

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)



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The Central Park Conservancy is a private, not-for-profit organization responsible for the management and restoration of Central Park, in partnership with the City of New York.

The Institute for Urban Parks

Since its earliest years, the Central Park Conservancy has been committed to helping other parks. As a leader in the field of urban park management and public-private park partnerships, the Conservancy's success has paved the way for countless other urban parks of all sizes and the partnerships that support them. The Institute for Urban Parks, founded in 2013, draws on the Conservancy's 40 years of experience and expertise to develop programs that educate and connect park organizations, while supporting a vital community of practice among public and private partners. Through continuing education, capacity building, thought leadership, and peer-to-peer exchange, the Institute empowers, informs, and connects the individuals and organizations that care for urban parks. We do this to ensure that all urban park organizations have the knowledge and the capacity to create and sustain great public parks throughout New York City, North America, and abroad.

Overview

Volunteers provide tremendous value to Central Park, the Conservancy, and Park visitors by sharing their time, enthusiasm, knowledge, and efforts. Through its various volunteer programs, the Conservancy supplements its ability to restore, maintain, and enhance the Park. To achieve meaningful and lasting support, urban park volunteer programs require thoughtful management to ensure that they meet the needs of the park—and the agencies or organizations caring for the park—as well as those of the volunteers. In building a robust and successful volunteer program over the course of four decades, the Conservancy has developed strategies for the effective recruitment, management, and retention of Park volunteers. The *Volunteer Management: FAQ* distills a series of key principles for cultivating a strong and successful park volunteer program.

Types of Special Events



Volunteers with LIVE, the Conservancy's first formal volunteer program.



The Conservancy expanded volunteer opportunities to include Greeters, who provide information to Park visitors.

When and how did the Conservancy first implement a volunteer program?

Volunteers have been an integral part of the Conservancy since its inception. One of the Conservancy's predecessors, the Central Park Task Force, united volunteers who sought to improve the condition of the Park in the 1970s. Following its establishment in 1980, the Conservancy continued the Task Force's volunteer engagement efforts, initially with Conservancy staff supervising informal groups of volunteers. In 1982, the Conservancy initiated a formal volunteer program, Learning and Involvement for Volunteers in the Environment (LIVE), intended to engage New York City residents with the Park and its restoration through a combination of learning and maintenance activities in the Park.

How has the Conservancy's volunteer program evolved?

The Conservancy's early efforts focused on trash pick-up, graffiti removal, and bench and lighting restoration projects. Its initial volunteer activities were primarily horticulture-based. Over time, as restoration efforts—and visits to the Park—continued to increase and expand, the Conservancy developed additional opportunities for volunteers, such as its Tour Guide and Greeter programs, which served to further engage visitors and enrich their experience.

What types of volunteer opportunities does the Conservancy offer?

Based on an individual's or group's abilities, interests, and availability, the Conservancy offers a variety of opportunities to volunteer in the Park:

- **Gardener's Assistants:** Individual volunteers commit to working a regular weekly schedule with a Conservancy staff gardener, helping meet the horticulture and maintenance needs of a specific area of the Park. By regularly working with staff alongside other volunteers, volunteers develop a great deal of knowledge about and pride for their area of the Park.
- **Greeters:** Greeters serve as ambassadors to the Park, assisting visitors with directions, answering Park-related questions, and providing information about upcoming events. Greeters can either support one of the Park's three information kiosks or five visitor centers. Greeters also assist as a mobile Walking Greeter, ensuring that Park information is readily available to visitors, no matter where they are in the Park.



Planting flowers in Shakespeare Garden is one of the many horticulture-based opportunities for volunteers.



Corporate partners volunteer with the Conservancy in order to foster environmental stewardship and team building.

