

RISK READY FOR OUTDOOR EVENTS

Smart strategies to help volunteer organizers handle safety concerns before they arise



Introduction

Welcome!

This guide is designed to help you plan and lead safe, successful volunteer events on public lands. Whether you're hosting a community cleanup, trail maintenance day, or nature-based education program, safety and risk management should be the foundation of your planning. The good news? Many of the tools and topics covered here focus on solid planning and can be enacted with little to no cost. With a few thoughtful steps, you'll be more prepared and better positioned to host safe, positive volunteer events outdoors!

Developed by the National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF), this resource draws on years of experience supporting volunteer managers on public lands, especially through National Public Lands Day (NPLD), the nation's largest single-day volunteer event for public lands. From choosing the right project and completing waivers to preparing for weather, site-specific risks, and emergency response, this guide walks you through what to consider before, during, and after your event.

Whether you're new to volunteer coordination or a seasoned organizer, our goal is to help you build a safer, more resilient program so that you can focus on what really matters: connecting people to public lands through meaningful service.

Using This Guide

We invite you to use this guide to support your volunteer planning efforts. It's meant to be a practical tool you can adapt to fit the needs of your site, team, and community.

You're welcome to share the guide with others. If you copy or adapt any part of the content, please credit the National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF).

For questions, feedback, or additional support, contact us at NPLD@NEEFusa.org.



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Organizational Preparation

Before you begin planning your event, there are a few things to enact across your entire volunteer program. For those at a larger organization or agency, this means investigating which forms, policies, and procedures are required. For smaller non-profits or local park agencies, you may need to create these and gather leadership or board sign-off.

For volunteer-led organizations, while you may not require this sign-off, we recommend you have your policies and procedures reviewed by a lawyer. Many law firms will consider working with small organizations *pro bono*, meaning free, or with significantly reduced fees.

Handbooks and Forms

It is best practice to have a volunteer handbook to guide all policies and procedures in your volunteer programs. Typically, a handbook is external facing for a volunteer, much like the employee handbook or manual you receive when you begin a new job. A detailed volunteer handbook will provide information about required forms, expectations, recognition, types of positions or projects, uniforms, information about tracking hours, etc.

A volunteer reference manual or policies overview is an internal-facing document that provides an outline for how volunteer managers are expected to operate a volunteer program. This is typically a blueprint for recruitment, onboarding, a job description template, required forms, administrative requirements like insurance or minor volunteer policies, reporting, and budgeting. Many state and federal public land agencies have reference manuals, guides, or volunteer program policies that can serve as a good starting template.

The Waiver

Volunteers should sign a waiver to inform them of the risks involved with participating in your program, and to protect your organization from liability if something happens on-site. The waiver should also outline your definition of a volunteer, making it clear they are not staff nor eligible for workers' compensation. It may also include a media release, granting your organization the rights to use photos and videos of participants. The form should be reviewed by a lawyer and have a place for a signature and date.

Organizations take different approaches on how often a waiver must be signed by regular volunteers, but for events like National Public Lands Day, many organizations opt to get a signed waiver from all participants.

Emergency Contacts

The waiver document also provides an opportunity to collect a participant's **emergency contact** (this can also happen during the volunteer registration process). No matter how you collect emergency contact information, it's essential that it's easy to access when you need it. Otherwise, what's the point of collecting it? If your volunteer management software includes a mobile app, use it to quickly look up information in the field. Many platforms offer this functionality. If not, organize printed waivers alphabetically by last name and keep them in a central location during the event. After the event, be sure to scan and save the waivers for your records.

Policies

While we can't cover every policy in this guide, we'll highlight a few essential ones specifically for outdoor volunteer events.

Minors

First, it is especially important for volunteer programs that operate in nature to have strong policies related to minors. Youth under 18 years of age must have a liability waiver signed by a parent or guardian.

Consider the types of projects you have under your program. Are some more appropriate for youth than others? Do you have child-sized gloves? Can high schoolers seeking service hours participate without a chaperone?

Volunteer managers should take time to assess and reduce risks related to youth safety, particularly around abuse prevention. Consider measures such as requiring background checks for volunteers working with youth or setting policies that prohibit one-on-one interactions between adults and minors.

