VOLUNTEER MANUAL

Therapeutic riding and horse related activities help to stimulate the physical, mental, emotional and educational development of individuals with special needs. We are providing our riders with opportunities to practice social interactions with our instructors, other students, volunteers and our horses in addition to physical exercise associated with riding. Learning to ride helps improve posture, balance, sensory-motor skills and mobility while increasing fitness, self esteem and feelings of success and empowerment.

Volunteer jobs at Equinox Horse Foundation include leader, side walker, event set up and breakdown, barn chores, facilities maintenance, fundraising and office work. If you are able to volunteer for therapeutic riding, we request that you make a commitment for certain lesson times/days and contact us as soon as possible if you are unable to make your time. If we are short volunteers our riders can’t ride!

THE VOLUNTEERS

We cannot do this without you! Therapeutic Riding is very volunteer intensive. We often need as many as three volunteers so that one person can ride. YOU allow our riders to learn and grow as well as ensure the success, growth and continuation of our riding program.

The Direct Benefits of Volunteering:

1. Provide people with the opportunity to ride
2. Gain skill and experience
3. Promote better understanding of special needs individuals within the community
4. Build confidence in yourself and others
5. Make new friends
6. Spend time with horses
7. Get some good healthy exercise
8. The possibilities are endless!

What to wear:

1. Layers to accommodate changing weather throughout the day
2. Sunscreen and bug repellent when appropriate
3. Comfortable closed toed shoes
4. Avoid dangling jewelry, revealing clothing – they are a temptation to some riders to grab and pull

Cancellations:

1. You will be notified when classes are cancelled due to other events on the farm
2. It is your responsibility to check in regarding cancellations
3. It is your responsibility to notify Equinox as soon as possible if you cannot make your time. If we can’t cover your shift, some riders can’t ride

Sign in and Recording Hours:

Your time is important to us and is highly valued! There is a notebook in the office where you will record your hours. Travel time to and from the farm is counted toward volunteer hours. These hours directly relate to certain grant applications and are greatly appreciated.

JOB DESCRIPTIONS:

Leader: As a leader you are responsible for leading a horse and monitoring that horse’s body language and following the instructor’s cues while gradually allowing riders more control as it becomes appropriate. While it’s important for all our volunteers to have healthy interactions with our riders, the leader’s primary responsibility is to keep riders safe by managing the horse’s movements.

Sidewalker: As a sidewalker your main job is to support the rider. You are to help interpret and reinforce directions from the instructor and aid the rider in completion of the directions while assisting the rider in maintaining proper balance and position. You are also to communicate to the sidewalker when the rider needs to move slower, faster or less sharp turns.

Event Support: We host educational workshops and fundraising events throughout the year and we often need help setting up before the events and cleaning up afterwards. In addition, we may also need errands run, like having lunch or supplies picked up for clients, preparing folders with educational materials and cleaning the barn, chairs and horses.

Office Work: There are many tasks we can use help with, like managing volunteer schedules, picking up materials at the printer, the volunteer newsletter, etc.

Fundraising: We could always use a grant writer and anyone else willing to plan and execute a fundraising event. Often we have the opportunity to set up informational booths at fairs or stores and other events and we need people to hand out information and explain how horses can help!

Facilities maintenance and barn chores: A therapeutic riding barn can never be too clean! It’s also great for the horses to get groomed, bathed or sometimes just get taken for a ‘no pressure’ walk. Other jobs include trail clearing and maintenance, tack cleaning and leaf blowing.

WORKING WITH SPECIAL NEEDS RIDERS

We teach riders with a wide array of disabilities like cerebral palsy, down syndrome, hearing and/or visual impairment, learning disabilities, brain injuries, autism spectrum disorder and so much more. Our riders are not defined by their disabilities – each is an individual and is to be treated as such.

