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Volunteer Horse Patrol Provides Needed Assistance in Difficult Economic Times

Jenifer Nadeau

University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System, jnadeau@canr.uconn.edu

Diane Ciano

Connecticut Horse Council, spirit76@snet.net



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Volunteer Horse Patrol Provides Needed Assistance in Difficult Economic Times

Abstract

Connecticut Horse Council's Volunteer Horse Patrol can serve as a model for other states interested in starting their own volunteer horse patrols. Duties of a volunteer horse patrol can include monitoring trail use, assisting with trail maintenance, and providing many other services to public trails and parks. A volunteer horse patrol can assist overworked state agencies so valuable services can be provided to the people of the state even in difficult economic times.

Jenifer Nadeau

Equine Extension Specialist
University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System
Storrs, Connecticut
jnadeau@canr.uconn.edu

Diane Ciano

Trails Committee Chair
Connecticut Horse Council
Berlin, Connecticut
spirit76@snet.net

Background

Connecticut Horse Council's Volunteer Horse Patrol (CHC-VHP) is an effective way to improve relations between recreational horseback riders and public land users while aiding an overworked, understaffed Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). No state or federal dollars support this program; funds and services are donated. The CHC-VHP program is modeled after the Maryland Department of Natural Resources State Forest & Park Service Equestrian Program Volunteer Mounted Patrol and the National Park Service VIP (Volunteers in Parks) program. Information and log forms are modeled after the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area Volunteers in Parks program. Other states may benefit from a similar self-supporting program.

CHC Trails Committee Chair and State Equine Extension Specialist are the co-supervisors for the program. Four state forests and a state park are patrolled. The duties of CHC-VHP, which officially began on June 1, 2003, are to ride or hike trails of each state forest and report suspicious or unusual situations to appropriate DEP or CHC staff and provide non-confrontational services to the public, including information on rules and regulations.

Additionally, they work in conjunction with DEP staff, identifying potential resource management problems such as trail erosion and compaction; coordinate and complete maintenance and repairs to facilities in conjunction with DEP staff; and render first aid and coordinate emergency medical services when necessary. CHC-VHP members also assist with programs and special events. The program is not involved in rule enforcement or policing.

Approach

The CHC Trails' Committee Chair was the main organizing force, with the assistance of the Connecticut equine Extension specialist. The idea for CHC-VHP came from a CHC member who e-mailed the CHC Trails' Committee Chair an article about the Maryland Horse Patrol from the Equestrian Land Conservation Resource newsletter. The chair then contacted the primary author of this article and the volunteer coordinator of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area

VIP Program.

A suggestion for forming a horse patrol was placed in the CHC newsletter by the chair, and almost 100 people indicated interest. Next, DEP was contacted, gave their approval, and the horse patrol began. Extension's role was to provide information on the patrol to horse enthusiasts throughout the state through promotion at Extension events, assist with horse and rider evaluations, and help develop rules and regulations for patrol members.

Program applicants are required to complete an application form, join CHC, study a program booklet, receive cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and first aid training, attend a policy training session, and undergo a horse and rider evaluation. Horses are not provided; applicants must provide their own horses. Those without horses may participate by assisting with trail maintenance.

Applicants are required to be a minimum of 21 years old, patrol at least one area per month, and transport the horse to and from the patrol areas. Volunteers must ride under tack at all times and pass a background investigation, including a criminal history and driving check. Applicants must have a signed, notarized CHC-VHP liability release form. Participants are not allowed to use unnecessary/excessive force, including slapping the horse with the reins, excessive kicking, whipping, etc., to discipline their horses while participating in horse patrol activities.

Riders are required to bring a negative Coggins test and a negative Rabies certificate to the evaluation. Proper riding gear and helmets are required. Applicants must test each horse that they plan to ride on patrol. Four evaluators are used for the horse and rider evaluation, usually including a representative of DEP, two members of the CHC who are also volunteer coordinators, and the state equine Extension specialist.

The horse and rider evaluation typically consists of nine "obstacles." The horse must stand tied and alone for 30 seconds. A hiker with a dog approaches the horse and rider. A car approaches the horse and rider, and the driver honks the horn. A person using a weed trimmer approaches the horse and rider to simulate the noise of a motorcycle or ATV approach. The rider is ridden near a tent, over a log, and near balloons. The horse also needs to walk over a bridge and be approached by a bicycle and rider from both directions.

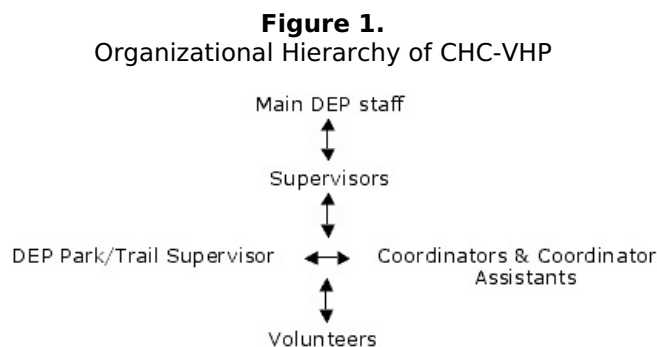
Guidelines for disqualification are detailed in advance. The rider must be in control of the horse at all times, without requiring severe restraint to proceed. The horse cannot show signs of lameness or illness during the evaluation.

