

Building and Training the Team:

How the University of New Hampshire Therapeutic Riding Program Trains Their Therapeutic Riding Program Volunteers

If your volunteer base is similar to ours, people from all walks of life apply to volunteer at your program. Our program has had over two hundred volunteers pass through since 1989, when the program began. We attract volunteers by advertising the dates and times of upcoming program sessions, as well as volunteer training sessions via radio, newspapers and flyers. As the University of New Hampshire's Therapeutic Riding Program, we have a large number of students who volunteer. Some students volunteer to fill a requirement in their course curriculum. Other students volunteer to learn, give back to the community, or enlarge their circle of friends. We accept high school students seeking to fulfill community service requirements in their curriculum. We have also had an occasional volunteer remanded by the court system to serve community service. Lawyers, teachers, doctors, nurses, RTs, OTs, PTs, SEPs, social workers, as well as moms and dads round out our volunteer base. These volunteers have big hearts and a little free time to offer their services to our program. Typical volunteers are well intentioned, but often lack experience working with special needs individuals and/or horses.

Our goal to provide quality programming with accountability to NARHA's Accreditation Standards is the foundation of our volunteer training sessions. We are very lucky to have such a wealth of available volunteers. However, such diverse backgrounds place a great responsibility on our staff to offer comprehensive training. Our volunteer training stresses safety for riders, self and horses. As program managers, it is our responsibility to have a process in place, which screens and prepares every volunteer for a safe, enjoyable experience with our program ... our reputation, depends on it!

The Paper Trail

Maintaining updated volunteer records helps structure your volunteer database. All volunteers fill out the required NARAH forms for liability and emergency medical treatment. The UNH attorney has revamped some of these forms to meet our requirements for volunteer services. UNH includes a Confidentiality Statement, stressing the importance of the rider's right to privacy. These files are culled once a year, with new forms sent out to those volunteers whose forms have expired.

Building Skills and Confidence:

At UNH, we operate a Fall, Spring and Summer session; each session is seven weeks in length. Our Fall and Spring programs are scheduled around LTNH horsemanship classes. AU of our horses used in the Therapy Program are also used in the University's riding program, which is helpful in keeping the horses properly fit (mentally and physically) for the job as therapy horses.

We schedule two 1-1/2 hour mandatory training classes. These classes include lecture, videos, discussion, role-playing, demonstrations and an orientation to the facility. These training classes will build the skills and confidence needed for volunteers to facilitate the goals and objective of our riders. We repeatedly underscore the safety issues along with the issue of working, as a team to meet riders needs.

Session One:

The first training session is held in a classroom format. Volunteer applicants usually have many questions, showing both enthusiasm and anxiety about what they are getting into. This session is structured to cover introductory volunteer issues, including:

1. Registration, liability, medical emergency and confidentiality forms. Our registration form discusses past experiences with individuals having special needs and/or horses.

2. Lesson dates/times and volunteer Handbooks are handed out. The volunteers may take this home to check their calendar for lesson commitments.
3. Handbooks are reviewed in detail. The volunteers keep the handbooks for reference or to share with others. Information covered in this 30 page handbook includes what to wear, what a therapeutic environment means, comprehensive descriptions of the leader/sidewalkers jobs, hints on how to interact with the different disabilities they may see in the program and a thorough discussion of safety and emergency procedures; an introduction for the "hands-on" practice that will come in the second session.
4. The NARHA Standards & Accreditation Manual is introduced. Volunteers are encouraged to review it and ask questions during their time with the program. Introduction of the Standards & Accreditation manual stimulated discussion about accreditation, accountability and quality control. Volunteers are encouraged to make observations and offer constructive criticisms if they see room for improvement.
5. A video describing what equine facilitated therapy is and the differences between classical hippotherapy, hippotherapy, developmental riding and vaulting is shown to the volunteers as a visual introduction of what they are getting into. Videos of past lessons are shown to demonstrate what the volunteer's responsibilities are depending if they are a sidewalker, leader, parent greeter, or horse prep person. A video of typical horse moods and behaviors promotes awareness of how carefully therapy horses are trained for their job. A video demonstrating emergency procedures, including a couple of eye-opening accidents caught on tape promotes awareness of critical safety issues.
6. Lady, a facility orientation takes the volunteers on a walkthrough: "Start here" as if they are arriving for their first day. From the barn/tack room (where they sign in and receive their lesson job) to the indoor arena (where the parent greeting area and bathrooms are); the volunteers get comfortable with our facility. The indoor arena is where the second, or "hands on" training session will be held the next week.