General Approach and Interaction:

1. Every rider is an individual to be treated with compassion and understanding – they are not their disability.
2. Each has their own learning rate, style of learning, unique strengths and challenges – get to know the individual and play to their strengths and support them through their challenges.
3. Provide them with increasing opportunities to be more independent
4. Relax and be yourself.
5. Speak directly to the rider, even if you think they can’t understand you.
6. Ask permission and offer assistance-don’t do everything for the rider
7. Appreciate what the rider can do. Remember that many difficulties an individual faces may stem from society’s attitudes and barriers, not from the disability itself.
8. If you are unable to understand what was said, tell them. The barn is a great place to practice speech and it’s always better to understand than to dismiss what was said. Sometimes the best way to handle this is to tell the rider that you are having a hard time understanding them right now and ask for help from their caregiver.
9. **Listening with your eyes and heart is just as important as listening with your ears**.
10. Allow time for riders to process a question or instruction. Some riders take longer to understand what was said than you may think. Other riders understand right away but need time to formulate an answer. Ask a question and count to ten before you expect an answer.
11. Remain calm! Sometimes people say outrageous things just to get a rise out of you and the best way to guarantee a repeat of bad behavior is to react large to it. This does not necessarily mean that you can’t tell someone a behavior is unacceptable and why only that it is most effective to keep the emotional charge out of your response.

Wheelchair Etiquette:

1. Ask for permission before you push someone’s chair – even if they can’t answer you (surprise is often the enemy of equilibrium)
2. Be respectful. The wheelchair is an extension of someone’s personal space, don’t lean or hang on a wheelchair unless you have the owner’s permission.
3. Be careful to include everyone in conversations.

Visual Impairment:

1. Always ask if and how they would like assistance
2. Some people may only need verbal directions/cues
3. Some people need physical assistance, generally allow the rider to hold your arm above the elbow and walk a half step ahead of them. Each individual may have specific ways they like to be assisted – ask them.
4. Verbalize information that may be written or posted as well as changes in the environment.

Hearing Impairment:

1. Maintain good eye contact.
2. Look at the rider when speaking to him/her even if you have a translator.
3. Avoid long verbal instructions, provide assistance with gestures, visual cues, etc.
4. Become familiar with Sign that the rider uses frequently.
5. Make the effort to learn sign as you go-instructions are often repetitive. Chances are we will be asking riders to stop or walk on more than once in each lesson.
6. If you ever feel uncomfortable in your role, tell the instructor or ask questions that will help you grow more comfortable. Everyone has a niche!

GENERAL PROCEDURE

* Upon arrival set up helmets, tack and equipment for the day.
* Check in with instructor regarding schedule and horse assignments
* Groom all the horses that will be ridden that day.
* Every time you bring a horse out of a stall or put one back offer him/her some water
* Riders must be supervised at all times, sometimes very very closely. The sidewalker stays within arm’s reach of the rider and is responsible for the rider while unmounted. The sidewalker is responsible for making sure the rider is wearing a helmet whenever they are near a horse. The sidewalker assists the rider in grooming and tacking up, assisting when the rider leads the horse and stays with the rider while the instructor does a final tack check.
* The leader is responsible for meeting the rider in the barn with the appropriate horse. The leader holds the horse while the rider grooms and tacks up, assists the rider during leading.
* At the end of their lesson, riders are allowed to give their horse a treat which is fed from Frisbees that are kept in the barn. Avoid allowing riders to feed horses directly from their hands.

SAFETY RULES

Equinox has a different approach to barn rules than most riding stables. Many of our clients are oppositional and when you tell them not to do something it is the first thing that they will do. Therefore we frame things positively when relaying rules to our students.

* Stay where a staff member can see you
* Wear your helmet
* If the fencing is brown mesh tape it is electric, chances are if you touch it, it will hurt
* Keep yourselves safe

Ultimately it is our job to keep our riders safe at all times. Be proactive!

LEADERS: A leader needs to demonstrate an understanding of horse behavior, body language and ability to maneuver a horse safely through obstacles. Our horses are generally very well behaved and trained to lead from either side. If possible lead from the side that is closest to the instructor to hear directions better. When stopped the leader should stand in front of the horse and face the rider. Avoid sudden stops/starts, sudden sharp turns and small circles unless otherwise instructed due to specific therapeutic interventions. Your horse is bigger than you think-what you believe is a big circle is not your horse’s perception of big. Remember that you have a whole crew behind you and make sure the sidewalker has enough room between the horse and the fence. Unless otherwise instructed use the whole arena and keep to the rail – no cutting corners! Maintain at least an elephant’s length between horses. If you are getting too close to the horse in front of you, you may pass (so long as an elephant can fit between the horses), make a circle (as long as it’s big enough that you don’t unbalance your rider) or cut across the arena. Your horse, your rider, the sidewalkers and the instructor are your team, please apprise your team of any changes you intend to make before you actually do them. Keep a nice brisk pace as it is generally more beneficial for both the horse and rider than a ‘turtle walk’.