- **Saturday Green Team and Seasonal Teams:** Individual members of the public looking for less commitment can join the Conservancy’s weekly teams as often as their schedule permits. The Saturday Green Team meets every Saturday morning to complete basic maintenance projects such as mulching or leaf removal in various landscapes throughout the Park. Seasonal Teams meet during the week to make immediate improvements to the Park that are appropriate for the season, such as painting benches, raking leaves, or removing snow from playgrounds.
- **Tour Guides:** Tour Guides lead public walking tours in the Park, sharing the Park’s unique history, ecology, and design with visitors. These trained positions have a competitive entry process, which includes an audition.
- **Special Events:** The Conservancy draws on its regular pool of volunteers to assist at the many Conservancy events held in the Park throughout the year, such as the Holiday Tree Lighting.
- **Corporate Partnership “Day in the Dirt”:** The “Day in the Dirt” program is a unique opportunity for generous corporations to become financial partners with the Conservancy, promote volunteerism and environmental stewardship, and build employee cohesiveness and camaraderie through a group horticulture or painting project in the Park.
- **Family, Teen, and School Group Volunteer Days:** The Conservancy offers opportunities for families, teens, and school groups to work on seasonal projects, such as raking leaves or spreading mulch, in order to promote volunteerism and stewardship to the next generation of Park lovers.

How many volunteers currently support the Conservancy?

The Conservancy is supported year-round by a host of both one-time and regular volunteers. In 2018, more than 3,400 volunteers contributed nearly 58,000 hours in the Park, 360 of whom devoted at least 50 hours of service. Of these volunteers, more than 1,300 were from a corporate or nonprofit group and more than 500 came from a school or family Volunteer Day group.

Recruitment, Management, and Retention



New Park volunteers receive training in weed identification and horticultural techniques.



Volunteers are able to build close relationships with Conservancy staff.

How does someone become a Conservancy volunteer?

Prospective volunteers are encouraged to attend a Volunteer Open House session where Conservancy staff and veteran volunteers share information about their experiences and answer questions about volunteering in the Park. After deciding to volunteer with the Conservancy, new volunteers complete an application indicating their program of interest. Certain opportunities have additional requirements, such as an in-person interview or experience qualifications.

What types of training do volunteers receive?

New volunteers for the Conservancy's Gardener's Assistant, Greeter, and Tour Guide programs receive specific training relevant to their chosen opportunity, which may include training on horticultural techniques or shadowing other volunteers. They also learn about the Conservancy's history and mission, and receive a copy of the Conservancy's Volunteer Handbook, which contains information about volunteer policies. Drop-in and group volunteers receive a brief, on-site orientation and guidance related to their scheduled activities, such as weeding or mulching.

How does the Conservancy recruit volunteers?

Conservancy volunteers are often visitors to the Park who have learned about the Conservancy's volunteer opportunities through word-of-mouth. The Conservancy also uses its social media channels to highlight the efforts of Park volunteers and direct followers to the Conservancy's volunteer website page where they can learn more.

Who oversees the management of the volunteers?

Under the umbrella of Park Operations, the Conservancy's Visitor Experience department oversees the management of Park volunteers. The Volunteer Services department coordinates the recruitment, placement, management, retention, and recognition of volunteers and volunteer programs. Field-based volunteers, such as Gardener's Assistants, also report directly to the individual Landscape Management staff with whom they work.

Communication, Evaluation, and Acknowledgment



Development opportunities such as lunch-and-learns and holiday events help enrich volunteer engagement with the Park and the Conservancy.

How does the Conservancy communicate with and schedule volunteers?

The Conservancy uses an online data management and communications platform system to manage volunteer information. Through the system's online portal, volunteers can view available opportunities and register for upcoming events or volunteer sessions. Conservancy staff can analyze specific volunteer information and communicate to volunteers via the online portal.

How does the Conservancy track volunteer progress?

Conservancy volunteers log their hours through the data management system. For specific events, the Volunteer Services department uses attendance sheets to track participation. Volunteer tracking is important for annual reporting purposes, as well as potential marketing and development opportunities.

