

Interfaith Hospitality Network

Guide for Volunteer Hosts

A Community Response for Homeless Families

The Mission of National Interfaith Hospitality Network is to mobilize communities to help low-income families achieve and sustain independence.

NIHN focuses on four program areas:

1. Organizing congregation to provide shelter, meals, and comprehensive support services to homeless families
2. Training volunteers as mentors to families at risk of homelessness
3. Promoting and supporting the growth of locally developed Network outreach initiatives
4. Advocating for adequate housing and support services for low-income people

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Networks Should Review this guide and make appropriate supplements, if necessary, to meet their individual needs.

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Dear Volunteer,

Welcome to the growing family of Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN) volunteers. You join many thousands of individuals across the country who have opened their hearts and their places of worship to homeless families.

The *Interfaith Hospitality Network Guide for Volunteer Hosts* is based on the experiences of volunteers and guests in IHN programs throughout the United States. The information provided here will help you understand your role as a volunteer and will ensure consistency for guests as they stay with different host congregations.

Interfaith Hospitality Network Volunteers have shown that by working together in a Network, religious congregations can effectively help homeless families to achieve independence. In the process, congregations are strengthened as people of many faiths unite to work for a better community for all.

At the national office of IHN, we are privileged to work with people from across the country—people who remind us daily that compassionate service to others is part of the expression of God’s love. The Interfaith Hospitality Network unites us all in this important ministry. Thank you for joining us.

Sincerely,

Karen Olson
President

Acknowledgments

This third edition of the *Guide for Volunteer Hosts* incorporates the ideas and experiences of many dedicated people, including staff, guests, and volunteers from Network across the country.

We thank the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for its generous financial support which made the publication of this guide possible. Also, our thanks go out to ERA Real Estate, which underwrote the printing costs.

I

Family Homelessness

Being without a safe, warm place to sleep, eat, and care for children; being without the security of familiar people and belongings - this is homelessness. The loss of a home is a crisis for anyone, but especially for families. Parents must endure the heartache of being unable to provide a secure environment for their children. Without a home, children are deprived of one of the most basic resources required for healthy development. This is the saddest statistic of all-one out of every four homeless people is a child.

Until recent years, many people believed that only alcoholics or severely mentally ill people could become homeless. These stereotypes never did accurately portray the homeless population and definitely do not reflect today's reality. Families with young children now account for up to 40 percent of America's homeless, and they make up its fastest growing segment.

There may be many individual reasons for a family's homelessness, but the root cause is the lack of affordable housing. Hundreds of thousands of American families have found themselves caught in the growing gap between family income and the cost of a home. Low-income renters are often only one paycheck or calamity away from homelessness. The loss of a job, an increase in rent, the onset of sudden illness, the gentrification of a neighborhood, the absence of family support- any one of these can drive a family into homelessness.

Fortunately, there are many thousand of people who believe that homelessness is unaccepted-especially in one of the world's wealthiest countries. And there is much that one person can do-especially in concert with other. Through the Interfaith Hospitality Network program, many Americans are assisting homeless people and working together toward permanent solutions.

II.

The Interfaith Hospitality Network

The Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN) founded in New Jersey in 1986, was created in response to the growing need to provide shelter, meals, and comprehensive support to families without homes. IHN programs are now in many states across the country; in these programs, more than 80,000 volunteers are contributing their gifts of time and talent.

The Network program unites religious congregations to assist homeless families. Each host church and synagogue provides accommodations and meals for three to five families (up to 14 people) for one week every two to three months on a rotating schedule. Social service agencies assess homeless families and refer them to the Network. Volunteers turn their churches and synagogues into temporary homes to provide hospitality to guest families. A centrally located day center is provided in a “Y”, a downtown church, or other community facility. Each Network employs a director who manages the program and works with the families as they seek housing, jobs, and other resources.

Participating congregations furnish sleeping quarter and a hospitality room where guests relax, socialize, do homework, and watch television. Guests arrive at the host congregation between 5:30 and 6:00 p.m. and remain overnight. The host congregation provides the evening meal, breakfast, and a bag lunch. In the morning, guests return to the day center. From there, children go to school, and adults care for young children or go out to work or to look for jobs or housing.

