VOLUNTEER VACATIONS
Host Guide

American Hiking Society's Volunteer Vacations program is designed to send you a crew of eager volunteers, ready to assist with your trail needs. Volunteer Vacations are trail building and trail maintenance projects organized by American Hiking Society & hosted by BLM, NPS, USDA-FS, USFWS, state parks, trail organizations, and other nonprofit partner groups across the country. Most projects are one-week or shorter in length, consist of 6-20 crew members, and involve trail maintenance and building tasks on hiking trails on public lands.

American Hiking provides you the following project assistance:

- Volunteer recruitment for your project and national promotion through our website, newsletter, email lists, industry events, sponsors and partners
- Logistical support and communication throughout the planning and trip process
- Volunteer food stipend & meal planning oversight for trips that do not provide food
- Assistance from a volunteer crew leader (if requested) who will aid with menu planning, food shopping, crew communications, social leadership and lodging logistics

Volunteers provide:

- Volunteer labor and eager attitudes!
- Daypack and basic hiking gear / clothes based on climate
- Travel to the project location
- Meal planning and preparation coordination
- Limited hiking and camping gear if indoor accommodations are not provided

Hosts provide:

- Project plan for a week-long service project for new / inexperienced volunteers
- Technical expertise and supervision of the volunteers
- Lodging/Accommodations for volunteers (Cabin, lodge, house, or campsite. Please note indoor accommodations are often preferred.)
- Tools & safety equipment/first-aid supplies
- Group cooking supplies including stove, pots, pans, utensils, and fuel or access to a full kitchen
- Transportation, when possible, including rides between lodging and the project site and airport pickup and drop-off to help reduce volunteers' travel costs.

PLAN YOUR PROJECT & APPLY:

Choose a Project:

American Hiking is dedicated to protecting foot trails and the public lands that surround them. Therefore, the bulk of your volunteer projects should be focused on building or maintaining foot trails on public land. On your application, you will need to have detailed goals and specific tasks for the week. This could include creating new trails, maintaining existing trails, repairing, removing or replacing structures like foot bridges or water bars, brushing or removing vegetation, planting or restoring habitat, laying gravel, etc.

The more specific you are in the application, the better we are at matching volunteers to your project who are interested and skilled in the tasks you require.

Project Duration & Time of Year:

We typically host week-long projects with the crew arriving Sunday, working Monday-Friday, and departing on Saturday. For shorter projects, we also offer the option for the crew to arrive Thursday, work Friday-Sunday, and depart Sunday evening. Consider the scope of your project work when requesting a crew, and determine if a full week is needed, or if a shorter trip would suffice. Shorter Volunteer Vacations are often more accessible to volunteers, and may help diversify the crew to include those who aren't able to take a full week off of work or other responsibilities to volunteer.

Please also consider the time of year that you select for your project, and any local or seasonal attractions like wildlife migrations, fall foliage, summer festivals, etc. All of these highlights make your project more attractive to volunteers so it is encouraged to plan your trip when volunteers might overlap with any fun events or attractions. Most volunteers enjoy traveling in the summer and fall. Consider the climate at your location, and when would be a good time to conduct trailwork and when it is pleasant to be outside and comfortable to camp. We typically don't accept projects in January - March, and only accept limited projects in April - May due to a limited amount of volunteer interest to conduct trail work in the winter months.

Apply Online:

The host application process typically opens in the late summer to early fall, and we will accept applications on a rolling basis through the winter. We will review and select applications based on their ability to match the criteria and requirements highlighted in this document. Hosts will determine the scope of the project work, dates, and all other project details, and include that detailed information in the application. AHS staff will review applications and work with hosts one on one to clarify any questions or to adjust the scope of the project work to better fit our needs and desirability for AHS volunteers. Once a project is selected, AHS will advertise your project online, and begin recruiting volunteers for the following season.

PRE-TRIP PLANNING

Final Project Design:

Detailed planning and design of the project should occur at least a month prior to the scheduled arrival of the crew. As appropriate and as needed, the site should be flagged and the design should be drawn. The project plan should include details such as the exact location and length of the trail to be worked; the estimated number of water bars and what kind to be cleaned, removed, added; the clearing width for vegetation; the installation, removal or repainting of signs involved; whether the project involves the construction of features such as puncheon, boardwalk or small bridges; and so forth. You will receive information about each crew member in advance of the project. Consider the crew, their trail experience, their fitness level, and their age in selecting the final tasks to complete.

You need to establish an itinerary for the week, secure necessary tools and materials, and confirm there is enough scheduled work prior to the crew's arrival. Your crew may be very experienced and complete the work in half the time estimated or weather could affect which projects can be accomplished. Always have a backup or additional projects planned and ready to implement should you have a stellar crew!