Minimum age requirements for volunteers often vary by event, depending on the type of work involved and the safety equipment available. Many organizers set two minimum age thresholds: one for volunteers with a parent or guardian and another for those participating independently. For events like National Public Lands Day, NEEF encourages hosts to consider welcoming all ages and to include at least one family-friendly project where children can participate, provided a parent or guardian is present.



Staff-to-Volunteer Ratio

Outdoor event planners should establish an appropriate staff-to-volunteer ratio based on the specific needs of the project. Factors to consider include the complexity of the work, the experience level and age range of your volunteers, visibility at the site, and the risk level of any tools being used. For example, a simple task like garden weeding may be manageable with a 1:20 ratio, while more complex or higher-risk activities, such as invasive species removal in wooded areas, may require a closer ratio of 1:10 to ensure safety and support.

If you're planning a large public event for National Public Lands Day, be sure to account for additional staffing needs, such as welcoming and registering volunteers, assisting with setup, and managing water and refreshments. Events held near waterways carry added safety risks, particularly for children. Any event involving youth will require higher staff-to-volunteer ratios to ensure adequate supervision and support.

Safety and Supervision

Compile a list of the activities your volunteers will be performing and consider the relevant safety policies. For most outdoor programs, there should be a blanket policy for volunteers to wear safety gear like gloves when handling vegetation, working with historic buildings, or dealing with garden mulch. Depending on the tasks, you might also need to require safety glasses, high-visibility vests, or other protective equipment, along with additional precautions for specific activities.

Be sure to check your insurance policy for any mandated safety requirements, such as having a staff member supervise volunteers at all times. Even if not required,

supervision is still a good practice, especially when volunteers are in remote areas, working with youth, or using potentially hazardous hand tools or machinery.

Privacy

The final category of policies to consider involves confidentiality and privacy, covering the information volunteers provide on forms as well as any reports they make about staff or volunteer conduct. Volunteer managers can often refer to their organization's employee handbook to adapt relevant HR policies for volunteers.

Additional Policies to Consider

The Nature Preparedness section of this guide outlines important safety policies related to preparing for weather conditions. It also covers procedures for incident reporting and response, including accidents and near-misses. Please keep in mind this is not a comprehensive list of all safety policies or potential risks when working with volunteers. We strongly recommend consulting legal counsel when developing and implementing volunteer policies.



 *Watch the Webinar Recording*

Inspiring Environmental Connection in Youth through Outdoor Exploration and Service

Looking to engage more youth and families in your National Public Lands Day event? This recorded webinar features expert tips and real-world strategies.

Learn how to:

- Design inclusive, family-friendly activities
- Create service opportunities that foster long-term environmental stewardship
- Recruit youth participants effectively
- Navigate safety, waivers, and photo permissions

WATCH NOW

Event Specific Preparation

As you begin to think about National Public Lands Day, or any outdoor volunteer event, selecting the most appropriate site(s) and project(s) is crucial for managing your organization's risk. Some volunteer coordinators set a maximum headcount first and then select a project based on that number. Others prefer to let the project itself determine the maximum volunteer capacity. The latter approach works especially well for recurring events, like an annual spring or fall seed collection.

In this section, we will cover the elements to consider about your site, staff, and schedule that will impact the safety of the day.

Site Risk Assessment

A site risk assessment is essential, either to help select a suitable site or project, or to identify and address risks after a site has already been chosen. Follow these steps to ensure a thorough evaluation:

Step 1

Detail the risks and rate the risk level.

- **Low** is something minimal and treatable and/or something very unlikely to happen
- **Medium** is a moderate risk that is not an emergency and/or can be avoided with basic safety measures.
- **High** is something that would be an emergency and/or highly likely to happen.

When assessing risk, it's important to consider both the potential severity of an incident and the likelihood of it occurring. Some risk assessments treat these factors separately and ask you to assign a ranking (typically from 1 to 3) for each. You then add these rankings together to estimate an overall risk score.

Example Risk Assessment matrix.

