

**Volunteer Handbook**

121 North Pleasant Street, P.O. Box 141, Amherst, MA 01004

(413) 345-0737

**Vision:**

To help people who are homeless, disabled, or poor in the Amherst area achieve long-term stability by securing safe, sanitary housing and a reliable income.

**Mission:**

The mission of Amherst Community Connections (ACC) is to empower a community of vulnerable individuals. This is done by providing resources and advocacy in public housing and federal/state benefit programs. Vulnerable individuals are typically exemplified by those who are homeless, disabled, elderly, formerly incarcerated and/or have low incomes.

Amherst Community Connections walks alongside these individuals to do everything in our capacity to improve their quality of life. We are able to provide resources and information regarding housing, food, income, and health care. We begin by assessing the personal needs of each participant. From there, we help guide the participants in the right direction, whether it be free community meals, job applications, or section 8 housing applications. Understandably, applying for federal benefits and public housing may be a difficult and confusing task for some participants. It follows that we help participants along each step of any application process.

Further, ACC strives to raise awareness of the personal, social, and economic hardships of chronic homelessness. We take every opportunity to organize community events which may encourage folks to engage in and support long-term coordinated solutions to help end homelessness.

**Values:**

ACC values role modeling positive behavior and building strong relationships as a team with our staff, our volunteers, and our communities. These values are exemplified in every facet of our work. We believe that positive social connections between our participants and a caring community provides support and stability for vulnerable folks.

**Stewardship:**

ACC is accountable for the success of the organization as a whole. ACC conducts its work in a fiscally and ethically responsible manner.

**Respect:**

ACC staff treats every individual with unconditional respect. It is not our job to judge anyone for past behavior or life decisions. We are here to give support to individuals who are willing to play an active role in improving their lives. We value individual and cultural differences.

**Integrity:**

In the spirit of mutual trust, ACC is open, honest and ethical in all of our actions.

**Innovation:**

ACC advocates for all people served through guiding principles rooted in our vision and mission.

**Excellence:**

ACC believes in and strives for best practices in advocacy and peer support services.

**ACC Philosophy:**

The philosophy of ACC combines numerous ideals in an effort to further support our mission and values. Those ideals include: (1) A commitment to confidentiality, (2) A commitment to the participants served, (3) A responsibility to treat all people with dignity, respect, and with ethical standards, (4) A commitment to ACC, and (5) A commitment to professional competency.

**Purpose and Function Statements:**

ACC provides resources for immediate relief, serving homeless and transient individuals and families. For the purpose of these policies and procedures, “homeless” means an individual or family that lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.

ACC recognizes that many people may end up homeless as a result of situations that can be related but are not limited to: fire, poverty, inability to secure affordable housing, inability to secure a living wage, and lack of skills and/or resources.

ACC is a program designed to provide information, case management, advocacy services, and referrals to resources available for participants based on their specific needs.

ACC is a federally recognized 501 (c) 3 non-profit tax-exempt organization.

ACC believes in involving the participants we serve in the process of helping themselves to lead independent and dignified lives.

ACC believes in the rights of all people to live and make choices that bring them optimum happiness, good health, and wellness while honoring their rights and responsibilities for their actions.

ACC believes that family and community are of great importance to achieve a stable and self-sufficient life. Participants are invited and encouraged to participate in working with our staff and volunteers on their individual goals towards a safe and fulfilled life.

**Volunteer Responsibilities:**

Each volunteer position has certain specific responsibilities. But, all volunteers should conduct themselves in a mature, professional manner. We must respect the dignity of each participant and support the ACC philosophy and mission.

**Volunteering: Policies and Procedures:**

When you are a new volunteer at ACC, you may feel a little strange in your new surroundings. This is a normal feeling and is expected. Your fellow volunteers and the ACC staff want to help you get off to a good start. Feel free to ask them for help or for clarification if there is something you don’t understand.

**Application/Training:** Community volunteers and college interns must complete a Volunteer Application and attend orientation and on-going training as requested by the Agency.