Project Itinerary:

You should be prepared with a basic itinerary for the project. Most trips will have volunteers arriving on Sunday evening. Sunday evening is generally used for setting up camp/settling into accommodations and group orientation and introductions. No trail work will be done on this meeting day. Generally, you should plan to have volunteers work Monday-Friday (with at least a half-day off, usually one full day off), so 4 - 4.5 days of actual trail work. Saturday will generally be used for cleaning up/breaking down camp and travel. We advise volunteers to expect to work 6-8 hours on the work days. You will need to discuss the exact hours of work and start/end times with the crew leader and communicate that to the crew. Please also incorporate a couple of hours on Monday morning (or the first work day) to go over tool safety, trail work safety, and to discuss the project in general. Also factor in time to drive or hike to the project, breaks, and lunch (which will be eaten on the trail). This schedule may vary if the group is backpacking into basecamp.

Sustainability:

American Hiking is committed to building and maintaining sustainable trails. We urge you to abide by sustainable principles and to use the best techniques possible to make sure the work our volunteers accomplish lasts for years to come.

PRE-TRIP COMMUNICATIONS

Communication with American Hiking:

When the minimum number of volunteers you indicated on your crew request has been met, AHS will contact you to confirm final project details and provide you with the current volunteer roster. Once we confirm the trip details with you, the project confirmation will be emailed to those registered. AHS will update you of any changes or additional volunteers that register after the confirmation email has been sent and before the project starts.

Once the project confirmation is sent, volunteers have the green light to book their travel, so it is imperative that the details in the project confirmation are accurate. Trips are generally confirmed 8-10 weeks in advance of their start. If the trip has not met the minimum number of volunteers that you designated in that timeframe, we will contact you to determine if the project should proceed.

Communication with AHS Volunteer Crew Leader:

If you have requested an AHS crew leader for your project, we will try to place an experienced volunteer in this role. The main responsibilities of an AHS Crew Leader are to act as liaison between the crew and you, create the crew's menu based on dietary restrictions, grocery shop and oversee meal preparation, act as a social leader, and coordinate camp chores. Each crew leader goes through an orientation to learn program basics, but since every volunteer vacation is different, we ask that you discuss the specifics of the project, accommodations, week's itinerary, and specific gear needs with the Crew Leader.

Although the Crew Leaders are usually veterans of the program, they are not expected to be experts in trail building and design and are not paid for their leadership role. The Crew Leader will look to you, the project host, for guidance regarding the project design and logistics.

Communication with the Crew:

Your contact information will be listed on the project confirmation, so when the confirmation is sent, you may start to receive inquiries from crew members. As mentioned, you will receive a detailed roster of volunteers when the trip is confirmed, so you can reference the names and backgrounds of those that might contact you.

The Crew Leader is required to make contact with the crew to introduce themselves and provide general trip information. In your initial conversation with the Crew Leader, please let them know of any specific travel or project details that they need to pass along to the crew (i.e. specific clothing they should bring, meeting location, weather update). You are also welcome to contact crew members to welcome the group and provide further details on arrival, the project, etc.

ACCOMODATIONS & TRANSPORTATION

Accommodations:

Hosts are asked to provide lodging for volunteers (campsite, cabins, dormitory, etc.). You should secure lodging or camping and determine what the sleeping accommodations, and provisions are well in advance of the project start. If you are hosting a backpacking trip, also determine where the crew will stay or camp on the day of their arrival and the night before their departure (often at the trailhead or ranger station). This will be communicated to the crew in the project confirmation.

For camping trips, volunteers are required to provide their own tent, sleeping bag, pad, and all personal gear as necessary. If you are providing indoor accommodations, please determine the number of available beds/cots and how they are situated, and what volunteers should bring (sheets, pillows, towels, linens, etc.).

Transportation:

If hosts are able, providing airport pickup and drop off shuttles is highly recommended. If you are able to provide airport transportation, it increases the ability for volunteers to join your project with less of a financial burden for a rental car / rideshare to your project location.

If volunteers must drive to and from the campsite / accommodations to the project location, please let us know in your host application. Most volunteers are fine to carpool with each other, but some volunteers prefer not to drive their personal vehicle down long or rough roads to access remote project sites. If this is the case, please communicate the details with us, and if possible, provide transportation to and from the project worksite.

Permits/Entrance Fees:

Any permits required for volunteer service need to be secured by the host well in advance of the volunteers' arrival. Any visitor entrance fees should be waived for the volunteer crew and communicated to the entry gate attendee in advance of the volunteers' arrival.

ONSITE

Orientation:

You should be available at the first meeting or group orientation to welcome the group and introduce yourself and staff who will be working with the crew. This meeting usually happens on Sunday late afternoon / early evening shortly after the crew arrives at camp and settles in. Use this first orientation to go over the schedule for the week, assign meeting times and locations for project work, brief the crew on the campsite / accommodations, discuss any safety concerns (ticks, bears, raccoons, etc.), and get the crew ready for the week of work. The formal safety orientation for the tool use will happen on the morning of the first work day.

Safety Orientation:

Prior to the project starting, we require you to thoroughly discuss safety issues, emergency plans, and proper tool use with the volunteers. Discuss any safety concerns of the project or region (altitude sickness, poison oak, bears, etc.). Discuss what steps should be taken in case of emergency, especially if there is no or limited cell phone service. Please demonstrate proper and safe use of each of the tools the crew will be using and any precautions they should take on the trail.