Significant Hazards	Examples	Risk Rating		
		Low (1)	Med (2)	High (3)
Tripping Hazards	Tree limbs, uneven terrain, exposed extension cord			
Tool-related Injuries	Power tool usage, open-toed shoe injuries from shovels			
Weather-related Risks	Lightning, flash flood, high winds, poor air quality			
Vegetation-related Risks	Downed limbs, poison ivy			
Environmental Risks	Water-related, heat illness, sunburn			
Wildlife Encounters	Bug bites, snakes, bears, anthills			
Fall Risks	Ladders, exposed cliff faces			
Vehicular Risks	Collision, injury to pedestrian			
Structural Risks	Unstable tents or booths			
Remoteness Risks	Longer emergency response times, difficulty accessing area			
Other?	Lost child, theft/vandalism, food safety, back injuries, overexertion			



Step 2

Consider how to mitigate the risks to reduce your risk rating, starting with the highest first. For example, if you have high risk because of power tool usage, you could require safety training for volunteers and always ensure a trained staff member is supervising volunteers closely to mitigate the risk of tool-related injury. You can flag or paint tripping hazards, areas of treacherous terrain, or steep drop-offs that could be dangerous, thus mitigating the risk that someone would fall, hit their head, or trip. For heat and weather-related injury, volunteer managers have the responsibility to provide areas to cool down or warm up depending on the temperature.

Step 3

Put risk mitigation strategies into practice during the event or create policies to protect all volunteers. Training both volunteers and staff helps make safety a shared responsibility across your entire team. Starting each event with a brief safety talk is also a helpful way to remind everyone about the specific risks they may face at the site or project that day.

Do your volunteers know to check for ticks when they get home? Do they know how to identify poison ivy before they go out in the field? Are they aware of the correct stance to use a shovel to avoid back strain? A safety huddle can prevent these from becoming a problem. This topic is covered more thoroughly later in this guide.

Safety Equipment

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) provides the most reliable guidance on the proper safety equipment and protocols to maintain a secure environment for everyone.

Checklist of frequently used volunteer safety equipment:

- ✓ Eye protection, such as safety glasses
- ✓ Safety gloves; i.e., gardening gloves or nitrile gloves for potentially hazardous exposure during litter pick-ups
- ✓ High visibility vests
- ✓ Hard hats
- ✓ First aid kit equipped to serve a large group, checked regularly for expiration dates and restocked
- ✓ Electrolytes and other consumables to assist with heat-related illness or diabetic health
- ✓ Supplies such as sunscreen, bug spray, and other weather- or environmental-related items
- ✓ Cell phone with service or radio to call for help as needed

First Aid Kit

A well-stocked first aid kit should include essentials for common injuries and be kept in a waterproof container with regularly checked expiration dates.

Category	Contents
Wound Care	Adhesive bandages (various sizes), sterile gauze, medical tape, antiseptic wipes or solution, antibiotic ointment
Protection & Hygiene	Disposable gloves, hand sanitizer
Pain Relief	Pain relievers (e.g., ibuprofen, acetaminophen), participant medications disclosed in advance (e.g. epinephrine auto-injectors)
Tools	Scissors, fine-tipped tweezers, thermometer, instant cold packs
Emergency Supplies	PR face mask, emergency blanket, first aid manual
Specialty Items	Elastic bandages, burn gel, hydrocortisone cream, flashlight with extra batteries

Emergency Response Plan

In the Appendix of this guide, you'll find a sample event emergency response plan, and in the next section, we've provided an Emergency Response Quick Reference. Please review and consider the following things when creating your own:

- What to do in the event of an injury
 - **Medical emergency:** How will a medical emergency be identified, reported, and promptly communicated? What first aid can be provided on-site, what can the volunteers manage themselves, and when should emergency services be called? Who among the staff is authorized to make that call?
 - **Emergency vehicle access:** How can emergency vehicles, such as ambulances or police, safely access your event site?
 - **First aid:** If first aid is necessary, who will administer it, and where will the treatment take place? For larger events, is there a designated first-aid station, or will emergency medical services (EMS) be present on-site?
- Where are your emergency resources located? First aid kit, AED, nearest hospital, etc.
- Extreme weather preparedness (see next section for details)
- Lost child plan: If youth are participating in your event, how will you ensure they are supervised at all times? If a child becomes lost and approaches a staff member, where will the child be taken and cared for until their guardian is located?
 - We recommend having a central location, such as event check-in, that will be staffed by someone who can quickly communicate with the entire team if needed. This spot can also serve as a hub for first aid, as well as for managing non-emergency tasks like welcoming late arrivals or assisting the press.
- Emergency contacts: Who will need to be notified in the event of an incident and an emergency? How will they be contacted?