How does the Conservancy acknowledge volunteers?

The Conservancy recognizes that its success would not be possible without the efforts of volunteers. To show appreciation, the Volunteer Services department provides a variety of offerings to keep volunteers informed and engaged, including ongoing educational opportunities, guest lectures, speakers, and classes. The Conservancy also holds an annual reception for volunteers who have contributed a minimum number of hours and publicly recognizes the achievements of volunteers through its blog, social media, and annual reports.

Guidelines and Practices



Volunteers stay motivated when the work they are given remains stimulating and engaging.

The following strategies have been effective in helping the Conservancy manage volunteers in and out of the field:

- **Plan ahead.** Few things are more frustrating for a volunteer than showing up to find that their help isn't needed or feeling that their interest and enthusiasm have been wasted. Take the time to compile and prioritize a list of potential volunteer projects, which may cover a wide range of activities in support of a park, as well as the tasks that volunteers will take on in supporting these projects. People are more likely to volunteer if they have a clear understanding of exactly what they will be doing when they show up to help.
- **Develop a meaningful orientation program.** While onboarding processes come in all different shapes and sizes, every effort to orient new volunteers must: 1) provide volunteers with a basic overview of the mission, vision, and structure of the park organization; 2) clarify the roles, responsibilities, risks, and rewards of volunteering; 3) establish what will and will not be within a volunteer's scope of work; 4) collect essential information (such as names, addresses, and emergency contacts) and required forms (such as liability waivers and volunteer agreements); and 5) train volunteers to do safe, effective, and efficient work in the park.

The onboarding process is also an opportunity for volunteer managers to learn more about the skills, knowledge, and capacities volunteers bring with them in order to assign them to appropriate projects around their parks. In the field, it is important to make sure that volunteers receive an appropriate orientation to their work site, including the location of facilities, relevant directions, and feedback in order to correctly do their job.

- **Match volunteers with appropriate projects.** A volunteer application or survey can be useful in helping volunteer managers determine the knowledge and skills of new volunteers. This can help determine the depth of training needed for volunteers when they arrive on site, the amount of full-time staff necessary to lead volunteers through their work, and the level of project complexity volunteers are likely to be able to handle. In addition, keeping a running list of ongoing, pending, and incomplete projects around their parks, as well as the anticipated scope of work for each project, enables managers to quickly match the right projects to volunteers.
- **Manage safety and equipment.** Convey safety protocols to volunteers, including phone numbers of supervisors and emergency meeting points. Make sure that volunteers have the proper uniform and tools to do their jobs safely and effectively. Volunteer managers should also make sure that all tools are returned at the end of the volunteer session.



The Conservancy acknowledges the hard work and support of volunteers, hosting annual receptions, posting on social media, and creating recognition opportunities, such as the Volunteer bench, located near Chess & Checkers House.

- **Communicate regularly.** Managers must maintain regular communication with volunteers before and during their volunteer engagement. Emails, phone calls, and even text messages can provide volunteers with the information they need to show up on time, ready to work. While volunteers may be working independently during their sessions, it is also important for supervising staff to check in frequently. Regular face-to-face communication during a volunteer event will help volunteers learn while on the job and ensure that questions or concerns are dealt with as they arise.
- **Recognize and thank volunteers.** A simple “thank you” can go a long way toward retaining volunteers and keeping them on the roster for future projects. Remember: volunteers share their time and energy and could decide to invest themselves in other initiatives. Volunteer managers must take a moment to thank volunteers for their service before, during, and after a volunteer project. Managers should also broadcast the value of volunteers to the wider park community through social media, periodic newsletters, and at special events, such as fundraisers and community meetings. Managers can also take steps to retain volunteers by soliciting their advice on future projects, engaging them in some basic decision-making processes, and creating opportunities for them to feel meaningfully connected to the operation of a park.

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Contact Us

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