Volunteers in the IHN program provide homeless families with basic human needs- Shelter, safety, and sustenance- with a spirit of warmth and hospitality. Churches and synagogues become temporary homes in which families are treated as guests and individuals are accepted as they are. In this environment, guests are able to maintain their dignity. The kindness of hosts helps to diminish the hurt of homelessness, and both volunteers and learn from each other.

III.

The Role of Volunteers

The success of each Network depends on the efforts and enthusiasm of hundreds of volunteers. They perform the variety of tasks necessary to provide a safe and comfortable temporary home for their guests. Volunteers express their hospitality by interacting with guests, treating guest families with dignity and respect, and showing genuine concern for their well-being. Without volunteers, there would be no Network.

Each host week, the host congregation needs about 50 volunteers to prepare meals, serve as evening and overnight hosts, coordinate activities, organize supplies, and assist guests as needed. Volunteers come from the host congregation and sometimes from nearby support congregations. Although most hosts are adults, youth can participate as well, particularly with arranging activities for young children and helping older children with schoolwork.

Hosting Opportunities

Volunteer hosts fill one or more of these roles during host week:

1. Dinner Preparers

(2 or 3 volunteers, in advance of 6 p.m.)

Dinner is a hot meal prepared at volunteer's homes or in the congregation's kitchen. It is served at about 6:00 p.m. Cooking dinner is a good opportunity for congregational groups—such as Bible study, women's circles, men's groups, and couple's groups—to get involved with the Network.

2. Dinner and Evening Hosts

(2 volunteers, 5:30-8:30 p.m.)

These volunteers may be part of the dinner preparation team or may arrive to eat with guests. Dinner hosts socialize with guests, welcome newcomers, and assist parent with children's needs. Dinner is informal. After dinner, hosts may conduct children's activities, help with homework, or assist a guest with a particular need.

3. Overnight Hosts

(2 volunteers, preferably a man and a woman, 8:30 p.m.-7 a.m.)

Two hosts spend the night at the church or synagogue. Overnight hosts spend time with guests, help older children with homework, and are available in case of emergency. They wake guests at 6:00 a.m. Some overnight hosts also prepare breakfast.

4. Breakfast Preparers

(Possibly 1 or 2 volunteers, 6-7:30 a.m.)

On weekdays, breakfast is a quick, simple meal (cereal, muffins, toast, juice, coffee) because guests must be ready to leave on the van at 7:00 a.m. At some congregations, overnight hosts prepare breakfast; at others, one or two volunteers arrive at 6:00 a.m. to prepare breakfast and clean up, allowing the overnight hosts to leave in time for work. Often, on weekends, breakfast is more relaxed and hosts prepare something more substantial, such as bacon and eggs, or pancakes.

Other Volunteer Opportunities

- 1. Supplies.** Volunteers either purchase (using funds from the congregational budget) or coordinate donations of food staples, paper products, cleaning supplies, and other needed items.
- 2. Activities.** Volunteers plan and organize special activities and events, such as arts-and-crafts projects, video parties, and outings for children and families.
- 3. Coordinating Donations.** Members of the congregation often wish to assist guests by donating clothing, furniture, and household items. A volunteer collects and organizes the donations, which are distributed to guests once they are settled in permanent housing.
- 4. Laundry.** Each host week, one or two volunteers wash the guests' and overnight hosts' towels and sheets.
- 5. Setup and Takedown.** Volunteer teams set up the accommodations on Sunday afternoon and help take down and move the beds the following Sunday.
- 6. Day Center.** Volunteers are invaluable additions to the Network day center. In addition to providing coverage when the Network director is out, they help guests and the Network director with many daily activities.

Volunteer Coordinators

Volunteer hosts are supported by other volunteers who serve as program coordinators. Each congregation has a primary coordinator with the responsibility for managing host week. In many congregations, several assistant coordinators manage specific responsibilities, such as meals, donation, supplies, and scheduling.

Coordinators serve as managers of the Network program within their congregations. They should communicate regularly with other volunteers to ensure that host week runs smoothly. Volunteer hosts should report problems or unusual incidents to the primary coordinator for follow-up.

IV.

How Can I Help?

How Can I Help? By understanding my role...

We all want to know the best ways to help. IHN volunteers help most when they understand their roles: As members of a host congregation, they have offered their congregation's facility as a temporary home. As hosts, they support homeless families on their paths to independence. Although volunteers cannot solve all the guests' problems, the volunteers' small acts of kindness make a difference in the lives of the homeless families they serve.

