

---

# Overview of Church-Based Volunteer Host Sites



**PRESBYTERIAN  
DISASTER ASSISTANCE**

*Hope through hospitality*

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. How to Become a Volunteer Host Site</b>	<b>4</b>
A. Discern the Call and Capacity to Host	4
B. Connect with a Long-Term Recovery Group	5
C. Involve Church Leadership	5
<b>III. Hosting - Points to Consider</b>	<b>6</b>
A. Personnel Needed for Host Site Coordination	6
B. Financial Support for Volunteer Host Sites	6
• How will you fund the host site operation?	6
• How much will you charge the volunteers?	6
• Are you prepared to receive donations?	7
C. Accommodations for Volunteer Teams	7
D. Feeding of Volunteer Teams	8
E. Logistical Details	8
• Host Site Calendar Management	8
• Minimum Age Requirements	8
• Insurance Requirements	8
• Fire Safety	9
• Local Codes	9
• Parking	9
• Transportation	9
• House rules	9
F. Tools, etc.	9
G. Sharing Information with Volunteers	9
H. Relationships with Congregation, Neighborhood and Community	10
I. Exit Strategy	11

Visit <https://vimeo.com/78757986> 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. PDA may wish to establish either a response or recovery host site. There is a short-term need for 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 where the volunteers 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 services, and is more involved 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 use 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, diaconate, 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

Becoming 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. Based on this determination, the church can then decide how to move forward as a potential host site.

If those are affirmed, a committee may 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 for the church 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) 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 website:

National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD): <i>Long-Term Recovery Guide</i>	<a href="http://www.nvoad.org/resource-center/?mdocs-cat=mdocs-cat-61&amp;att=null">http://www.nvoad.org/resource-center/?mdocs-cat=mdocs-cat-61&amp;att=null</a>
--	---

## C. Involve Church Leadership

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

---

## III. Hosting - Points to Consider

### A. Personnel Needed for Host Site Coordination

Early in the process the hospitality committee needs to establish policy and identify personnel needed to help run the volunteer host site. Personnel needs should be determined once the committee has a general operational plan. It is important that you have people who will commit to the project for the long term. Depending on the size of the host site, an individual or a team can fill the essential roles. For these roles, the term “host” will be used for the rest of this document.

### B. Financial Support for Volunteer Host Sites

The church must assess funds and financing of volunteer host site. It is recommended that the church set up a separate bookkeeping system/account for the host site. Some questions about finances may include:

#### 1) How will you fund the host site operation?

- Ask for donations from the congregation and community
- Seek and apply for grants (Many grants may 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 their care from being a burden upon the disaster-stricken community—including the host site. It is common for volunteers to pay a *per diem* fee for accommodations.

Many host sites with experience suggest a *per diem* rate of \$15-30 per

How much your volunteer host site charges will depend upon what you will provide for the volunteers. The daily charge should offset the expenses of maintenance, providing hot water, beds, electricity, Wi-Fi, some staff reimbursement, and meals (if provided). Charging the same fee to all groups is easier and 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 church 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 groups get busy during the week, this can be overlooked. In the information you send to prospective teams, you should mention that funds are expected upon arrival.

**3) Are you prepared to receive 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. Be prepared to provide receipts for *per diem* and/or donations.

### **C. Accommodations for Volunteer Teams**

*(Ask your PDA contact for examples of sleeping accommodations.)*

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

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

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 building(s)? Can showers be installed inside? In addition, arrangements could be made to use nearby facilities (*e.g.*, YMCA, a fitness center, community centers, dormitories, etc.).

The American Red Cross recommends 20 – 40 square feet per person for its approved shelters. It is also recommended that you check with your local fire marshal and building codes to comply with city ordinances.

Separation of sleeping quarters by gender is 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.

Decide on sleeping accommodations:

- Bunk beds, mattresses, or cots? (Check with American Red Cross or Salvation Army about cots and blankets.)
- Volunteers provide sleeping bags?
- Ask volunteers to bring their own bedding?

---

Identify times and areas in which the facilities will not be available to volunteer teams. Church day care facilities must be off-limits and inaccessible to volunteers.

Is leisure space available for volunteers? It is recommended to provide space for the volunteers to relax in an area separate from 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 have ample time for a good night's sleep.

## **D. Feeding of Volunteer Teams**

*(Ask your PDA contact for examples of meal plans and chore lists. Samples are included in the separate document, "Appendix to the Overview of Church-Based Host Sites.")*

The church should determine the level of food service the site will provide to volunteer teams. PDA recommends that volunteer teams do their own cooking and food shopping.

## **E. Logistical Details**

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

### **1) 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.

### **2) Minimum Age Requirements**

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

### **3) Insurance Requirements**

It is advisable to check with your insurance carrier before housing people overnight. Some volunteer host sites require that volunteers have medical insurance coverage. All volunteer host sites should have volunteers sign liability release forms. See appendix for sample document.



#### **4) Fire Safety**

It is imperative to have a fire safety plan and a severe weather safety plan in place, so the staff and volunteers know what to do, whom 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.

#### **5) Local Codes**

Contact your fire marshal and zoning department to make sure that hosting can occur.

#### **6) Parking**

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

#### **7) Transportation**

Work teams must provide their own transportation to and from the host site to the work site. Keep in mind that work for large teams may be divided between work sites, which may require multiple vehicles.

Work teams are responsible for arranging their own transportation to and from the airport.

#### **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 should 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 whether host or volunteers will take care of the volunteers' living quarters, including disposing of trash, keeping the bathrooms clean and stocked, etc.

#### **F. Tools, etc.**

Volunteer work teams may ask if they can bring their own tools. The hospitality 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. One source of tools you may want to consider is *ToolBank.org*

#### **G. Sharing Information with Volunteers**

*(Ask your PDA contact for examples of a volunteer skills assessment form, liability release form, parental responsibility form, suggested packing list, emotional and spiritual care brochure,*

---

*devotionals, reflections, welcome email, thank you notes, orientation notes, evaluation form and host site manual for volunteers. Some of these sample forms are available in the separate document, "Appendix to the Overview of Church-Based Host Sites.")*

**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. Helping manage the team's expectations is a key factor in providing an enjoyable hosting experience.

**Host Site Manual:** Create a handbook that details your accommodations and sets the expectations for teams. A template will be provided. Provide host site rules (including *per diem* amounts and how to pay), a packing list, waiver or liability forms, arrangements for food, and any other information that will make their stay more comfortable and better prepare them for their trip.

**Local Amenities:** 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:** The hospitality committee should talk to their insurance provider to discuss the need for liability or waiver-type forms for the benefit of the host site. Are these forms that can be signed when team arrives or should they be signed before the team arrives?

**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 note 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 sending church or the team.

## **H. Relationships with Congregation, Neighborhood and Community**

Before and during hosting, it is critical to know that your congregation, neighborhood, and community will accept 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 at some point in time. Maintaining communications and positive relationships with neighbors close to the site is critical.

**Suggestions for Maintaining Supportive Relationships between the Congregation and the Volunteers:**

- Invite volunteers to share fellowship with your church (*e.g.*, provide Sunday night supper as a welcoming event for volunteers.)
- Allow the volunteers to share their work experiences with the church (*e.g.*, include volunteers in a Wednesday night supper.)
- Include the volunteers in a worship experience at your church
- Provide time and access to entertainment and local culture (*e.g.*, in collaboration with your work partners, suggest that teams take an afternoon off to tour the area and enjoy local amenities.)

**I. 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.

**J. Thank You!**

Thank you for serving. PDA stands with you in your ministry of presence to volunteer work teams. We are available to assist you in this joint response effort.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---