

Fact Sheet

NPS Volunteer-In-Park Program and Paperwork

1. What is the Volunteer-In-Parks (VIP) program?

The VIP program is a National Park Service-wide program that provides volunteers with unique opportunities to contribute their enthusiasm, skills, and experience to help the National Park Service (NPS) achieve its mission:

“The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations”.

As a NPS VIP with the North Country National Scenic Trail (Trail), volunteers help the NPS develop, build, and maintain the Trail; inform and educate the public; and preserve, protect, and maintain both natural and cultural resources. The Trail’s VIP program is co-managed by the NPS and the North Country Trail Association (NCTA).

2. Why do I want to be a NPS VIP? What are the benefits?

As a NPS VIP, you are joining a group of more than 100,000 others who donate their time and talents to the NPS! Volunteering with the Trail is a great way to become or stay physically active, find solace and relief from everyday pressures and stress through nature-based activities, meet new people, use your skills to protect important resources and create opportunities for others, gain new skills, and share in a sense of pride and accomplishment by contributing to the success of the nation’s longest national scenic trail that exists for all the world to enjoy and benefit from. As a thank you for your service, you are eligible to attend certain skills and leadership training, earn recognition items based on hours of service, and receive the America the Beautiful Volunteer Pass (if you do not already possess a Senior Pass, Access Pass, or Military Pass).

As a NPS VIP, you are also provided the same protections as NPS employees regarding injuries and tort claims. It is very important to note, however, that this means adhering to the same rules and policies that apply to NPS employees, and that the work and services you provide must be consistent with the type of volunteer work you have elected to perform. This is particularly important to help ensure that you, your interests, and your coworkers will be protected in the event of an injury, accident, or other incident.

3. What paperwork is required to be a NPS VIP with the Trail?

If you would like to be a NPS VIP with the Trail, please complete the following steps:

1. Read through the library of position descriptions on NCTA’s website in the Volunteer Resource Center and select any that best fit your interests, skills, and physical capabilities.
2. Read the associated job hazard analyses (JHAs) on NCTA’s website in the Volunteer Resource Center for each position that you are interested in.
3. Print out, complete, and sign the Volunteer Service Agreement.
4. Send the Volunteer Service Agreement to Volunteer Program Manager Nic Loiseau. (See question #8.)

Regardless of how many positions you would like to sign up for, only one Volunteer Service Agreement is needed. Simply check the appropriate boxes in box 24 on the form.

4. I didn't need to complete this paperwork before. Why is there a change?

In 2019, there was a review of the volunteer program by the Regional and Washington offices of the NPS. As a result of their findings, we must implement new measures to more accurately document who is serving as NPS VIPs, better describe the work that volunteers elect to do, and ensure that each person has made an informed decision about the type of volunteer role that is best suited for them. To accomplish this, NPS VIPs will be asked to read and understand the different types of position descriptions that are available and identify which specific positions they have elected to choose on the Volunteer Service Agreement. It was determined by NPS leadership that our past use of group agreements to document who is serving as an NPS VIP does not adequately assure that each person has been informed of the type of work that might be done, has been made aware of the potential hazards and risks associated with this work, and has been given the opportunity to choose the type of work that is best suited to the individual's unique personal interests and abilities. Group volunteer agreements may still be used, but only for specific, short-term activities (two consecutive days maximum) or for specific projects where outside organized groups participate in the activity.

5. What is a position description (PD)?

A PD defines the nature of the position that is to be performed and ensures that the NPS VIP has a clear understanding of their role within the VIP program. The document states the general types of duties associated with a volunteer position, the physical demands that may occur, the environment in which the work is performed, safety considerations, any training or other requirements, and additional information that help describes the role and what should be expected. You don't have to perform every duty or task that is listed in the PD; The intent is only to describe the types of work that volunteers may do. It is essential to only perform work that you:

- have been trained to do,
- can do safely,
- feel comfortable doing, and
- agree to do.

In addition, the PD also provides information regarding the use of personal vehicles if authorized; potential reimbursement; benefits to the volunteer; program administration; and the NPS anti-harassment policy.

6. Do I need to sign a new Volunteer Service Agreement for each position description?

No. Regardless of how many positions you would like to sign up for, only one Volunteer Service Agreement is needed. Simply check the appropriate boxes in box 24 on the form.

7. What is a job hazard analysis (JHA)?

JHAs examine the tasks associated with a particular job, identify the potential hazards and risks associated with each of these tasks, and describe what actions or measures to take to avoid, reduce or mitigate the potential hazards and risks. The JHA is meant to be a tool to aid in preventing accidents, but it cannot identify every hazard or risk; It should be considered a first step in the safety journey. By proactively identifying hazards and risks in advance, we can take appropriate steps to enhance safety before we even arrive at the work site: we can identify what training is needed before we perform certain tasks, know what personal protective equipment (PPE) will need to be worn during work, identify any special equipment or first aid supplies that should be available at the work site, etc. It will take a little time to review the JHA(s), but it is time well spent to gain an

understanding of what hazards and risks we should anticipate and what we can do to ensure our safety. The JHAs associated with a particular project must be reviewed during a pre-work safety briefing to further identify and document any site specific conditions or hazards that may exist and ensure everyone participating in the project has been provided with this information (there may be first-time volunteers present who have never seen the JHA).

