

Selecting, Training, Preparing, and Providing for Members of Your Group

Many people may be eager to join your trip to serve the communities and people of the Gulf region. However, the challenging conditions your group may encounter in the devastated area and the nature of the projects you will be carrying out mean that you should be careful in selecting the members of the group. You may want to institute an application process to help gauge individuals' experience, commitment, and understanding of the project. A good application will inform people about your program and force them to contemplate their motivations for going on the trip and the challenges they might face.

Before you can ask questions of your prospective participants, you should supply them with some basic information.

- Brief statement of program philosophy
- List of the site(s) and description of the work and challenges
- List of costs for participants, what costs will cover, obligations to help with fundraising (if any)
- Number of participants in each group
- Requirements: orientation, post-trip responsibilities, or other expectations
- Interviews or meetings that will be part of the application process

Some sample questions that may help probe motivations and lead applicants to consider the challenges of the project:

1. What do you hope the group can accomplish in one week? What qualities and skills do you possess that would help members of the group to achieve this goal?
2. Why do you want to go to the Gulf Coast region on this service project?
3. What has been your best experience in service? Please explain and tell why this experience affected you the way it did.

4. You are assigned to work in a neighborhood that is badly damaged, yet seems salvageable with the help of your group. Some of the residents, however, seem ungrateful for your help and maybe even hostile to your team's efforts. How would that make you feel? What do you think you should do?

Reviewing the Applications

Before reviewing the applications, you should determine the criteria for selecting members of the team. There are many issues involved in setting selection standards. For example, should cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds play a role? Should you adjust the numbers so that you get a fairly even male/female ratio? Do people who have the ability to pay the full cost of the trip get first choice? Do you choose only graduate students or juniors and seniors as members or include representatives of all education levels? Do you want the group to represent a certain range of majors?

It may be necessary to conduct interviews to help make the final choices of team members. Be careful to keep the goals of the project and the selection criteria in mind in conducting the interviews and making the final selections.

Determining Skills, Experience, or Training Needed for Volunteers

Host organizations in the Gulf Coast area will have their own procedures for determining how your group's particular skills might apply to their volunteer opportunities. Make sure that you have understood clearly the expected skill levels that are needed for your group's assignments.

Training

If members of your group do not have the right (or best) experience to be effective volunteers for particular assignments in the Gulf region, they may be able to get training in advance of the trip. Many organizations, including the Red Cross, will provide training before you go. (Contact your

local chapter of the Red Cross, Salvation Army, or Habitat for Humanity for training opportunities.) You may also look to faculty or other experts who can provide specialized training if it is needed.

Preparing Members for the Service Trip

Once the members of the group are chosen, you should prepare them for their service. The preparation can include an orientation, background reading, group discussions, and other specialized training that will help give them confidence and understanding of the context and the current situation in the disaster area. You might want to include information about what to expect in terms of travel, accommodations, food and other arrangements, and a realistic picture of the living conditions they will face. Students who have returned from the region may be able to give group members a “reality check” and answer questions. The orientation can include team-building activities meant to foster a positive group dynamic and present the philosophy and concepts of service learning and civic engagement. Use the Internet to gather background information about the storm’s destruction and the area’s current conditions. The *New Orleans Times Picayune’s* website (www.nola.com) provides excellent information about current conditions and reports of progress of the recovery and rebuilding.

Providing for Group Members

Because of the nature of Gulf Coast service, institutions may need to provide significant support for their groups. These may include the following:

Identification: Badges, nametags, shirts, hats, or other means to identify your group members and let the community know who they are.

Tools and safety equipment: Depending on the work assignment, shovels, rakes, mops, crow-bars, plastic bags, hammers, trowels, water testing devices, ladders, paint brushes. For gutting houses, the following equipment is recommended: Tyvek suit (one per day); respirator mask (purchase the “real” respirator mask with filters); chemical heavy duty rubber gloves; goggles; ear plugs; work gloves; hard hat; latex gloves (all available at home improvement stores); and steel toe or rubber work boots.

First aid and health supplies: Rags, bandages, antibacterial soap, over-the-counter anti-diarrhea medication, and antiseptic.

Meal and food provisions: Cook stoves, propane, charcoal, matches, ice chests, lanterns, and kitchen implements.

Supervision by trained staff and faculty: Certified first aid providers, trained adult disaster volunteers, experienced tool and equipment supervisor, experienced truck and van drivers, and seasoned team leaders.

Adapted with permission from “Organizing an Alternative Spring Break,” Break Away, the Alternative Break Connection, Inc. www.alternativebreak.org