Event Emergency Response Quick Reference

Medical Emergency

- Identify the emergency and call for help immediately.
- Provide on-site first aid if possible.
- Call 911 if needed.

Questions to answer:

Who is authorized to call 911? _____

What first aid can be offered by staff/volunteers? _____

Where is the nearest first aid station? _____

Emergency Vehicle Access

- Ensure the event site has a clear, marked access route.
- Make sure no vehicles or equipment block emergency access points.
- Staff or volunteers should be able to guide emergency vehicles if needed.

First Aid Resources

Resource	Location / Person Responsible
First Aid Kit	
AED	
First Aid Administered By	
EMS On-site? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
First Aid Station	

Extreme Weather Preparedness

See the next section ("Weather Preparedness") for detailed guidance.

- Do you have a plan for shelter or evacuation?
- How will staff and volunteers be informed of weather alerts?
- Who initiates weather-related decisions?

Lost Child Plan

Children must be supervised at all times.

If a child is found alone:

- Escort them to the designated central location: _____
- A staff member will stay with the child and contact their guardian.

This central location may also serve as:

- A first aid hub
- A press/information point
- A communication base for event staff

Emergency Contacts

Role	Name	Phone
Event Lead		
Safety Officer		
First Aid Lead		
Security		

Key Emergency Resources

Resource	Location
First Aid Kit	
AED	
Nearest Hospital	
Emergency Vehicle Access Point	

Keep this reference visible and ensure all team members are familiar with it before your event begins.

Preparing Your Staff

Before your event, take the time to clearly define everyone's roles and responsibilities:

- Establish the chain of command so all team members know who oversees key areas.
- Designate who will manage first aid administration and who can call emergency professionals if needed.
- Identify who will monitor weather conditions and decide when to shelter or evacuate attendees.
- Assign someone to handle media interactions if press are present.
- Outline any other essential roles to ensure smooth coordination.

Also, discuss logistics and event-specific setup during this phase. Have staff and event leaders wear brightly colored vests or uniforms and nametags to stand out clearly. Review the venue map, station assignments (if volunteers will be divided into groups), and the event timeline. Anticipate any challenges such as difficult terrain, tight schedules, equipment sharing, or unexpectedly high attendance to ensure your team is prepared.

Volunteer coordinators should be included in staff field training like chainsaw safety and first aid certification. There are often opportunities in your area for these types of trainings, if needed. For larger staff, it can often be beneficial to host an annual "working with volunteers" training that covers safety protocols.

Who will be working on the day of the event? During a prep meeting, review the site risk assessment, clarify what volunteers are permitted and not permitted to do, and go over all the aspects of the emergency response plan. Establish a communication plan for the event day, whether that's through group text, radios, or by coordinating all communication through a designated point person.

Staff need to be there to supervise. Many field staff members are used to getting their hands dirty and will find it challenging to stand back and watch. Yes, they are there to ensure volunteers enjoy themselves and do the work correctly, but safety should be the top priority.

The primary responsibility of staff during the event is to monitor volunteers for any issues, including:

- Bad form with a shovel or other tool
- Volunteers that are too close together and may hit each other with tools

- Encounters with “the elements,” i.e., staying hydrated, taking breaks, applying bug spray, avoiding heavy brush or treacherous terrain

An informed event planning committee serves as your eyes and ears on the ground. Enabling everyone to stay alert and prioritize safety is one of the most effective ways to ensure a smooth, enjoyable event for all. See more under the **Pre-Event Staff Check-In** section.

Nature Preparedness

Wildfire

Wildfire-related hazards are becoming increasingly common, especially for outdoor events. Often, the most immediate concern isn't the fire itself, but poor air quality caused by wildfire smoke.

