Ethical Boundaries for Volunteers Supporting Law Enforcement in National Parks

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Abstract

This article defines the ethical boundaries that protect volunteers who support visitor safety and law-enforcement-related functions in national parks. Although volunteers can assist with information, observation, traffic support, administrative work, backcountry roves, and reporting hazards, they must not exercise powers such as arrest, detention, search, citation, evidence handling, use of force, or other commissioned enforcement duties. The article emphasizes clear position descriptions, accurate role titles, appropriate uniforms, scenario-based training, supervision, and the principle of observing, withdrawing, and reporting when suspected crime or aggression occurs. It also addresses bias, privacy, radio communication, traffic risk, backcountry safety, search and rescue, crowd management, emotional effects after serious incidents, and independent complaint channels. Joint planning between volunteer coordinators and law-enforcement supervisors is recommended to prevent informal assignments that exceed legal or safety limits. Documentation and periodic role audits strengthen accountability. The article concludes that ethical boundaries do not diminish volunteer contribution; they protect volunteers, visitors, professional authority, and public trust.



Volunteers are essential to the success of national parks by providing assistance and education to visitors, helping with traffic, keeping an eye on trails, and doing administrative tasks. Certain jobs are near to those of public safety and law enforcement, but don't actually involve law enforcement. This perimeter must be clearly marked! Confusion can put volunteers and visitors at risk, legal cases and the trust of the public.

The Volunteers-In-Parks program was created by federal law, which also prohibited volunteers from engaging in hazardous duty, law enforcement and policymaking work. The limit is in line with the guidance provided by the National Park Service. During patrol volunteers should not give out citations, be a back-up to the patrol, or be in an on-duty law enforcement vehicle. These restrictions are for the sake of lawful authority and the safety of volunteers.

There are consequences, training, certification, supervision and accountability with law enforcement power. Ordinary extensions of helpful service are not arrest, detention, search, citation, taking evidence and use of force. A volunteer uniform or radio doesn't give such authority. All roles should have a description of what a volunteer can and cannot do.

The use of force must be outside the responsibility of the volunteers. Enforcement in any role should be based on physical restraint, threat, defensive techniques, or having enforcement equipment. PPIs allowed for the general public for outdoor safety purposes require their own policy and training. If volunteers are confronted by aggression, they should put some distance between themselves and the aggressor, and seek permission to buy help, not to try to control the situation.

Limited support for public safety is still available. Volunteers may give directions, report hazards, help with

traffic and parking (which are not hazardous), help with clerical duties, approved backcountry roves, and relay observations. Risk Assessment and staff supervision should be provided for each task. Support shall decrease the risk of danger, and not move unpaid participants towards confrontation.

Public perception is affected by the role titles. Patrol, ranger, officer or enforcement assistant may mislead visitors as to their powers. When appropriate names for positions include ambassador, observer, information, traffic assistance or administrative support. Identification should be easily visible and identify the volunteer without compromising personal safety.

Yet there is a similar challenge for the design of uniforms. Clothing for the National Park Service can signify association and direct the visitor to where help is available. It can also look like the uniform of the official police from afar. During orientation, it is important to inform them about introducing the volunteer status and reacting to a visitor's request for action.

The golden rule when a crime is suspected is to, OBSERVE, WITHDRAW and REPORT as per training. Volunteers should never chase, engage with, search, detain or try to assert personal control. Distance and personal protection – first! Staff must have clear lines of communication appropriate for the area, radio system and emergency.

The quality of the observation is very important as it can lead officers to the wrong person or wrong incident or be inaccurate, which could result in an innocent person being implicated. Training needs to differentiate between observation and interpretation. The volunteer is to write information of time, place, observable behaviours, and identifying information, avoiding assumptions. Reporting should be done without using labels as determined by appearance, identity or perceived social status.

The direct attention needs to be given to bias risk. People in public spaces speak various languages, have a variety of cultural habits, disabilities, clothing styles and knowledge of the rules of the park. Conduct isn't the only factor in determining suspicion; stereotypes also can shape it. Discriminatory practice can be minimised through scenario training, supervision, reviewing reporting patterns and complaint procedures.

The privacy boundaries are in effect in each and every visitor interaction. A volunteer may be given personal details regarding a missing person, medical need, family dispute and suspected crime. This type of information should be transmitted through proper channels and kept to a minimum. Sharing information about incidents orally outside of an investigation is an infringement of dignity and it can jeopardize investigations.