SIDEWALKERS: A sidewalker requires a certain degree of physical strength as well as an ability to read human body language and provide guidance and help our riders manage their behavior. You are responsible for helping riders maintain their balance while sitting on a moving animal. If you get tired you may switch sides or switch jobs. Please communicate with your team. Sidewalkers are responsible for keeping our riders safe while on the ground and managing the grooming and tacking up process. During the lesson sidewalkers help the rider maintain focus, interpret or repeat directions from the instructor and support the rider in carrying out those directions. Remember not to overload the rider with words and allow time for them to process information and carry out instructions. Gradually allow the rider to perform more and more tasks with less and less help. If your rider is struggling with anything communicate with the instructor. Sometimes it is more appropriate to discuss issues after the lesson and sometimes it is imperative that a problem be addressed immediately. Use your discretion.

Healthy social interactions are a very important component of our riding program. Modeling behavior is an excellent way to teach social skills. Always greet the riders when they arrive. Introduce yourself properly and offer your hand for a hand shake. Ask how they are, ask how the ride was, ask what they learned, check in with caregivers and encourage riders to tell their caregivers what they learned or practiced or appreciated. Appreciation is an integral part of each lesson – appreciation for the horse, the skills riders learn and each other. Be prepared by the end of the lesson to give the rider or another volunteer a compliment.

HORSES

Hold the horse rather than tie to the wall whenever the horse has client contact – it is safer for the client. When tacking up we NEVER NEVER NEVER slap a saddle on and crank the girth. This is the number one reason that horses become ‘girthy’ and start biting during the tacking up process. Horses DO NOT hold their breath so that you can’t tighten the girth properly – they tense up and brace against the pain they anticipate. Allow the horse to look at and smell the pad and saddle before gently placing them ‘too far forward’ on the horse’s back then slide them back into place. Tighten the girth slowly and only so that it is touching the horse. Walk the horse then gradually tighten the girth at least three times before bringing the horse to the mounting ramp. The instructor should always check tack before a rider gets on the horse. If the instructor does not – remind them.

* We ask our horses for things rather than dictate or make them do things
* We use phases of pressure whenever we ask for things. Pause for a few seconds before increasing to the next phase (remember when you are working with our riders and you allow time for them to process your question? Same thing).
* Hold lead ropes 6-12 inches from the snap, not the snap itself or the halter
* Release of pressure is a great reward and a key component of communication with your horse. If your horse is standing quietly at the mounting ramp give him/her some slack – literally

An important thing to be aware of when maneuvering horses is that when you turn the horse’s head to the right the hindquarters swing to the left. Therefore, if you have a rider standing on the left side of the horse and you think you will move the horse away from them by moving right you are giving your horse the choice of going with you and knocking into a handicapped child, deliberately disobey you or twist himself in knots trying to go with you and not injure the rider. Please spend some time getting familiar with the horses’ biomechanics.

When leading a mounted rider away from the mounting ramp remember that sometimes the instructor is physically holding a rider upright on the horse. Please walk straight along the steps away from the ramp so the instructor doesn’t fall off it. Trust me this is a bummer when it happens.

EMERGENCY PROTOCOLS

* The leader is responsible for the horse at all times, moving the horse away from a rider who has fallen, keeping the horse still if necessary and informing sidewalkers if this is impossible and the rider needs to be taken off the horse immediately
* The instructor is responsible for the rider who is in trouble
* The sidewalkers for that rider are responsible for supporting the instructor – whether that is calling 911, bringing a caregiver into the arena or holding someone’s hand
* All other teams in the arena are to keep a safe distance from the rider who needs help
* All other team volunteers are to minimize the distractions and keep other riders calm and occupied

Volunteering for therapeutic riding is hard work, challenging, fun and one of the most rewarding experiences you will ever have. For us it’s all about the relationship – your relationship with the horses, with each other and most importantly with our riders. We hope you will stick around and join our herd.

Thank you so much for your time, your willingness and your dedication.