**Attendance:** Submission of weekly time sheets by interns (but not community volunteers) is necessary in order for us to keep an accurate record for your college credit purpose. Time sheets must be submitted PROMPTLY by Friday 5 PM or the last day of your work week.

Call your direct supervisor if you will be more than 15 minutes late and discuss with them if you need to leave early.

**If you are unable to cover your shift, please make it up in the same week.**

**Boundaries and Limitations**: Please maintain proper boundaries with participants; being kind and compassionate is important. Becoming too friendly or intrusive can lead to various problems. Do not engage in a personal relationship outside of work.

Wear your Agency name tag when you interface with the public.

The primary focus on one’s work at ACC must be service to the participants, not fulfillment of your personal needs. If personal issues arise in your life that may cause difficulty in fulfilling your responsibilities, it may be best to take a break from volunteering.

Meet with participants only at the Jones Library, the ACC office, or other public places.

Be on time when you meet with participants. Contact them (if they have a phone) if you will be more than 15 minutes late.

Provide ACC’s phone number to participants. Do not give your personal phone number.

**Confidentiality:** Confidentiality is critical when working with people in vulnerable situations**.** Whatever is shared with you at ACC must remain at ACC. Please read and sign the Confidentiality Policy.

**Appearance:** Volunteers should dress modestly and present themselves professionally.

**Conflict Resolution:** Should you have a difficulty with another volunteer or staff member, contact the ACC executive director. A meeting will be arranged to hear the concerns and a plan devised to resolve the conflict. If your concern is with the executive director or you do not feel the conflict has been resolved, you may contact the president of ACC Board of Directors.

**Drugs and Alcohol:** ACC is a substance-free environment. Please report any suspected substance use/abuse by staff or other volunteers to the executive director.

**Equal Volunteering Opportunity:** ACC provides equal volunteering opportunity for everyone regardless of age, sex, color, race, creed, national origin, religious persuasion, marital status, sexual orientation, political belief, or disability that does not prohibit performance of essential job functions. All matters relating to volunteering are based upon ability to perform the job as well as dependability and reliability.

**Gifts, Tips, Soliciting:** Do not accept any tips or gifts from participants, their families, or friends. We do not want to create an atmosphere where our participants feel obligated to reward ACC staff and volunteers for doing a job. Also, you may not promote or solicit your own business enterprise, political agenda, or religious beliefs while volunteering with us. Solicitation for a private charity is also prohibited.

**Participant Interactions:** It is the policy at ACC that volunteers do not lend participants money, transport participants, or give gifts to the participants. If you choose to do so, ACC accepts no responsibility/liability for these actions**.**

**Harassment:** Sexual harassment or harassing conduct will not be tolerated at ACC. If you feel you have been harassed, or if you observe harassment of a participant, report your concerns immediately to the ACC executive director.

**Incident Reports:** Volunteers will be required to document any unusual incidents that may occur on a shift on the Incident Report. Copies are located in the Volunteer Handbook file. (Examples of incidents that need reporting include: volunteer or participant injury, medical emergency, serious disagreements or conflicts, law enforcement involvement, and any other unusual situations.). If a serious situation arises when staff is not present, you may call the executive director at home for support and consultation. Never hesitate to call 911 in an emergency situation.

Immediately report any concerns about a participant to your direct supervisor if the participant shows signs of self-harm, abuse of others (verbal/physical), or other warning signs.

**Meetings:** There will be Volunteer Support meetings that will be opportunities to discuss situations and brainstorm solutions with other volunteers. These meetings are optional, but a good opportunity to share concerns and ideas for improving services.

There will be staff/volunteer/intern meetings at 4 PM on the last Wednesday of these months: February, March, April, September, October, and November. These meetings are mandatory. Updates about the agency, and presentation on research and projects will be made by teams within the agency. Advanced notification of absence to direct supervisor is expected. Permission must be obtained to miss a meeting.

