volunteer Teams

(See pages 3-15 in appendix for examples of portable showers, shower buildings, bunk beds and room dividers)

The committee will have to decide on what lodging provisions will be made to provide a safe and sanitary space to house teams.

How many people can you house? Host site capacity depends upon a number of factors. For example, the number of showers and available space are two important considerations when determining the

number of volunteers a site can host. The ratio commonly used is 10 to 15 volunteers per shower (If showers can be used by either men or women). Therefore, a facility with two unisex showers could host between 20 and 30 volunteers.

Identify times and areas in which the facilities will not be available to volunteer teams.

If possible, it is preferable to have a dressing area and shower combination rather than female and male showers. Most teams do not have an equal number of males and females and a unisex shower plan is more efficient and faster. It is also recommended that sinks not be in the dressing/shower area so showers can be taken, then the person can dry, change clothes, exit and then use a sink if needed.

If the facility has showers, what is the hot water capacity? Would you need to add capacity or upgrade to a more efficient on-demand-type system?

If your facility does not have showers, do you have a place for shower trailers or outside shower building(s)? Can showers be installed inside? In addition, considerations should be given to utilizing nearby facilities (i.e. YMCA, a fitness center, community centers, dormitories, etc.) provided agreements can be reached.

As for space considerations, the American Red Cross recommends 20 – 40 square feet per person for its approved shelters. The New Jersey fire code requires a minimum of 40 square feet per person in the sleeping areas.

Will sleeping areas be separated by gender? Separation by gender is usually preferred. Some volunteer host sites have an area for volunteers who snore so others can sleep better. Sleeping areas should provide electrical outlets for the use of CPAP-type machines. If possible, provide a separate area for people who use these machines.

Will bunk beds be provided? What about mattresses or cots? Many adults do not like sleeping directly on the floor or on the top bunk.

Will the volunteers bring sleeping bags? Will linens be provided, or will volunteers be asked to bring their own bedding?

Identify times and areas in which the facilities will not be available to volunteer teams. If your church has a day care it is recommended that that area be off-limits to volunteers.

Is leisure space available for volunteers? The host site should have space for the volunteers to relax without having to remain in their sleeping area. This means there should be space for the volunteers to play games, read, watch TV, use the computer, or just have a place for quiet time. A couch, comfortable chairs, and a table with chairs are always a good idea. A quiet time should also be established so that volunteers are provided with ample time for a good night's sleep.

D. Feeding of Volunteer Teams

(See pages 17–32 in the appendix for examples of Westminster meal plans, Gulf Coast food manual, Westminster chore list and housekeeping chores)

The steering committee should determine the level of food service the site would provide to volunteer teams.

How many meals will be provided, if any? Some host sites provide food for all three daily meals. Some sites prefer to provide food for breakfast and lunch and allow the team to go out for dinner, which helps the local economy. Some sites prefer volunteer teams purchase their own food and prepare dinner themselves.

Questions to answer

- Who will do the grocery shopping—the host or volunteers?
- Who will cook the meals—the host or volunteers?
- Where will the work teams eat and prepare meals?
- Who will keep the dining area and the kitchen clean—the host or volunteers?
- Who will plan the menus—the host or volunteers?

One option is for the host to sit down on Sunday nights with each new volunteer team leader and create menus for the week. Another is for the host to suggest which foods to use and let the cooks decide how to prepare them. As previously stated, volunteer fees should cover the cost of food if you choose to purchase it.

In any case, some kitchen items should be provided. In addition to cooking implements and utensils, items—such as condiments, ice, towels, dish cloths, paper towels, dish soap—should be a part of every kitchen and available to volunteers.

One of the most difficult things to store is water in plastic bottles. Some host sites have decided to ask volunteers to bring their own water bottles and fill them up at the church. Not only does this save space and money, it helps your host site “go green” because you are not using and discarding plastic bottles. It is also recommended that the host site provide only juice, water (not bottled), milk and coffee. The volunteers can purchase other beverages such as sodas locally.

E. Logistical Details

(See pages 34 – 36 in the appendix for examples of New Jersey fire code and bulletin boards)

The steering committee will need to decide on logistical details for the host site.