How Can I Help? By providing a temporary home...

Homelessness disrupts life beyond all measure. Host congregations invite guests to use their facilities as their temporary home. During host week, when volunteers enter their church or synagogue, they are entering their guests' home. By experiencing their congregation's facilities in this way, volunteers identify with the needs of guests.

How Can I Help? By seeing beyond stereotypes...

IHN's success lies in the ability of its volunteers to put a human face on the tragedy of homelessness and to develop relationships with guests based on mutual respect.

How Can I Help? By striving for understanding...

Volunteers need to understand that Network guests are going through what may be the most severe crisis of their lives. Each person deals with this trauma in a different way. Some individuals are optimistic and open about their situations, while others feel ashamed, humiliated, and alienated. However guests cope with their displacement, they find themselves dependent upon others to support their basic needs and the needs of their children. Many homeless people feel helpless and frustrated and may express these feelings by withdrawing or acting in an angry manner. Some may find it difficult to accept the goodwill of volunteers or to show appreciation. Volunteers need to recognize and be sensitive to the frustration and anger that guests may feel.

How Can I Help? By not judging...

Volunteers should try to overcome the normal tendency to judge or criticize. Guests and volunteers may have different lifestyles and values; it is the volunteer's task to forego these differences and relate to guests as individuals worthy of trust, respect, and utmost courtesy. An ability to see life from another perspective is an especially useful attitude for all volunteers.

How Can I Help? By being a good listener...

While volunteers are not counselors, they do need to employ the listening skills of good counselors: reflecting back, clarifying, and summarizing what they hear. Good listeners don't assume that others think as they do; they listen more than they talk; they don't need to express an opinion on everything that's said. By becoming adept listeners, volunteers can help guests begin to work through the problems they face.

How Can I Help? By respecting privacy...

Guests will meet dozens of volunteers during their Network stay. For this reason especially, volunteers need to take their cues from guests. Volunteers should introduce themselves and be friendly, but not pry or hover. Guests who want to talk are not usually shy about it. Volunteers should respect those who don't.

How Can I Help? By focusing on strengths...

As volunteers develop relationships with guests, volunteers become a helping force by focusing on guests' strengths and capabilities. This focus helps to create empowerment, or a state of mind in which an individual feels personal power as a result of confidence and self-esteem. As guests begin to feel empowered, they mobilize their own internal and external resources to take action and solve problems.

How Can I Help? By understanding my limits...

At times, volunteers may feel helpless in the face of seemingly insurmountable problems in guests' lives. To temper any disappointment, it is vital that volunteers remain clear about their role. They are not counselors or professional problem solvers. At most, volunteers encounter guests a few times a week every two to three months. The role of volunteers is "not to solve but to serve." The goal of Network volunteers must be to provide a secure, homelike environment where guests can focus on their needs and take action to solve their problems. Network volunteers make many contributions to homeless families, but their greatest contribution is the kindness they offer.

How Can I Help? By adopting the hospitality Code...

Just as Network guests are asked to comply with a set of guidelines, volunteer hosts are asked to observe the IHN Hospitality Code. The code summarizes IHN's philosophy of treating Network families with dignity and respect. All volunteers should be familiar with the Hospitality Code and strive to live by it in their relationships with guests.

Interfaith Hospitality Network Hospitality Code

- 1. It's nice to hear your name,** so learn the names of our guests, too.
- 2. Labeling people creates invisible barriers.** Remember that guests are guests, not “the homeless.” Whether spoken or printed on a posted sign, labeling creates an automatic division and fosters an “us” and “them” syndrome.
- 3. Personal questions can be tough to answer,** so don't put guests in awkward positions by asking personal questions. If guests need to talk, give them the chance, but don't pry.
- 4. We all like to keep some things to ourselves.** All information about guests is confidential. Don't discuss guests' situations with other people. Respect their privacy. And never assume that another guest cannot hear you.
- 5. Everyone can use a little privacy.** Our churches and synagogues become temporary homes for our guests. Knock before entering a guest's room.
- 6. Sometimes we need to spend time alone.** Respect guests' needs for quiet times alone or with family.
- 7. We all have bad days.** Depression, sadness, and hopelessness may come. Allow guests the space to deal with their emotions. And be prepared to forgive outbursts without judging them as ungrateful.
- 8. We understand and care for our children.** Allow guests to do the same. Avoid contradicting guests' instructions to their children. Always ask parents' permission before giving things to children.
- 9. Parents need a break.** Offer to tutor, play with, and plan activities for interested children while their parents take a break.
- 10. Adult guests should be treated like adults.** Although our guests are in situations that may require them to be temporarily dependent on others, remember that they are adults who are capable of making their own decisions.