Wildfire smoke is a mixture of pollutants, including gases such as carbon monoxide, but also microscopic particulates. When inhaled, these particulates travel deep into the lungs, presenting an extreme threat to health.

The Air Quality Index (AQI) is one way to measure the air quality in any given area. There are numerous sources for determining AQI, including the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#), [AirNow.gov](#), and your local weather station.

The following chart outlines AQI considerations with outdoor events.

AQI Value	Level of Concern	Event Consideration
0-50	Good	n/a
51-100	Moderate	n/a
101-150	Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups	Limit the intensity of the outdoor activity if your group involves youth or seniors
151-200	Unhealthy	Cancel outdoor events involving youth or seniors and consider cancelling any outdoor event
201-300	Very Unhealthy	Cancel your outdoor event
301-500	Hazardous	Cancel your outdoor event

Other questions to ask:

- Are smoke conditions getting worse?
- What is the AQI forecast if the event is rescheduled?
- Is there an option to change the event venue to an area with cleaner air?

Learn more about wildfire risk in your area by visiting the USDA Forest Service website: <https://wildfirerisk.org/>.

Virtual Events

If holding an outdoor event is no longer feasible, consider shifting to a [virtual event](#) for National Public Lands Day. Virtual events can still connect people to public lands while keeping everyone safe at home. For example, you might host a webinar with a naturalist guest speaker or share a series of nature-immersion videos paired with guided meditation.

Thunderstorms/Severe Weather

As the weather continues to become less predictable and increasingly severe, it's important to have a severe weather plan. In addition to planning for a range of "typical" weather in your area, you should also have a contingency plan in case severe weather completely shuts down your NPLD event. Here are five factors to consider when creating an inclement weather plan for your NPLD event.

Define "Severe Weather" for Your Event Location

Every event, location, crowd, and weather situation is unique. What qualifies as severe weather in one area may not be viewed the same way in another.

Make a list of every type of weather that could impact your event and how severe it needs to become before you do something about it. Flooding due to heavy rain, high winds and tornadoes, excessive cold or heat, and thunderstorms all need to be taken into consideration. Once you have a list, determine the potential next steps, from bringing everyone inside for a few minutes to canceling the event altogether.

As a general rule, anything involving **thunder** or **lightning** should be an immediate evacuation for outdoor events. There is no safe place outdoors during thunderstorms. If you hear thunder, lightning is close enough to strike.

Additionally, while you should heed warnings from officials, you shouldn't wait for the National Weather Service to declare severe weather before you evacuate. If you think you see a storm brewing, play it safe, use good judgment, and get people out of there.



Establish a Communication Plan

As the event nears, keep an eye on the forecast for weather-related occurrences which could affect your event.

Days Before the Event	Action
7 days	Monitor predicted weather conditions. Decide if severe weather will postpone or cancel the event. Identify a deadline of when you will make the call to postpone or cancel the event and notify event leaders.
3-4 days	If the weather forecast continues to predict severe weather, notify your volunteers of the deadline when you will officially reschedule or cancel the event.
1-2 days	Make the decision to postpone or cancel the event and notify your event leaders first, then event participants.

If possible, notify participants directly about any changes to the event, whether it will proceed as scheduled, be modified, or be canceled. If registration isn't required or you don't have contact information for all attendees, be ready to share updates publicly through all available outreach channels. Aim to **give yourself at least two days to communicate any changes**. It's helpful to have pre-scripted messages prepared for common scenarios, but also be ready to craft situation-specific messages as needed.

Determine How You Will Handle Evacuations

Once you've identified the conditions that would trigger an evacuation, it's important to develop a clear action plan. Consider the following:

- **Volunteers:** Where will you direct your NPLD volunteers in an emergency? How will you communicate with them quickly and clearly?
- **Evacuation route and timing:** Do you know where people should go and how long it will take them to get there?
- **Structures on-site:** Are you aware of the stability of all structures being used (e.g., tents, canopies, stages) and how much wind, hail, or other weather they can safely withstand?
- **Equipment and tools:** After ensuring the safety of people, develop a plan for how to secure or evacuate tools and equipment.

Having a clear plan in place for both people and property will help ensure a safer, more coordinated response if an emergency arises.