1) Worksites

How far are the worksites from the living quarters? It is suggested that, whenever possible, worksites and volunteer should be no more than 30 minutes apart. Long drives make for long days. Traffic must be taken into consideration.

2) Host Site Calendar Management

Establish host site non-operational (blackout) days. Identify holidays, special events, and any periods of time in which your facility is not available to host teams.

Decide which days and times volunteers should arrive and which days they depart. It is a good idea to give your congregation a day or so to breathe and rest between work groups. Most volunteer host sites are set up to receive volunteers on Sunday afternoons or evenings and to have them depart on Fridays or Saturdays. Some volunteer teams may request to stay through Sunday to worship with the host congregation.

3) Minimum Age Requirements

Decide the minimum age of volunteer team members based on advice from insurance provides, local state regulators and work partners.

4) Insurance Requirements

It is advisable to check with your insurance carrier before housing people overnight. Some volunteer host sites require volunteers have medical insurance coverage. All volunteer host sites should have volunteers sign liability release forms. Volunteer host sites should keep these forms for a couple of years after hosting in case a question arises.

5) Fire Safety

It is a good idea to have a fire safety plan and a severe weather safety plan in place so the staff and volunteers know what to do, who to call and where to go in case of an emergency. These plans should be posted in areas that can be readily seen by the volunteers.

Local fire codes must be reviewed to determine what is required to house volunteer teams overnight. Ask someone familiar with codes and fire safety to inspect the facility.

6) Local Codes

Become familiar with local building and zoning codes. Decide whether these codes restrict or change your hosting decisions.

7) Parking

Ensure there is space for volunteers to park. It may be necessary to mark spots in your parking lot for volunteers. Some volunteer teams may want to bring trailers, buses, RVs, or construction-related equipment. Parking restrictions should be made clear to teams *before* they arrive.

8) House rules

Issues such as smoking and onsite alcohol use need to be addressed in advance of the arrival of the first volunteers. These rules need to be communicated to the volunteers before they arrive as part of their trip preparations.

Housekeeping issues should be addressed at the very beginning of the visit. Determine and communicate who will take care of the volunteers' living quarters, host or volunteer teams. Determine who will do janitorial duties such as disposing of trash, keeping the bathrooms stocked, etc.

F. Tools, etc.

Volunteer work teams may ask if they can bring their own tools. The committee must determine how to respond to these requests and whether to provide secure space for tools. Tools will typically be supplied by the agency that provides jobs and/or job assignments.

G. Sharing Information with Volunteers

(See pages 37-58 in the appendix for examples of volunteer skills assessment form, liability release forms, parental responsibility form, suggested packing list, emotional and spiritual care brochure, reflections, Westminster welcome email, email for thank you notes, orientation notes, evaluation form and host site manual for volunteers)

Before they arrive: By communicating well before the team arrives, you increase the odds of having a successful and rewarding week. All policies, including sleeping arrangements, meals, house rules, arrival and departure times should be communicated to the team well before their arrival. Managing the team's expectations is a key factor in providing an enjoyable hosting experience.

Host Site Manual—Ensure you have an organized system that provides teams information on local amenities, volunteer host site rules, items they may need, and any other information that will make their visit more comfortable and better prepare them for their trip. It is suggested that the host site prepare a manual that contains all pertinent information on the guidelines and operation of the host site. It is also a good idea to have a binder in an area accessible to the volunteer team that includes the manual, local amenities, entertainment, and emergency contact information.

Forms—To help ensure meaningful work, it is important that the work provider know the skill level of the volunteer team before they arrive. When volunteer teams register, they should receive a skills assessment form and return it prior to their arrival.

Other documents that the steering committee may find important to send to the volunteer teams when they register include:

- a) Individual Liability Release Form
- b) General Liability Release Form
- c) Authorization for Medical Treatment
- d) Parental Responsibility Form
- e) Packing List
- f) Emotional and Spiritual Care Brochure
- g) Other forms as determined by the steering committee

When they arrive: The host and work partner should have an orientation upon the team's arrival.