V.

Policies and Procedures

1. Host Staffing

The number of hosts at any one time should be a minimum of two and a maximum of four. More than four hosts can be overwhelming to guests, who meet so many volunteers each host week; also more than four hosts may not enhance the homelike atmosphere the program tries to create. Hosts should wear name tags to simplify introductions and encourage conversation.

2. Guidelines for Network Guests

When guests enter the Network, they agree to abide by the Guests Guidelines, a set of rules that ensure the safety and comfort of guests and hosts. The guidelines are posted at each host congregation.

3. Hospitality Logbook

Each congregation has a Hospitality Logbook in which to record important information. The primary coordinator, using material provided by the Network director, writes background information about incoming families (names, ages of children, material needs, emergency number, work schedules, and so on) in the Hospitality Logbook. Hosts add to the logbook, noting important events and other information that incoming volunteers need to know. Medical needs, guideline violations, late arrivals, discipline or behavior problems, as well as positive and helpful information about each guests should go into the logbook. In addition, it may be helpful to record activities that volunteers have organized for guests and note how these activities were received (for example, whether the children enjoyed an art project or a special game).

The logbook should contain only factual, relevant information, not opinions about guests' behavior. The logbook must not be accessible to guests because it contains confidential information. At the end of host week (Sunday), the primary coordinator of the next host congregation to review logbook entries and to discuss information about the week just ending that may be helpful to the next congregation.

4. Meal Preparation

All dinners served to guests should be hot, nutritionally balance, meals. To avoid repetition, many congregations have a meal coordinator who is responsible for planning the menus. Network volunteers have found that while an occasional tuna casserole is fine, most guests (particularly children) prefer the meat-and-potatoes style of meal, such baked and rice, or meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

On weekday breakfast should be quick and easy; cereal, muffins, toast, milk, juice, tea, and coffee are fine. Cereal and beverages with heavy sugar content should be avoided.

Every evening, guests make bag lunches for the following day, using cold cuts, peanut butter and jelly, fruit, juice boxes, snack bags, and other traditional lunch items supplied by the congregation. Dinner leftovers should not be served again for dinner but may be offered as a choice for lunch.

Weekend Meals. On weekends, meals are often more casually scheduled than during the week. In many congregations, guests prepare their own hot breakfast on Saturday morning at their leisure, or hosts provide pancakes or bacon and eggs as alternatives to cereal and toast. Weekend dinner are often more casual as well and night include ordering pizza or having a picnic or barbecue.

Some congregation offer guests the option of cooking a meal of their choice on a convenient night of the week (usually Saturday). Guests plan the menu; volunteers and guests may shop for the ingredients. For interested guests, this has proven worthwhile: guests have a change to use their skills to give something back-and in the process, volunteers learn more about the guests.

5. Housekeeping

Guests and volunteers share the responsibility for keeping the living and sleeping areas clean and comfortable. At the Sunday orientation meeting, primary coordinators review the list of daily chores with the guests, sign up individual guests for specific jobs, and post a chore sheet for the week.

Chores include the following:

- After-dinner cleanup (clearing the table, washing dishes, etc.)
- Vacuuming or sweeping the hospitality room(s)
- Picking up toys before bedtime
- After-breakfast cleanup
- Cleaning and checking bathrooms mornings and evenings

All rooms should be thoroughly cleaned on Saturday evening or Sunday morning. On Sunday morning, guests should strip and fold their beds and organize their clothes and belongings to prepare for moving to the next host congregation.

6. Recreational Events and Activities

Planned activities on a limited basis provide a nice break for guest families. When the weather is pleasant, the activities coordinator may decide to arrange outdoor activities, such as visiting a playground, playing baseball or kickball, or swimming at a local pool. In winter, videos (be sure they're appropriate for children), board games, puzzles, books, and art- and-crafts materials be supplied.

Activities are great, but it's important to remember that schoolchildren have homework to do, and adult guests are often tired and want to relax in the evening. Monday through Friday, activities should be low-key so that guests can attend to their responsibilities and still have time to rest and relax.