After passing the evaluation and completing all necessary forms, the volunteer receives two volunteer identification patches and a first aid kit supplied by CHC-VHP. Volunteers are required to purchase helmet covers and windbreakers specially designed by the patrol and encouraged to wear a consistent "uniform" when patrolling.

There is a hierarchical organization to the patrol. Volunteer supervisors serve as the liaison between the CHC-VHP and the DEP general staff, appoint individuals to serve as volunteer coordinators, and work with the volunteer coordinators to manage volunteers in the program. The volunteer supervisors are the Connecticut Horse Council Trails' Committee Chair and the University of Connecticut equine Extension specialist.

The volunteer coordinator (at least one per park or trail) acts as the liaison between the volunteer supervisor and the CHC-VHP volunteers. The volunteer coordinator maintains contact with the DEP supervisor for that public park or trail and provides him/her with information from CHC-VHP volunteers. The volunteer coordinator also relays information from the DEP park or trail supervisor to volunteers about what needs to be done in the park, reports any pertinent and timely information to the CHC-VHP supervisor, and sends all patrol logs from CHC-VHP volunteers to the CHC-VHP supervisor. There are currently 10 volunteer coordinators.

The coordinator assistant helps the volunteer coordinator with his or her duties. There are currently 4 volunteer coordinator assistants. A flow chart follows (Figure 1).



There are currently 40 volunteers. Generally, a volunteer picks a forest or bridle trail that will be his or her primary patrol area. Most areas that are patrolled are bridle trails varying from wide, old wagon roads to narrow, windy trails. Trails are generally located in forests, away from major roads. Most of the areas patrolled are somewhat rocky and may include creek crossings or steep hills.

When on patrol, the volunteer counts the number of horseback riders, hikers, bikers, walkers with dogs, walkers, etc., that he or she sees while patrolling, and offers directions, maps, first aid, or other information (Figure 2). The volunteer should be a positive role model for equestrian use on the trail. Some maintenance activities include trimming tree limbs, moving downed trees, noting flooded areas of trail, and determining if previously closed trails can be reopened.

Figure 2.
Monthly Log

Connecticut Horse Council, Inc. Volunteer Horse Patrol - MONTHLY LOG

Patrol Log for the month of _____

Patrol member _____

Visitor Sighting Abbreviations: **H**=Hikers, **B**= Bicyclists, **E**= Equestrians, **W/D**=Walkers with Dogs (no leash), **W/D/L**=Walkers with dogs leashed, **HU**=Hunter, **MC**=Motorcycles, **ATV**=All Terrain Vehicles

Assistance Abbreviations: **G.I.**=General Information about Horse Patrol, or Parks
DIR=Directions, **F.A.**=First Aid, **CPR**=include report **Note Assistance Given Below**

Date	Patrol Hours	Main-tenance Hours	Location of Patrol	Visitor sightings (fill in # of sightings)							# Assistance - note below						
				H	B	E	W / D	W / D / L	HU	MC	ATV	GI	DIR	FA	CPR		
Totals																	

Notes: Include corresponding Date and Location - Use back of sheet for more space.

Signature

Date

Return to: Volunteer Coordinator with Quarterly Report

Volunteer Coordinator Signature

Date

Strengths and Weaknesses

The strength of the program is the dedication of all participants in the program and the thorough training and evaluation each horse and rider team receives. Because the program operates on volunteer help, if the volunteers are not motivated and do not patrol, nothing will be accomplished. Volunteers and coordinators must also turn in their monthly logs in a timely fashion so that the DEP staff and supervisors can see where more volunteers are needed or where there are problems. Lack of communication between coordinators and DEP staff is also a weakness; when this occurs, necessary tasks fail to be completed.

Future Direction of the Program

The program continues to grow and expand. More volunteers continue to join. Recently, approval was given by DEP to add two state parks and a forest to the program. A horse and carriage patrol will also be added in two forests. Trails day events and orientation rides have been organized to promote CHC-VHP.

Conclusion and Implications

The CHC-VHP program is designed to help alleviate some of the burden from state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) employees. By working with DEP supervisors, volunteers are able to multiply effectiveness of these employees and reduce costs to taxpayers. Programs like CHC-VHP enable struggling state agencies to continue to provide valuable services to state residents despite difficult economic times. This program helps to protect and preserve the trails of the state.

Other states could organize a similar program and operate it through the state horse council or other state horse group, with assistance provided by the Extension horse specialist or other Extension personnel.

Acknowledgements

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