There will also be regular supervisory meetings. Feedback about your performance and suggestions on improvement will be discussed at the meetings. ACC staff members will listen to and address your questions and concerns. We believe there is always room for improvement and discussion.

**Email & Internet Use**: For work purpose, please set up an email with the email address of “first name last name ACC@xxx.com”. For example: JaneDoeACC@gmail.com. It is strictly forbidden to check personal emails or conduct online activities unrelated to your responsibilities at ACC.

**Smoking:** Smoking is not permitted in the ACC office/building. Participants and volunteers may smoke outside 20 feet away from the building.

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**A Gentle Reminder:** Most of us at this point will have a pretty good idea of what we think the participant could or should do to resolve his/her situation. Although there are exceptions, it is very important to allow him/her to make the decisions about how to proceed. Offer suggestions about what you think the participant’s resources are if you need to, but ask them to decide. Our purpose is to **EMPOWER.**

**Feelings that may be experienced by people who are homeless:**

**Anxiety:** This is the most common feeling; any substantial threat produces anxiety. Normal amounts of anxiety help one mobilize against threats in ways that are appropriate and healthy. Chronic and untreated anxiety, however, may produce confusion, distorted perception, poor judgment, self-defeating behaviors, and panic attacks.

**Helplessness:** People work hard to successfully manage and develop coping skills. To have the roof fall in as the result of an external disaster or a series of events may produce feelings of helplessness.

**Shame:** People are taught to be competent and self-reliant but during a crisis one can feel incompetent and may have to depend on others. When norms of productivity cannot be met due to precarious social situations, many often feel ashamed. Shame typically signals inward feelings of inadequacy. Shame often leaves individuals with a desire to change or “fix” something about themselves or their lives.

**Anger:** This may be directed at others, events, supportive people, or turned inward on the individual themselves. In the event of a participant becoming angry, it is best to remind him/her that they are in a safe place and we are only trying to help them. Empathize with their frustrations if possible, this will help the participant feel more of a connection.

**Ambivalence:** A person in crisis may feel ambivalent because of struggling with independence vs. dependence, self-reliance vs. reliance upon others, controlling emotions vs. losing control, and increasing self-confidence by managing by him/her vs. increasing vulnerability by reaching out to another for help.

**Low Self-esteem:** All of the above feelings can produce a decrease in self-esteem and leave the individual feeling extremely vulnerable. It is this decreased self-esteem and great vulnerability that make a crisis both a danger and an opportunity.

Participants in crisis may act on their feelings and how they think one ought to behave to accomplish something. This is why some participants act angry, demanding, and manipulative; these are feelings and actions which defend against their real feelings of anxiety, helplessness, shame and incompetence. Although the behavior is an attempt to regain control, it usually fails to obtain the necessary help or to restore control.

**Presentation of Normalcy:** Although this is not an emotion, it is a common occurrence with new participants. Individuals have a tendency to present themselves in a manner which may not fully acknowledge problematic issues. It’s common to hear the phrase “it’s not really a big deal” or “it’s not really an issue.” This presentation may prevent ACC staff from providing the most comprehensive help possible. It is important to provide a safe, inclusive environment which may be conducive to participants feeling more comfortable and open. This sense of comfort will help the participant open up about his/her candid issues, which may need to be addressed by case workers.

**ACC Hospitality Code**

**1. It’s nice to hear your name**; so learn the names of our Participants, too.

**2. Labeling people creates invisible barriers**; remember that participants are participants, not “the homeless”. Labeling – whether spoken or printed on a posted sign – creates divisions and can foster an “us” and “them” syndrome.

**3. We all like to keep some things to ourselves**; all information about participants is confidential. For work purpose, you can share information about participants with your co-workers, but not with other participants or with other people outside of the agency.

**5. We all have bad days**; depression, sadness and hopelessness may come. Allow participants the space to deal with their emotions. Be prepared to forgive outbursts without judging participants ungrateful.

**Thank you for your work. ACC cannot function without your help. Volunteers are so precious. We cannot afford to hire you. We can only appreciate you!**

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