You can get reliable weather updates from sources like the National Weather Service and your local news station. Understanding the difference between **Watch** and **Warning** can help you determine whether to postpone your event for a few hours or activate your weather plan and cancel it for the day.



Watch vs. Warning



Issued when weather conditions like wind and humidity make it favorable for severe weather to develop	Issued when weather conditions are imminent or occurring
Covers large area and lasts for several hours	Covers a small area
Continue with normal activities, but keep in mind where to go for safety	Lasts for less than an hour
Begin heavily monitoring radar Check in with event staff about possibly evacuating/sheltering	Find shelter immediately



Evacuation and Sheltering Decision Tool

Planning for sheltering and evacuation can be challenging, especially for outdoor events with large crowds. The tool below can help you determine when to “make the call” to evacuate and shelter during extreme weather conditions.

$$\text{Alert \& Activation Time (minutes)} + \text{Evacuation or Shelter Time (minutes)} \times 25\% \text{ Safety Factor} = \text{Total Time Needed (minutes)}$$

Definitions:

- Alert & Activation Time: Amount of time it takes to notify event attendees about evacuation/sheltering procedures
- Evacuation or Shelter Time: The amount of time it takes to evacuate or seek shelter
- 25% Safety Factor: Amount of time to consider possible changes in storm speed or delays
- Total Time Needed: The amount of time needed to safely carry out an evacuation/sheltering plan

Train Your NPLD Event Team

Everyone involved in the planning and execution of the event needs to know and practice what to do in the event of severe weather or another emergency. With practice, everyone will be calmer and faster if an actual emergency occurs. Try to run at least one practice exercise in which you time how long it takes to prepare for severe

weather. **Remember, it will always take longer than you expect when volunteers are involved.**

For large events, consider nominating a **Weather Liaison** whose job includes monitoring radar, calling local weather stations for updates, and determining when it is time to seek shelter/evacuate the area. Your **Weather Liaison** could also serve this purpose ahead of the event, monitoring developing weather conditions in order to make a decision on cancellation.

Decide If, and When, the Event Will Resume

In the aftermath of severe weather, you'll need to determine whether the event can safely continue, and if so, when and how.

Consider the following questions in advance:

- Was anything damaged during the weather event?
- Are post-storm safety inspections required before resuming?
- Is it possible to postpone the event to a later time or date?
- Do you have access to an alternate venue?
- How will you communicate updates to attendees?

Having answers to these questions ahead of time will make it easier to make clear, confident decisions when you're under pressure and others are waiting for direction.

Extreme Heat

Heat emergencies can easily happen at outdoor events—especially at volunteer events where participants are active. Factors such as the availability of shade/shelter, adequate hydration, and age (youth and older individuals are more sensitive to high temperatures) all play into heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

A forecast's heat index indicates how hot it feels outside versus the actual temperature. When the heat index is above 80°F, play it cool with these strategies.

- Slow down strenuous activities and encourage frequent breaks
- Consider postponing the event to a cooler part of the day
- Encourage volunteers to dress in lightweight and light-colored clothing that reflects sunlight

- Provide hydration stations for volunteers to drink lots of water and encourage them to stay hydrated even if they are not thirsty
- Avoid serving alcoholic beverages
- Provide sunscreen above 30 SPF—sunburns make it harder for the body to release heat
- Provide shade and encourage volunteers to spend time out of the sun
- Ask volunteers to speak up if they are having any cramps, heavy perspiration, or feeling faint—these are signs that heat exhaustion may be setting in

More information on the hazards of heat exposure and what to do when you are facing hot outdoor temperatures can be found at the Occupational Health and Safety Administration website: <https://www.osha.gov/heat-exposure/hazards>

If you are inviting youth to your event, consider sharing the National Environmental Education Foundation's SunWise toolkit. SunWise is a free environmental health program that teaches K-8 children about sun safety, UV radiation, and stratospheric ozone: <https://www.neefusa.org/what-we-do/health/sunwise>

Prepping for Insects

Ticks, mosquitoes, and other insects are a natural part of being outdoors, but they can also carry diseases or trigger allergic reactions. Some, like ticks and mosquitoes, are known to [transmit illnesses](#) such as Lyme disease, West Nile virus, and other vector-borne diseases. Others, like bees and wasps, may cause serious allergic reactions in sensitive individuals. That's why it's essential to prepare for insect encounters when planning and hosting outdoor events.

