

CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT

## NATURAL AREAS

# Community Stewardship Program Policy Guide



In partnership with





Dear Chicago Park District Natural Area Volunteers,

The Chicago Region has long been a place of deep connection between people and nature. Chicago is located on the ancestral homelands of the Council of the Three Fires-- Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi Nations. The Sac, Fox, Myaamia, Ho-Chunk, and Menominee also called this area home. We recognize these Indigenous communities are the original stewards of this land, and that many continue this legacy as residents of Chicago today.

Our Natural Areas are a reflection of our history and advocacy. The Chicago Park District oversees almost 2,000 acres of native habitat, from coastal dunes to woodlands to prairies, and the native plant and wildlife communities that call them home or stop on their migration. The habitats may vary greatly, but they have one thing in common – volunteers. In 2001, inspired by the actions of engaged community members, the Chicago Park District launched the Community Stewardship program to support and recruit volunteers to aid in habitat restoration and community engagement.

In 2015, the Chicago Park District partnered with The Nature Conservancy, a global conservation organization, to expand the Community Stewardship Program. The shared commitment has helped to strengthen relationships with institutions and local organizations to have deeper reach and impact.

Volunteers are the heart and soul of our restoration and stewardship work. Your commitment ensures these precious places receive the care they need to thrive, which not only benefits pollinators, birds and other wildlife, but people and nearby neighborhoods, too. Chicago's Natural Areas give people a place to gather, and connect with nature and each other.

The Chicago Park District and The Nature Conservancy look forward to continued partnership to build a more inclusive, equitable Community Stewardship Program. We appreciate the dedicated spirit that you bring to the Natural Areas.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael P. Kelly".

Michael P. Kelly  
General Superintendent and CEO  
Chicago Park District

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michelle Carr".

Michelle Carr  
State Director, Illinois  
The Nature Conservancy

# Community Stewardship in the Parks

Volunteers are an important part of Chicago Park District's (CPD) Natural Areas. These Natural Areas include a wide variety of native habitat types such as prairie, wetland, savanna, woodland, dunes, and lagoons, ranging in size from 0.25 acres to 300 acres. Through the Community Stewardship Program, dedicated community members commit to leading regularly scheduled workdays with the goal of assisting in the protection, management, and monitoring of native habitats while connecting people to nature.

The Community Stewardship Program began in 2001 and has grown exponentially. In 2015, a partnership between the Chicago Park District and The Nature Conservancy was formed to support the program management. Community Steward Volunteer Positions include Lead Steward, Assistant Steward, Greeter, Community Steward Apprentice and Nature Ambassador. In addition to dedicated individuals, Community Stewards also include institutional partners such as Shedd Aquarium, Friends of the Chicago River, Audubon Great Lakes, and the Lincoln Park Conservancy.

## Why Serve as a Volunteer Community Steward?

Becoming a Community Steward offers many benefits, including learning about native Illinois flora and fauna, gaining hands-on experience in ecological restoration, developing leadership skills, connecting people to nature, and fostering an environmental ethic in the city of Chicago.

## Community Stewardship Guidelines

All park users are expected to abide by the conditions stated in the Chicago Park District [Facility Users Code of Conduct](#). Below are the responsibilities and guidelines each Community Steward must follow. Though The Nature Conservancy provides support and staffing for the Chicago Park District Natural Areas Community Stewardship Program, Community Stewards are ultimately Chicago Park District volunteers, and as such must adhere to Chicago Park District policies and procedures.

**Management:** These guidelines will be provided to all Community Stewards, and are also available for review at [www.chicagoparkdistrict.com](http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com).

Lead Stewards and Assistant Stewards must sign a Volunteer Agreement, which outlines the general expectations and guidelines for volunteer and workday management. This agreement will be updated anytime there is a change in leadership, or in the event of a significant change to the guidelines.

Lead Stewards, Assistant Stewards and Greeters are required to complete and submit a background check. Background checks should be arranged with the Program Manager.

**Liability:** All Natural Areas volunteers must sign a Chicago Park District Liability Waiver, which should be updated annually. Community Stewards must submit waivers to the Program Manager by February 1 of each year. Lead Stewards are responsible for collecting waivers from all other volunteers at each workday and must submit waivers to the Program Manager when requested.

**Communication:** The Lead Steward is required to maintain communication with the Volunteer Stewardship Program Manager. Your work is important to us! Please contact your Program Manager with any questions or concerns, and let your workday participants know of Park District opportunities, events or workshops that may be of interest.

Permission must be obtained in advance from the Chicago Park District before initiating contact with the media, or agreeing to any media invitations or interview requests related to the Community Stewardship Program or the Chicago Park District Natural Areas. The Volunteer Stewardship Program Manager can assist in this effort.

**Inclusiveness:** Each site in the Stewardship Program must have a transparent process for welcoming interested volunteers. As a public agency, the Park District values inclusiveness; anyone interested in volunteering is to be fairly considered.

**Workdays:** The Lead Steward is responsible for scheduling workdays at the start of each year. A minimum of four workdays per year is expected. The schedule must be submitted to the Program Manager for approval, and will be shared with the public on the Chicago Park District website.

Organized groups (schools, corporate groups, etcetera) interested in participating in a workday must be approved in advance by the Program Manager. Plans for marketing materials such as banners, brochures or giveaways should be included in the request for approval.

## Community Stewardship Volunteers: Roles and Responsibilities

Community Stewards are passionate and dedicated volunteers who work in coordination with Chicago Park District staff to facilitate volunteer workdays in designated Natural Areas. Stewards contribute to site planning and provide day-of instruction to workday volunteers. Stewards create a safe and welcoming environment for all volunteers, including someone who may arrive with little to no restoration knowledge or experience.

