Volunteers in Parks

Volunteers are essential in the upkeep, development, and community engagement within Madison's parks. Going beyond merely maintaining green spaces, volunteers foster community, promote environmental stewardship, and enhance the well-being of Madison area residents. Recognizing the significance of their contributions is crucial for the sustained growth of the volunteer program and vitality of our public spaces. The deep history of volunteering in Madison's parks greatly benefits the city and is positioned to give the program the structure and support it deserves. Substantial improvements in volunteer organization, outreach, and recognition have been made possible by dedicated full-time volunteer coordinators. These coordinators champion system-wide efforts across Madison Parks, including the golf program, land management activities, and the advancement of sustainability programs and practices. Furthermore, both Madison Parks and Olbrich Gardens have seen changes in their volunteer coordination teams in 2023. Madison Parks has established a new dedicated volunteer coordinator position, while Olbrich Gardens has welcomed a new person into an existing coordinator position. These strategic moves mark a significant step towards enhancing support for volunteer initiatives and strengthening community connections across diverse park landscapes.

Contributing in various capacities such as youth engagement, special events, citizen science, group initiatives, long-term commitments and short-term projects, volunteers play a pivotal role in Madison's vibrancy and community engagement. Long-term volunteers offer sustained support, undergoing a comprehensive onboarding process. Short-term volunteers, including those fulfilling specific requirements or mandates, contribute to targeted assignments. Youth volunteers, ages 14 to 17, also partake in volunteer programs, with younger volunteers participating alongside a guardian, ensuring a safe and inclusive environment for all ages. Special event volunteers, or episodic volunteers, lend their efforts to one-day events, enhancing the community spirit without the commitment to ongoing assignments. Lastly, group volunteers, such as families, clubs, and organizations, contribute collectively and adhere to guidelines to ensure a safe and productive volunteering environment. Each category is crucial to the Madison Parks success, as we aim to refine and expand these opportunities, fostering a deeper connection between the community and the parks, while ensuring a rewarding experience for all volunteers.

Since the beginning, Olbrich Botanical Gardens has relied on the generosity of volunteers. Supplying their time and often their own tools, volunteers helped transform the once polluted marshland into the gorgeous gardens of today. Throughout the decades, donating more than 21,000 hours, the spirit of volunteerism has continued to grow at the Gardens. From the smiling faces that greet guests, to the muddy boots that grow the gardens, these volunteers are ingrained in every aspect of the Gardens.

Collaboration with other community groups throughout the Madison area is a foundation to achieving our volunteer goals and enriching the volunteer program with diverse experiences and expertise. By partnering with organizations such as the Sierra Club, Clean Lakes Alliance, and various school groups, we broaden our reach and enhance the quality and impact of volunteer efforts. These partnerships offer unique opportunities for volunteers to engage in specialized projects, such as environmental conservation, educational programs, and community cleanup projects, which aligns with our mission to maintain and improve Madison's parks. Working

closely with these groups amplifies our efforts and fosters a sense of community, solidarity and shared responsibility for our natural spaces. We are committed to strengthening these relationships and exploring new partnerships to ensure our volunteer program continues to grow and adapt to the needs of Madison's parks and the community. By doing so, we aim to create a more inclusive, effective and interconnected network of volunteers and community partners, further embedding the park system into the fabric of our city and ensuring its sustainability and vibrancy for future generations.

A critical aspect of enhancing volunteer involvement is refining the onboarding process for volunteer recruitment. This process must be designed to be seamless and informative, ensuring potential volunteers fully understand their roles, responsibilities, and the impact of their work. For Parks staff, understanding this onboarding process is key to effectively communicate with potential volunteers. Staff should be equipped to guide volunteers through the initial steps, from expressing interest to becoming actively engaged, making the transition as smooth as possible. This aids in recruitment and builds a stronger relationship between staff and volunteers from the beginning.

The vision includes a thriving park system with a robust volunteer program deeply integrated into its core functions. This includes a comprehensive, user-friendly platform for volunteer registrations, ongoing training opportunities, and increased collaboration with local schools, businesses, and community groups to ensure a diverse volunteer pool that represents the entire Madison community. Additionally, goals include having a formal acknowledgment system, annual recognition celebration and formalizing policies for project approval and volunteer group formation. As the effects of climate change continue to influence our environment, volunteer needs and the work completed will adjust and evolve, highlighting the importance of adaptability and proactive stewardship in preserving our natural spaces.

Policymakers will see volunteer engagement as an investment in community well-being, by facilitating a supportive environment for volunteers and establishing clear metrics to measure the success of volunteer programs. Additionally, it's important to recognize volunteer contributions allow Parks to do more than what would be possible within the constraints of the capital budget. Volunteers supplement the work of Parks staff and help make it possible to achieve goals that would not be possible without their involvement. One key goal is working with Madison Parks Foundation to build private funding support for volunteerism, including seeking corporate support to further enhance volunteer initiatives and expand their impact within the community.

Parks staff will understand the benefits of volunteerism and its potential to transform Madison's parks into community hubs. Staff will be adept at managing volunteers efficiently, leveraging technology for outreach, and maintaining a positive, inclusive volunteer culture, which recognize the connection between a thriving volunteer program and overall park success. The volunteer onboarding process, is crucial for effective communication with new volunteers, ensuring they feel welcomed and valued from the start. As Parks staff become adept at managing volunteers efficiently and maintaining a positive volunteer culture, they are poised to align volunteer efforts with overarching goals and measurable outcomes.

A successful volunteer program can be gauged through increased participation, improved park conditions, positive community feedback, and higher volunteer retention rates. Olbrich Gardens continues to achieve great success with their established volunteer program, reaching a total of

21,000 hours in 2024. Inspired by their accomplishments, Madison Parks aims to emulate this success by seeking to increase volunteer hours to 15,000 per year by 2025. This goal represents a significant step forward, building upon the foundation laid by Olbrich Gardens and reflecting a shared commitment to fostering vibrant and engaging park experiences through dedicated volunteer efforts.