

Things to Consider When Working with Volunteers

1. **Volunteer Applications** – The use of a volunteer application is a recommended best practice. This can allow you to find out about basic information, emergency contacts, experience, interests, limitations (medical, etc.), availability, or other information you choose to include. Included in this “Volunteer Resources” file are several examples of applications used by other horse rescue groups.
2. **Waivers and Releases** – It is highly recommended that you have all volunteer sign a waiver or release prior to volunteering. This will help to protect you and your organization from liability. In a perfect world, you would consult with an attorney to create such a document. In the real world, where you are struggling to pay for lawyer fees, a good option is to take a look at the forms being used by other organizations and use them as a basis for your form. Included in this “Volunteer Resources” file are several examples of waivers/releases used by other horse rescue groups.
3. **Photo & Video Consent** – You may want to use photos and videos of volunteers to promote your organization on your website, social media, etc. Before doing that, you need to have a signed consent form from the volunteer. Rather than trying to get these signatures as you go along taking photos, it is much better to include a section on your waiver/release that is specifically about photos & videos. You will see examples of this on some of the sample waiver/releases
4. **New Volunteer Orientations** – Providing an orientation for new volunteers is a recommended best practice. Topics to cover at your orientation can include general safety guidelines, a tour of the facility, how to schedule a volunteer shift, the expected time commitment, additional training that may be available, and any other information you feel would be valuable to a new volunteer. Rescues handle their orientations in a variety of ways. Often, however, they have specific times – say the first Saturday of each month – that they conducted their orientations. This is much more convenient than repeatedly interrupting your day to orient yet another new volunteer. Included in this “Volunteer Resources” file is a document with a list of website links for the volunteer page of horse rescue groups. You will be able to see how these other groups approach many aspects of working with volunteers, including how they do their orientations.
5. **Setting up a Volunteer Schedule** – The use of a schedule for signing up volunteers is a recommended best practice. Horse rescue groups schedule volunteers in a variety of ways. Some have designated work days each month when they accept volunteers. Some have an AM shift and a PM shift every day, and volunteers sign up for the days and shifts they want. One group had a Google calendar right on their website where volunteers could go on and add themselves to the shifts they had selected. Some have different types of tasks and specific days or times that those tasks were done. Having specific times or days that volunteers can come, and/or having them sign up in advance for a specific shift, can ensure that you are prepared for the volunteers’ arrival and ready to have them help in a meaningful way. Nothing “turns off” a volunteer faster than hearing, “Oh, I didn’t know you were coming. I don’t really have anything for you to do.” Included in this “Volunteer Resources” file is a document with a list of website links to horse rescue groups. You will be able to see how these other groups approach many aspects of working with volunteers, including how they do their scheduling.
6. **Levels of Volunteers** – As you work with volunteers you will find that you have people who range from brand new volunteers with little to no horse experience, all the way up to long-time volunteers with a great deal of horse experience. Volunteers who have been with your organization over a period of time and have demonstrated their horse skills and good judgment will most likely be allowed to do things that newer, less experienced volunteers would not. You might want to consider having designated levels for your volunteers, with each level having specific tasks and responsibilities associated with it. The higher the level, the more “skill intensive” the tasks can be for the volunteers. This approach can prevent volunteers from ending up in a risky situation where they try to do something that is beyond their skill level. It can also minimize the likelihood of hearing, “Why does she get to (fill-in-the-blank) but I don’t?”

The Best Friends adoption facilities in Los Angeles use colored paws to designate volunteer levels. Perhaps colored horseshoes would be a good choice for a horse rescue? All volunteers would start out as, say, a red horseshoe, which would allow them to do certain basic tasks under the supervision of staff member or more experienced volunteer. With time, experience and training (either formal or informal) they could progress to higher levels with more responsibilities. It would be up to you to determine what the levels would be, what volunteers would be allowed to do at each level, and the requirements for progressing to a new level.

If you like this idea and are looking for images of horseshoes you can use, there is an online company called Happy Hoofwear that sells colored horse shoes (http://www.happyhoofwear.com/en/home/8-happy-hoofwear-front-pattern-horseshoes.html#/size-size_1/color-powerful_pink). I've "borrowed" some of their images below.



- Children Volunteering** – Allowing children to volunteer is a terrific opportunity to educate them both about horses and the importance of “giving back.” However, having child volunteers also requires more planning and supervision on your part in order to minimize safety risks for the children and the horses. If you decide to accept children, you should set a minimum age. Many of horse rescues that I looked at set 12 or 14 years old as their minimum. (At Best Friends the minimum age for volunteering in our horse department is 12.) For reasons of safety and liability, parents should be required to volunteer with their children (at least the younger ones), and it is important to have parents sign a separate minor consent/waiver form for their child. There are several examples of these included with the other waiver/release forms in this file. If you are interested in creating a more robust youth volunteer program, you could consider something like the Legacy Program run by Days End Farm Horse Rescue (<http://www.defhr.org/education/youthprograms.html>). Or if you want to simplify things, set aside just one day each month when children can come volunteer.