During the week: To keep the congregation connected with the recovery effort, it is important to take notes of the accomplishments of the volunteer teams in order to communicate them with the congregation. Posting photographs on a bulletin board is a great way to keep up with the team.

After they leave: It is always nice to send the teams a thank you note. This note or email can be addressed to the church, the team leader, or individual members.

H. Record Keeping

(See page 59 in the appendix for example of volunteer hour worksheet)

Volunteer host sites should keep records of all volunteer hours worked with notes as to which city and/or county the work took place. Collecting information on volunteer hours can save your community tax dollars and add to the value of your work. These records may be helpful in writing grants.

Lutheran Disaster Response offers free software you can use to track these hours and other information. You can download a copy of the training database that contains fake clients and volunteers to see how it works at <http://www.ldrnd.org/DRDdownload.html>. More information on it can be found at <http://www.lrrnd.org/Databases/DRD.html>.

I. Relationships with Congregation, Neighborhood and Community

Before and during hosting, it is critical to know how supportive your congregation, neighborhood, and community will be to accepting volunteers from outside who may be of a different race, religion or nationality.

Have an idea of how long your neighbors will accept and welcome volunteers. Fatigue and impatience will almost always set in after some point in time. Maintaining communications and positive relationships with neighbors close to the site is critical.

Questions to answer

- Will you invite volunteers to share fellowship with your church and allow the volunteers to share their work experiences with the church? (One host church provided Sunday night supper as a welcoming event to their church; another included the volunteers in their weekly Wednesday night supper. Both events allow the host site and the volunteers to interact with the volunteers and to include the volunteers in the church.)
- Will you include the volunteers in a worship experience at your church?
- Will you provide time and access to entertainment and local culture? Some volunteer host sites suggest that teams take one afternoon off to tour the area and enjoy local amenities.

J. Exit Strategy

Experience has shown that when a volunteer host site has completed its hosting ministry and is preparing to shut down operations there may be excess equipment, materials and possibly funds. The committee overseeing the volunteer host site should have a plan for what to do with these resources when the host site is closed. Any equipment, tools, and resources that were borrowed should be returned to the owner.

Even after all of that has been done there may be some unused resources. When that time comes it is very helpful to be able to go back to the original plan and see what the organizers had in mind for these extra resources. Keep in mind that it is critical for designated funds to be used in the way they were intended when they were donated.

IV. Roles and Responsibilities of the Host

This is a list of tasks necessary to operate volunteer host sites:

Check Box

Communicate with volunteer teams before their arrival to confirm reservation details	
Ensure volunteer teams know what to expect from the host and job site (manage expectations)	
Create a process for evaluating the effectiveness of the host site	
Maintain host site calendar (or have someone do so)	
Act as a liaison between work providers and the volunteer teams	
Ensure the facility is ready for volunteers to arrive with attention to cleanliness, maintenance, and supplies	
Create and maintain a binder that provides host site, points of interest and community information for volunteer teams	
Welcome and orient volunteer work teams upon arrival	
Provide a warm, safe, sanitary, and hospitable environment	
Provide and post emergency contact information to volunteer teams	
Be on-call to the teams throughout the week should questions or needs arise	
Train all personnel in direct contact with teams in caregiving	
Facilitate the feeding of volunteer teams	
Generate and maintain accurate and appropriate records	
Receive, record, disburse, and manage funds (expenses, donations, fees, gift cards, etc.)	
Keep congregation updated and connected with volunteer team efforts	
Consider having one meal per week with homeowners served by volunteer teams and congregation	
Send thank you notes to the volunteer teams after they have left	

People filling these suggested roles can complete these tasks:

- Host Site Coordinator (if this is a group, they should share one cell phone to ensure they have some time away from the phone when it is passed to the person on call)
- Caregivers
- Emergency Contact
- Food Committee
- LTRG Liaison
- Orientation Leaders
- Advocate (work partner liaison)

An individual may fill one or more roles. It is recommended that a team be formed to avoid burn out. We encourage the host to reach out to their community, neighbors, and other congregations to develop partnerships that assist in rebuilding the community.