8. Where do I send the completed Volunteer Service Agreement?

Please send the original signed forms to Nic Loiseau. You have a few options:

- Mail the forms to 318 E. Main St. Suite K, Lowell, MI 49331 (Tracking is recommended.)
- Fax the forms to 616-319-7913.
- Email forms to nicole_loiseau@nps.gov. It should be encrypted to protect your personal identifiable information.

Nic will contact you when she receives your agreement.

9. What is a Volunteer Service Agreement? What does it mean when I sign the Volunteer Service Agreement?

It's called an "agreement" for a good reason. Together with the position description, the Volunteer Service Agreement is the formal document that establishes the relationship between the individual volunteer and the NPS. It defines what the NPS is asking a volunteer to do, what the volunteer agrees to do, and what the NPS will provide to the volunteer after they agree to do it. When you sign the agreement, you are documenting that you understand the type of work you are volunteering to do, know what is required to do this type of work, acknowledge that you can do this work safely, and agree to the terms and conditions that apply to service and recognition of an official NPS VIP. It is important to review, understand, and complete all elements of the volunteer agreement before signing.

When you sign an agreement, you are joining thousands of others who contribute to the mission of the NPS, and will be provided with the same federal workers compensation, tort, and liability protections provided to NPS employees.

10. Where can I find instructions and the forms that I need to read and complete?

The positions descriptions, JHAs, Volunteer Service Agreement, instructions, and other resources can be found on NCTA's website in the [Volunteer Resource Center](#). The forms will be available online May 6, 2021.

11. How often do I need to complete the required paperwork?

As long as you continue to report your volunteer hours on a regular basis (at least once a year at a minimum), you must only update your volunteer agreement when there is a change in personal information or if you wish to make any changes to the volunteer positions you wish to perform.

12. What if I signed up to volunteer in one position and then I decided that I want to get more involved? What do I need to do?

Please review the position description and associated JHA for the other position(s) you are interested in. Then complete a new Volunteer Service Agreement and send it to Nic Loiseau. Please check the appropriate boxes in box 24 on the agreement.

13. What if I do not have access to a computer and/or printer?

You have a couple of options. You can contact Nic Loiseau and she will be happy to mail you the forms, or you can attend a workday and complete the forms before you start work. Chapter* representatives will have copies of the forms on hand. It is recommended that you arrive to the workday early to give yourself plenty of time to review and sign the forms. It's important that this process is completed first thing.

*Chapters are responsible for having copies on hand for volunteers that show up on the day of the event.

14. What do I do if I'm no longer interested in volunteering?

Please let Nic Loiseau know so she can close out your Volunteer Service Agreement.

15. Do I need to be a member of NCTA to volunteer?

No. You can be a VIP without being a NCTA member. You can be a NCTA member and not be an NPS VIP. Or you might choose to be both; There are many ways to contribute to the Trail!

16. What if I choose not to be a NPS VIP? Can I still work on the Trail?

Yes. But you must understand that if you choose to do so, you are foregoing the workers compensation, tort, and liability protections that are available to NPS VIPs and you will not be eligible to receive any NPS volunteer service recognition, NPS-provided training, or any other benefits that would otherwise be available to you.

17. What about Trail affiliate members/volunteers? Can affiliate volunteers sign up as a NPS volunteer? Do affiliate volunteers still need to sign the individual Volunteer Service Agreement?

Because the Trail follows several sections managed by affiliates, individuals associated with these groups are welcome to be NPS VIPs when they conduct work along the North Country National Scenic Trail, but it is not a requirement. The provisions of the NPS VIP agreement, the enrollment process, what it provides, and what it requires is the same for any person who elects to volunteer with the NPS.

18. What if a new volunteer shows up for a Trail workday but they haven't previously completed the Volunteer Service Agreement? Are they still able to participate in the workday?

Absolutely! An individual may participate as a NPS VIP after being briefed on the work that is to be done, reviewing the associated JHAs, and signing the appropriate volunteer agreement (either an individual volunteer agreement, or a group volunteer agreement if their participation will be temporary and limited to the specific project). Chapters are responsible for having JHAs and volunteer agreement paperwork on hand for volunteers that may show up on the day of the event.

One suggestion is to have new or potential volunteers sign up before the workday. If it's determined that there is a new VIP, the paperwork can be emailed to them ahead of time to save time at the meeting location. Then the individual can hand the completed paperwork to the crew leader before the workday begins. All completed paperwork should be sent to Nic Loiseau within five days.

19. Does signing up as a NPS VIP change how or when I submit my volunteer hours?

No, signing up as a NPS VIP does not change how or when you submit volunteer hours. Hours should continue to be reported to NCTA via their website or directly to their database manager.

20. What about the volunteer hours I have already contributed under the previous sign-up process?

Will those hours still count toward my total hours volunteered?

Yes, all the hours that you have contributed to the Trail count towards your lifetime achievement. The new sign-up process doesn't affect any part of the VIP recognition program. We thank you for your dedication!