Session Two:

During the second 1-1/2 hour training session, held within the next week, uncompleted paperwork is turned in. Volunteers hand in their lesson commitment schedules. I review all this paperwork immediately after the session is over to start coordinating volunteers with riders into lesson time slots. This session is structured for hands-on activities. We all gather in the indoor arena to observe a demonstration of a horse that is not suited to be a therapeutic riding horse. The squeals from the rider, a variety of toys and the wheelchairs that are presented to this horse trigger the flight response. This demonstration is repeated with a "team" to demonstrate how to protect the rider in this type of situation. Teamwork once again is stressed.

Two or three of our therapy horses are then brought out and introduced for demonstrations and role-playing. Mounting and dismounting riders needing special considerations is demonstrated using an experienced rider who has volunteered to role-play a client rider. Careful explanation regarding attention to safety details when mounting a rider from the ramp is given. A variety of dismounts are also demonstrated, with attention drawn to matching the techniques with the rider's disability. At this point, the volunteers transition from observers to participants in the process of becoming a team with their fellow volunteers. An experienced team presents a lesson; demonstrating the jobs of "Leader" and "Sidewalker." Using experienced volunteers as client riders, new volunteers role-play lesson activities by listening to me instruct from mounting, through a mock lesson/game to dismounting. Criteria for being a leader is a strong background in horsemanship. As new volunteers take the job of "leader", suggestions and recommendations are made so they understand critical safety issues of the precious cargo on their horses. As new volunteers take the job of "Sidewalkers," suggestions and recommendations are made so they help facilitate goal-oriented lesson plans for their rider. As this role-playing experience comes to a close, the mood lightens as I share anecdotes of past mistakes and how teams all work together for a pleasurable experience and that their time as a volunteer should be fun, as well as rewarding.

The last activity of this session is extensive emergency dismount training. We also practice emergency evacuation procedures at this time so that the first lesson the riders and the volunteers can have a "fire drill" in an orderly fashion. In the emergency dismount practice; the volunteers watch a demonstration of an emergency dismount, including discussion of what is considered an emergency. Care is taken to reinforce the fact that the instructor of the lesson identifies and supervises any emergency procedure. A review of the volunteer Handbook text protocol with illustrations of the emergency dismount is requested first. In an emergency, one of the sidewalker volunteers becomes the dismount assistant and the other sidewalker volunteer becomes the receiver of the weight of the rider, assisting them safely to the ground. The leader steers the horse at an angle so that the haunches swing away from the rider. Receiving unexpected weight can be intimidating, so the new volunteers begin by participating in the following trust exercise. Two volunteers stand in line with one another, both facing the same way approximately an arm length away from each other. The front person slowly falls backward in the arms of the other; the rear person accepts the weight and walks backward away from the "danger."

Following this exercise, the experienced volunteer riders mount the horses and are "emergency dismounted" over and over again until all the volunteers are comfortable with both sidewalker jobs during the dismount. Anyone with back problems is advised to be in the position of the dismounting sidewalker, not the receiving sidewalker. The evacuation drill is practiced last, emphasizing the fact that an evacuation is NOT executed with emergency dismounts. The decision for an evacuation is made well before the need for emergency dismounting. The evacuation drill is practiced in an orderly fashion, with typical dismounts.

Finding Their Place

One of the best outcomes of our volunteer training sessions is the camaraderie and team spirit that develops between the volunteers. As the session progresses, skills are improved and a group of individuals evolves into a compatible unit that works together for the benefit and safety of the rider. Other outcomes include non-horsey people developing an understanding for the horse and it's job. Those who may have been uncomfortable around disabled individuals develop an appreciation for individual personalities. I hear time and time again from volunteers that their volunteer training experience with such extensive training increases their confidence to work with the riders. New volunteers are presented with a huge amount of information in these two sessions and are expected to perform their duties with confidence and accuracy during the lesson. The long-term goal of all our riders is to ride independently to their greatest possible degree. The volunteers are responsible for carrying out lesson activities that facilitate meeting that goal by listening to my instructions during the lesson. Teams of volunteers are typically assigned to the same rider every week, so that they learn what works consistently best for lesson outcomes. While the purpose of Volunteering is to "give of yourself to others," we have found that our comprehensive volunteer training process sets the stage for a pleasurable experience. By the end of the seven-week session, each volunteer gains self esteem, self-confidence, as well as receiving as much as they give at the lessons.