7. Donations

Volunteers often want to donate clothes, furniture, and household items to guests. However, Space constraints often limit what can be store at the host congregation. Therefore, unless a guest has an immediate need for certain apparel, donations should not be made until a guest has found a permanent home.

Volunteers may wish give guests financial assistance for housing and other needs. Such assistance can be beneficial when properly directed. To ensure that financial gifts are used wisely, they should be coordinated by the Network director.

8. Medications and Medical Needs

To safeguard children and other guests, the primary coordinator must put all prescriptions and over-the-counter medications in appropriate, locked storage. Guests must ask for medication when needed; hosts are not responsible for dispensing any drugs. A first Aid Kit must be on hand at all times and may include analgesics (safely stored) for adult children. Hosts should never recommend any medicine; guests must make own decisions.

If any guest has or develops a contagious disease, the Network director will make other arrangements for the guest until the period of contagion is over. It is helpful for each congregation to have a designate on-call physician and/or nurse to respond to questions not requiring immediate medical attention.

If there is an injury need for a volunteer or guest to be in contact with blood or other

bodily fluids, protective gloves must be worn. A supply of gloves should be kept with the host congregation's First Aid Kit and with other supplies. Any areas soiled by blood or other bodily fluids must be thoroughly cleaned with a solution of one part bleach to nine parts water.

9. Medical Emergencies

The primary coordinator should post a copy of emergency Procedures, along with a list of all emergency phone numbers, near a telephone that volunteers use.

In a medical emergency:

- 1. Phone 911, the rescue squad, or the police.**
2. A host should accompany the guest to the hospital. If there are not enough hosts present to permit a host to go to the hospital, call the primary coordinator or a backup volunteer to accompany the guests or meet the guests at the hospital.
3. Report the emergency to the primary coordinator and the Network director as soon as possible.
4. The accompanying volunteer must report back as soon as possible concerning the guest's medical status and arrangements.
5. Record and date all information about the emergency in the Hospitality Logbook.

10. Parenting

Parents are responsible for the care of their children while they are in the Network. However, hosts should intervene if a child's behavior becomes injurious to self or other or destructive to the congregation's property. In other cases, volunteers must respect the parent's right to parent, even if that parenting is inconsistent with the volunteer's own view of good parenting.

Witnessed or suspected child abuse is an exception. To protect children, the law mandates that child abuse be reported to the agency that handles abuse investigations. If a volunteer suspect abuse, the Network director must be contacted immediately.

Many congregations report that occupying children with appropriate activities is one of the best ways to help parents who need time to concentrate on their own needs. Guests may be tired and discouraged and, like all parents, need break from the responsibility of parenting. Young groups from the congregation may be especially successful at engaging children in enjoyable activities. Volunteers should always ask parent for permission before giving items to children or engaging them in activities.

11. Conduct and Discipline

Guests and volunteers are expected to behave respectfully and courteously. If occasionally the stress of homelessness and group living leads a guests to behave discourteously or irresponsibly, volunteers need to understand and avoid taking negative feelings or behavior personally.

At no time, however, should a volunteer or guest be subjected to verbal or physical abuse or harassment. Any abuse or threatening behavior should be immediately report to the Network director. If necessary, the police should be summoned to escort an individual off the premises.

12. Smoking, Alcohol, and Drugs

No Smoking is permitted in the church or synagogue. A designated area outside the building should be available for smokers. Alcoholic beverages and illegal drugs are strictly prohibited. Any suspicion of intoxication or drug use must be report to the Network director.

All guests sign the Guest Guidelines that cover the policies regarding smoking, alcohol, and drugs. Hosts should be aware of these rule; they should note any violations in the logbook and speak directly with the primary coordinator or Network director.

13. Spiritual Nurturing

Although many individuals volunteer to host as an expression of their faith, discussing personal beliefs with guests is inappropriate and should be avoided unless the guest initiates the subject. Volunteers may certainly invite guests to worship services and should provide any necessary transportation if they choose to attend.

14. Confidentiality

It is IHN policy that all information obtained from or concerning guests is privileged communication. Sharing about a guest with any outside source without the specific permission of the guest is inappropriate and unacceptable.

It's natural to want to discuss your volunteer experiences with your family and friends, but even when your conversation is in the strictest, you should avoid giving names and other details that might identify guests. IHN guests' right to confidentiality and privacy must be preserved.