Supervision and Training:

Full supervision of the crew while on the project site is required. If you need to be away from the crew for part of the project, you must provide an alternate staff member or quick method for communication should something arise on the trail (radios, satellite phone, etc.). Most crew members are usually experienced, but often there are participants who have never done trail work before and will need to be trained.

Tools/Safety Equipment:

We ask that you provide any necessary tools and safety equipment required for project completion. Make sure that tools are sharp and in good working order prior to the crew's arrival. Please demonstrate proper and safe use of each of the tools the crew will be using and any precautions they should take on the trail.

Group Cooking Gear:

Hosts are required to provide group cooking gear including stove and fuel, pots, pans, utensils as necessary, etc. A full listing of supplies we ask you to provide is linked here. Volunteers are asked to provide their own personal eating utensils including plate/cup/knife/fork (for camping trips).

SAFETY & ILLNESS PROTOCOL

Emergency Response:

The safety of our volunteers, hosts, and partners is our highest priority. Hosts take every precaution to prevent injury and illness during project work. This includes giving volunteers a full briefing before work begins on the risks they may encounter and how to reduce them on the trail.

Each host follows their own safety protocol and responds immediately to all injuries and illnesses during the trip.

In An Emergency

1. CALL 9-1-1 if the situation calls for it. Don't hesitate.

2. START CARE. The person with the highest medical training provides immediate care.

3. GET TO CARE. Continue care on the way to a hospital, emergency room, or urgent care clinic.

4. NOTIFY. Once the patient is receiving care, contact:

- AHS staff: (insert best contact for emergency)
- The volunteer's emergency contact (if additional follow-up is needed).

5. FOLLOW UP. After the trip, complete the incident form AHS provides.

AHS does not cover the cost of medical or evacuation services.

Illness on a Trip

Staying healthy helps everyone enjoy their time on the trail. Volunteers are asked to follow all local, state, and federal health and travel regulations, along with any additional health requirements set by individual hosts, such as symptom screenings, testing, or mask use in shared indoor spaces. AHS recommends that volunteers follow current public health guidance before, during, and after their trip and monitor themselves for symptoms of illness.

If someone becomes ill during a trip:

- Separate from the group. Anyone with symptoms of a contagious illness, including fever, should keep their distance from others and avoid shared surfaces and spaces.
- Consider leaving the trip. Depending on the severity of symptoms, the volunteer may need to head home.
- Seek medical care when needed. AHS strongly urges anyone with moderate to severe illness to be seen at the nearest medical facility.

All trip participants must provide their own health and accident insurance in case of injury or illness while on their trip. AHS and its partners cannot be held responsible for potential transmission of nor exposure to illnesses on the trip or during travel to and from the trip.

DAY OFF & EVENING ACTIVITIES

Local Activities:

We strive to provide both satisfying work and play on our volunteer trips. To ensure that the crew has a chance to relax and explore the area on the trip, we ask you to give the crew at least a half-day off of trail work for free-activity, and a full day if possible. This can mean scheduled time off the work project for the crew to do their own exploring, hike on their own, or relax in camp. **It is highly encouraged to provide a structured activity during the crew's time off which may include a guided hike, a ranger-led tour of the area, ranger talk, boat/canoe trip or other local excursion.** Your project will be more attractive to volunteers who are excited to learn more about your park or resource area if you are able to provide a staff or ranger led activity!

Special Event:

It is not required, but a final dinner/celebration with the crew is always appreciated at the end of a working vacation. This can be discussed with the crew leader and announced to the crew during orientation. Sometimes the volunteers want to get on the road on Friday evening if they have completed the weeks' work so you might want to schedule the celebration on Thursday evening.

MEAL PLANNING & FOOD

Food Purchasing:

For most Volunteer Vacations, the menu planning and food purchasing is arranged by the volunteer Crew Leader, however, if the Crew Leader is flying to the project location, they might need transportation and assistance with shopping on their arrival day. If the Crew Leader is driving to the project site and does not need transportation, please be prepared to provide information regarding local grocery stores.

If the host is providing food, please refer to the **Menu & Meal Planning Guide** (request from AHS staff) for detailed instructions on providing meals for your volunteer crew. You will receive dietary restrictions, allergy information & any special requests for each crew member upon confirmation of the trip.

American Hiking Society will reimburse your organization or the Crew Leader (whoever purchases the food) for food expenses. **American Hiking Society staff will confirm the reimbursement policy and total approved reimbursement amount with the host and/or crew leader PRIOR to the start of the project.**

Do not purchase any items, food, or other purchases prior to receiving approval for the reimbursement by an AHS staff member.

WE'RE HERE TO HELP

Hosting a volunteer project is a team effort, and you don't have to figure it out alone. Whether you're planning your first work day or building a long-term partnership, we'd love to hear from you.

Questions About Volunteers or Getting Started

For general questions or help getting started, email volunteer@americanhiking.org. AHS staff will be happy to point you in the right direction.

Programs and Events

For questions about program planning, host partnerships, or events, contact Morgan Ellis, Manager, Programs & Events, at mellis@americanhiking.org.

Ready to Host?

Bring a volunteer crew to your trails! Share your project needs through our **2027 Volunteer Vacations Crew Request Form**.

We look forward to hiking with you!