The handling of evidence should continue to be the responsibility of trained staff, unless there is a specific and lawful protocol in place which specifies otherwise. When an object is moved, a container is opened, rights are violated, evidence may be contaminated by moving an object or taking a photo of private

material, or sharing an image. Volunteers to maintain distance and to report to appropriate persons. For any outstanding teaching, they must have undergone training and document.

Traffic assistance can have a lot of risk even if there is no enforcement. Road conditions can change rapidly due to high speeds, mixed weather, poor lighting, and wildlife and drivers getting frustrated. Reflective equipment, safe positioning, communication, escape routes, authority to halt work are required for volunteers. Don't enter into unsafe roadways just because you are wearing a traffic vest.

The design of backcountry roves can be very critical. Volunteers have the ability to gather and disseminate data and to report issues, but in the remote areas this means a slow response in cases of emergencies. Fitness, navigation skill, weather understanding, radio and check-in procedures are to be judged. Volunteers should not be deployed as rangers in high-risk areas as substitutes for commissioned rangers.

A specific role exists within search and rescue which is the ability for trained volunteers to undertake valuable roles within the formal incident command. This participation is not voluntary law enforcement support. Appropriate Involvement is based on Task Qualification, Medical Readiness, Equipment, Supervision and Scene Assignment. All Volunteers should not transition from visitor assistance to hazardous rescue without being properly prepared.

The crowd management when events or closures are required should be done through visible command. Volunteers are able to provide information, direct movement and determine access routes. They should never force someone to obey or get in the middle of two hostile people. Escalation procedures should involve commissioning personnel as a step to be taken before the escalation of conflict.

Information and data can be accidentally revealed when using radio. Visitors, media or unauthorized listeners can hear what's going on in the open channels. It is important that volunteers have straightforward instructions and information regarding names, medical information, suspected violations, and protected areas. While it's important to be brief, it's more important to be confidential and accurate than professional.

Joint planning of volunteer coordinators and law enforcement supervisors is needed. Commissioned staff know about operational risk and the legal authority, and the coordinator knows about the recruitment, support and volunteer capacity. Position review to include both. Informal assignments can be generated during a hectic day, and be subject to no protections, putting all at unnecessary risk.

Realistic scenarios for training should be used. Pressure to act outside of role can be caused by a lost child, aggressive visitor, unattended object, domestic dispute or vehicle collision. Through practice, volunteers are able to determine what the first step is, how to get in touch and what the safe exit is. When rules are written they can be used as a reference in real-life scenarios.

Emotional impact is a post serious incident issue that needs to be addressed. Being exposed to injury,

violence, death and distress, even as a volunteer witness, can have a long term impact. De-Briefing, confidential support information and permission to step-away should be provided by supervisors. Service commitment shouldn't mean that there is a need to swallow trauma.

Documentation protects accountability. Position descriptions, training records, hazard analysis and incident reports, supervision logs and corrective actions provide a traceable system. Records can also be used to determine if there are any recurring issues of confusion or unsafe assignments among managers. They also insulate their volunteers from the criticism for tasks not clearly explained.

Complain routes should be independent of the immediate supervisor, if possible. A volunteer should have the ability to report pressure to overstep authority, unsafe conditions, discriminatory conduct and retaliation. It is important to have an easy path through which visitors can report volunteer behavior. Regular review ensures fairness and good practice and avoids the culture of small issues.

Incident counts are not the only measure to consider when assessing a program. A low number may be due to safe design, poor reporting or low levels of activity. In-depth understanding through interviews, observations, scenario assessments, near-miss reports and visitor feedback. Review should inquire if the volunteers feel they can refuse instructions if they are unsafe.

The roles of volunteers should be accurately communicated in public communication. Volunteers as an enforcement force would lead to wrong expectations and can be confusing democratic responsibility. Service, Observation, Education, Logistics and Visitor Support should be the elements on which recognition should be based. There should be formal accountability mechanisms for the use of commissioned authority, which must be clearly recognizable.

Don't allow boundaries to be violated due to staffing pressure. Reliable volunteers may be sought to fill vacancies, meet the needs of a season or a budget constraint. Role audits between the tasks that are actually performed and those written on the job description are required periodically for managers. Civic service must be in support of professional capacity, not to be a substitute for a commissioned position.

Volunteer contribution is not reduced if one is ethical. With clearly defined boundaries, participants are able to use powers, hazards and liabilities without the professional law enforcement. Knowing when to assist, report and when to withdraw is of benefit to Parks. Role clarity is a fundamental aspect of stewardship that is founded on respect for law, safety, privacy, and human dignity.