Ticks are most active from late spring to early fall, but can be present year-round. Avoiding brushy or wooded areas helps reduce exposure, though this isn't always possible for activities like planting or invasive species removal. Mosquitoes breed in standing water and are most active at dawn and dusk, particularly during warmer months. Bees and wasps are often drawn to sugary drinks, food, perfumes, and bright colors, and tend to be most active in late summer and early fall.

Before the event, share some common-sense prevention tips with volunteers and participants:

- Wear long sleeves and pants
- Tuck pants into socks and shirts into pants
- Use an EPA-registered insect repellent (20-50% DEET on skin or clothes or .05% permethrin on clothes)

- Wear light-colored clothes so ticks are easy to see and remove before they bite
- Avoid scented lotions or perfumes that may attract bees and wasps
- Shower directly after the event
- Shake out clothes and gear before leaving the site

In your first aid kit, include fine-tipped tweezers for tick removal, as well as antihistamines and epinephrine auto-injectors (if any participant carries one for known allergies) in case of insect sting reactions.

During the Event

Pre-Event Staff Check-In

Before volunteers and participants arrive, hold a staff huddle to check in and coordinate. This ensures that staff and volunteer leaders are aligned and ready to work together smoothly.

Communication Channels

By the day of the event, you have likely already established and prepared communication channels, whether it is by radio, calls/texts, or a runner. Now is the time to pass out radios (after an equipment check) and make sure phone numbers are exchanged.

This is also an opportunity to set expectations for when communication needs to happen. Only for emergencies or out of the ordinary circumstances? Or perhaps even more frequently, like checking in with hydration and timeline reminders? Will there be code words or signals for specific situations?

Your staff and group leaders should be aware of emergency procedures. Consider printing out a step-by-step checklist of what actions should be taken and who should be contacted if there is an emergency like a lost child, first aid, or severe weather.

Review Roles, Safety, and Logistics

On the day of the event, gather your staff and volunteer leaders for a pre-event check-in. This is a critical opportunity to align the team, reinforce safety procedures, and set a positive tone for the day.

Start by confirming key roles and responsibilities:

- Review the chain of command so everyone knows who to report to.
- Confirm who will be:
 - Responsible for administering first aid and contacting emergency services if needed.
 - Monitoring the weather and making decisions about sheltering or evacuation.
 - Handling media contact in case press are present.
 - Responsible for any additional roles that your determined were important.

Next, walk through logistics and site-specific details.

- Review the event map, station assignments (especially if volunteers will be split into groups), and the event timeline.
- Make sure staff and event leaders are easily identifiable by wearing brightly colored vests or uniforms and nametags.
- Ensure your communication plan is solid. Everyone should know how to get in touch quickly in case of an issue.

Finally, the pre-event check-in is an ideal time for a motivational pep-talk. Your team worked hard to make this event happen! Thank them for their efforts and anticipate a smooth, successful, and fun event.

Briefing Your Volunteers

With your on-site registration check-in complete, now is the time to brief your volunteers on how to stay safe during the event. Educating volunteers is an important tool in your safety toolkit. After your welcome talk and event overview, it's ideal to mention safety before people move on to their assigned roles.

This includes sharing staff roles, such as who is in the first aid chain of command, the location of first aid kits, and what to do in a medical emergency. Implore your volunteers to not ignore any medical situations, even if they don't seem bad at first. Conduct a full headcount of all volunteers and identify assembly points in case someone gets lost. Explain your inclement weather policy, including when the call to seek shelter/evacuate will be made and what they need to do. Relay any specific venue or event safety rules. Finally, identify key contacts for security concerns, including Site Manager chain of command, should any issues arise.

Don't forget to close with an expression of confidence in your staff, a reminder to enjoy the experience, and another thank you for showing up for public lands!