Workdays include hands-on opportunities in ecological restoration, monitoring, education and cleanup. Basic tasks include but are not limited to trail maintenance, planting, pruning, controlling invasive plant species, seed collection, trash pick-up and nature walks.

Each site in the Stewardship Program must have a Lead Steward, and there are a limited number of Volunteer Positions. Interested candidates must contact the Community Stewardship Program Manager for more information at [stewardship@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:stewardship@chicagoparkdistrict.com). Holding a formal Volunteer Position is not required to take part in workdays (see “Workday Volunteer”).

## Volunteer Positions

### Lead Steward / Assistant Steward

Lead or Assistant Stewards must be at least 18 years old and commit to a minimum of 2 years of service to the Group. The Lead Steward serves as the primary point of contact with CPD staff, and is responsible for overall coordination of workdays. Lead and Assistant Stewards must complete a Chicago Park District Volunteer Application and clear a background check before beginning service.

#### Qualifications:

- Possess a desire to learn, a strong interest in the management of the Natural Areas, strong leadership and communication skills, and the ability to work collaboratively with diverse populations.
- Previous experience in natural areas management or volunteering is preferred, but not mandatory.
- Completion of one season as an Apprentice Steward (candidates with prior stewardship experience may be deemed exempt).
- Willingness to participate in supplemental trainings as recommended by CPD staff.

#### Responsibilities:

- Work with CPD to schedule volunteer workdays and manage site volunteers. Stewards are expected to coordinate and lead at least four workdays per year.

- Coordinate with CPD staff to contribute to the ecologically-sound management of a designated Natural Area.
- Share observations of space use, community attitudes, and the health of plant and wildlife communities for use in CPD site management plans.
- Support management activities including native species planting and propagation, woody and herbaceous invasive species control, trail maintenance, ecological monitoring, and litter removal as planned with CPD.
- Coordinate tool and supply requests with the Program Manager.
- Send communications to volunteers.
- Record attendance and service hours in Volgistics and provide a summary to the Program Manager following each workday (by Monday following the workday).
- Assist with the recruitment, recognition, and retention of volunteers.
- Provide direction and guidance to Community Steward Greeter and Apprentice.
- Option to serve as a mentor to Apprentice Stewards.

### **Community Steward – Greeter**

Community Steward Greeters must be at least 18 years old and commit to a minimum of 1 year of service to the Group. The following responsibilities are carried out by the Lead and Assistant Community Stewards at locations that do not have a Greeter. Community Steward Greeters must complete a Chicago Park District Volunteer Application and clear a background check before beginning service.

#### **Qualifications:**

- Possess a desire to learn, a strong interest in the management of the Natural Areas, strong leadership and communication skills, and the ability to work collaboratively with diverse populations.

#### **Responsibilities:**

- Welcome and orientate workday volunteers.
- Administer CPD Liability Waiver forms and submit signed forms to Program Manager.
- Engage with park patrons to promote the Community Stewardship Program, volunteer workdays and the benefits of the Natural Areas.

### **Community Steward – Apprentice**

Community Steward Apprentices must be at least 16 years old and commit to one year of service to the Group. Apprentice under the age of 18 must have parental consent. Community Steward Apprentices must complete a Chicago Park District Volunteer Application.

#### **Qualifications:**

- Possess a desire to learn, a strong interest in the management of the Natural Areas, strong leadership and communication skills, and the ability to work collaboratively with diverse populations.

#### **Responsibilities:**

- Assist with a minimum of 4 workdays in a 12-month period. *If you are preparing to apply for a Lead or Assistant Steward position, you should participate in at least one workday at the site you seek to serve (if possible).*
- Take direction and guidance from the Lead and/or Assistant Steward(s).

### **Volunteer – Nature Ambassador**

Nature Ambassadors must be at least 18 years old. Nature Ambassadors must complete a Chicago Park District Volunteer Application before beginning service.

#### Responsibilities:

- Collaborate with the Program Manager and the Lead Steward to offer nature walks or other nature based learning opportunities as part of workdays in the Natural Areas.

#### Qualifications:

- Experience leading others in nature walks or activities.
- Knowledge of Illinois' natural areas and habitat types.
- Strong communication skills, and the ability to work collaboratively with diverse populations.

#### Workday Volunteer

Volunteers without a formal role are welcome to participate in workdays, no application is required. Youth volunteers age 13 or over must be accompanied by a parent on their first visit. Volunteers under the age of 13 must always be accompanied by a parent or guardian.

Lead Stewards are required to provide workday volunteers with a waiver that must be signed before participating in a workday. Group waivers will be made available to accommodate one time or unexpected volunteers. People under the age of 18 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian to the first workday, and cannot participate without a signature from the parent or guardian.

For more information about workdays visit [www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/communitystewardship](http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/communitystewardship).

#### Requirements

|                                     | Volunteer Application | CPD Background Screening | Apprenticeship* | Sign CPD Volunteer Agreement | Sign CPD Liability Wavier |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Community Steward <b>Lead</b>       | ★                     | ★                        | ★               | ★                            | ★                         |
| Community Steward <b>Assistant</b>  | ★                     | ★                        | ★               | ★                            | ★                         |
| Community Steward <b>Greeter</b>    | ★                     | ★                        |                 |                              | ★                         |
| Community Steward <b>Apprentice</b> | ★                     |                          |                 |                              | ★                         |
| Nature Ambassador                   | ★                     |                          |                 |                              | ★                         |

\*Exempt if prior experience is approved.