Rules and Monitoring

It is every staff member's job to monitor safety. Some venues and events have specific rules to promote a safe experience. Some regulations and guidelines to consider include:

- Limit running (and NO running with tools in hand)
- Wear appropriate clothing for the task and weather
- Stay hydrated, even if you are not thirsty
- Report first aid needs, even if they do not seem like an emergency

- Be polite and respectful to other volunteers and staff
- Stay in designated work areas (non-designated work areas may be sensitive or recovering ecosystems)
- Report malfunctioning or broken equipment immediately

If you notice the rules at your event are being broken, this is an opportunity to activate the chain of command. If volunteers and event participants are creating hazardous situations, consider if they will receive warnings before being asked to leave the event.

Incident Reporting

Incident reporting is a critical step in ensuring the safety of staff and volunteers, protecting your staff and volunteers from responsive action, and improving future events. This means documenting all injuries, property damage, and security incidents. There are some factors to consider in effective incident reporting:

- **Timeliness:** Report the event as soon as possible
- **Accuracy:** Make sure the report is truthful
- **Completeness:** Make sure the report includes all details, no matter how trivial
- **Confidential:** Be sensitive to privacy
- **Objective:** Focus on the facts, not what you think may have happened

Before your event, check to see if your organization has an incident reporting form and procedure. If it does not, work with your human resources and legal department to develop one.

After the Event

Post-event Safety Review

In your volunteer thank-you message at the end of the day, remind participants of any immediate actions they should take, such as staying hydrated or checking for ticks.

For larger events, hold a short meeting with your staff immediately after the event has ended. Debrief on any incidents or near misses and flag any urgent concerns. Ensure staff members complete an incident report for any and all accidents or near misses. Follow up with any injured volunteers. Update your event plan or volunteer policies if any of your lessons learned for the day require it.

A Commitment to Safety

Staff and volunteer safety is the responsibility of every member of your team and every individual volunteer involved with your work. Building a culture of safety starts with volunteer managers like you, but it shouldn't stop there. The National Environmental Education Foundation hopes this guide helps you begin that journey toward creating a safer and more rewarding volunteer experience.

Safety becomes even more complex on large service days like National Public Lands Day. Every year on the fourth Saturday in September, NEEF leads this tradition of service and celebration of public lands. It's a perfect opportunity to "open your doors" to new audiences in a fun and exciting way, but their safety and enjoyment are ultimately your responsibility. By committing to safety and using these big events to recruit regular volunteers and engage the community, you can create a win-win for everyone involved.

See you in September for National Public Lands Day!

Appendix

Sample Emergency Response Plan

Background Information

Event Description

This is a 200-person volunteer event with Friends of Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens. Volunteers will be removing invasive plants and picking up trash. Volunteers have signed up online and will check in as they arrive and will receive gloves, t-shirts, and work assignments. Snacks will be provided in the registration area. There will be colored flags designated for each project and, after opening remarks, people will meet their groups at the flags to get direction from their team leaders. Work will happen between 9:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. and pre-packaged sandwich lunches will be provided in the picnic area at the end of the work period.

Date/Time and Location

Saturday, September 24, 2022, 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Kenilworth Park & Aquatic Gardens, 1550 Anacostia Ave NE, Washington, DC 20019

Event Leaders

(Primary) John Smith - Park Ranger, Big Fun State Park

jsmith@neefusa.org | (cell) 555-123-1234

10 additional project leaders on-site (1 leader for every 20 volunteers)

Emergency Plan

Action Steps in Case of Emergency

1. Check the scene of the incident to ensure it is safe and stable
2. Call 9-1-1
3. Call the Primary Event Leader(s) listed above ASAP
4. Care for patient until medics arrive (if necessary, send a leader with patient to hospital)

When applicable, remember to review this with participants and other leaders!

Emergency Resources

- Location of nearest public phone: Kenilworth Park & Aquatic Gardens Visitor's Center

- Location of nearest first-aid kit: There should be one first-aid kit with each project leader at all times.
- Location of nearest Automated External Defibrillator (AED): Kenilworth Park & Aquatic Gardens Visitor's Center.
- Location of nearest hospital: Prince George's Hospital Center, 3001 Hospital Drive, Cheverly, Maryland 20785 | Phone: (301) 618-2000

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