

2026-2027 MDS Yearlong Volunteer Guidelines



**Mennonite
Disaster
Service**

The purpose of the Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) Yearlong Volunteer Program is to provide an opportunity for volunteers to serve others, enhance their leadership skills, and to serve with MDS to help bring people home after disasters. Generally, this program has attracted young adults who may not have strong leadership or construction experience, but are willing to learn, and therefore this document is written with them in mind. For those who do not fall into these categories, this agreement can be modified on an individual basis.

Program Goals:

1. MDS Yearlong Volunteers will enhance their leadership skills through working with weekly volunteers on MDS projects under the supervision of MDS Project Directors, with the expectation of becoming a Leadership Volunteer.
2. MDS Yearlong Volunteers will improve their knowledge and skill of house construction and repair, of office management, or of cooking for large groups under the training and guidance of MDS Leadership Volunteers.
3. MDS will provide this service opportunity particularly geared toward young people, with the intent of nurturing the value of service in individual volunteers and in Anabaptist churches at large.

Terms:

Long-Term Volunteer: a volunteer serving four (4) weeks or more on an MDS project, but not in a leadership role

Leadership Volunteer: a volunteer serving four (4) weeks or more on an MDS project in a leadership role

Leadership Roles include (learn more [here](#) on the MDS website):

- **A Project Director** is responsible for the long-term planning and day-to-day operations of the project, including volunteer management, construction, and community relations.
- **A Construction Supervisor** partners with the Project Director in supervising the day-to-day construction needs of the project.
- **A Crew Leader** facilitates the day-to-day work of the Weekly Volunteers and works alongside the crew in construction on the job site.
- **A Office Manager** is responsible for the project's financial accounting, communications and hospitality needs.
- **A Head Cook** plans and prepares well-balanced nutritious meals.
- **An Assistant Cook** assists in the preparation and serving of well-balanced nutritious meals.

MDS Yearlong Volunteer Requirements:

1. Must be at least 18 years old.
2. Must complete the Long-Term Volunteer application process: application form, two references, a background check, and an interview.
3. Exhibit leadership skills and the capacity to learn.
4. Demonstrate the willingness and ability to move into a Leadership Volunteer role in the second half of the year.
5. Provide proof of health care coverage, with knowledge of how to make and manage any personal claims.
6. Provide a valid Driver's License and an International Driver's License, if applicable. Volunteers must be at least 19 years old to drive an MDS vehicle.
7. Present a valid passport for travel within the US and Canada. It is expected that each volunteer will be able to navigate air travel and airports, delayed flights, etc.

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8. Be available from August through July; these dates are approximate.
9. Participate in an MDS Yearlong Volunteer orientation held in Lititz, PA at the beginning of each year.
10. Participate in MDS on-site training (construction or otherwise) at the beginning of the year, at a location to be determined.
11. Participate in the MDS Annual Celebration (February of each year, location varies); travel, lodging and registration costs will be covered by MDS.
12. Provide personal financial support for personal items, clothing (volunteers will need clothing for multiple seasons and climates), some food, respite expenses not covered by MDS, and other miscellaneous costs. MDS recommends approximately \$100 - \$150 per month. Volunteers are expected to know how to manage and access their funds.

MDS will Provide:

1. Orientation to MDS and training on relationship building, conflict resolution, and teamwork.
2. Appropriate basic skill training and meaningful work during the year at MDS projects located in the US.
3. Lodging and food while on projects. This will include Wi-Fi access (in common areas), laundry facilities, meals, bedding, and food for weekend meal preparation. It is our hope to provide private or semi-private rooms, but that may not always be possible at every project - sharing a room may be necessary.
4. An MDS cell phone for use while serving with MDS. These phones will *not* support international calls but will support the use of apps that perform Internet-based calls (WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom, etc.).
5. A \$20.00 stipend paid in cash, during each week of service on a project. For Yearlong Volunteers, stipends will be paid during project breaks and during respite weeks (note: this policy differs from MDS practice with other Leadership & Long-Term Volunteers).
6. Leadership Volunteer team-building activities while on a project. Typically, the Leadership Volunteers decide as a group where to go/what to do. The Project Director pays for the activity or meal cost from the project budget for the whole group.
7. Transportation to and from home, orientation, training, project, and respite locations during their term of service. MDS will pay for the cost of one checked bag on all flights and for all meals while traveling. Volunteers are encouraged to have one checked bag, one carry-on bag, and a backpack. Volunteers are asked to make reasonable purchases when buying meals to practice good stewardship of MDS donor funds.
 - a. For U.S. and Canadian residents, MDS will provide transportation to/from Lititz, PA at the beginning and end of the volunteer's term of service.
8. Respite Care will be scheduled throughout the year to provide time for relaxation and refreshment. Each Yearlong Volunteer will receive 3 weeks of Respite Care, an extended Winter Break (2-3 weeks), and a 3-day weekend during the summer. Timing and guidelines for Respite are explained later in this document.
9. An MDS debit card or similar for each volunteer to use for MDS-related expenses during their term of service. Receipts are required for all expenses. Specific training on submitting receipts will be offered and must be followed.
10. Up to \$250 for the purchase of work boots and a coat for use during the volunteer's MDS service.

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Expectations:

1. MDS expects each Yearlong Volunteer to have basic life skills for navigating living on their own. We know each Yearlong Volunteer will be living and interacting with other Leadership Volunteers at a project, however we expect each Yearlong Volunteer will be able to manage their personal finances, shop for food and prepare meals (on weekends and when on respite), do laundry, navigate travel, manage health care needs, purchase clothing, etc.
2. The MDS Yearlong Program is not a discipleship training program. While MDS Project Directors provide opportunity for spiritual growth through morning devotions, prayer and spiritual support, and worship attendance, Yearlong Volunteers should not expect direct discipleship training or spiritual mentoring. Volunteers can expect to grow in their faith and relationship with God during their time with MDS, but volunteers will manage this on an individual basis.
3. MDS expects each Yearlong Volunteer to become a Leadership Volunteer during their time of service. To that end, MDS staff will check in with each volunteer during the year of service to allow the opportunity for both MDS and the volunteer to determine if the relationship is a good fit and mutually beneficial (see details below).
4. MDS acknowledges the challenges of living in transient community for extended periods of time, without the consistent support of family and close friends. Yearlong Volunteers are encouraged to understand the challenges of being on their own for several months at a time. While friendships are made with other Leadership Volunteers and with Weekly Volunteers, these groups of people change regularly and often are unable to provide a source of consistent, long-term support.
5. MDS expects Yearlong Volunteers to abide by these lifestyle guidelines while serving with MDS: (see the MDS Field Guide)
 - Be the hands and feet of Jesus
 - Expect to see Jesus in those you serve
 - Have a great time
 - Be flexible
 - Work as a team
 - Do quality work
 - Follow the MDS lifestyle and conduct, and dress code guidelines (see below)
 - All are responsible to the MDS Project Director or Coordinator on site
 - When staying longer than a week, all volunteers attend weekend worship services in the community where they are serving
 - Be sensitive to the routines and needs of other volunteers as you live and serve together

Lifestyle and Conduct Guide

- Show respect for all people regardless of gender, ethnicity, race or culture, both in the communities where MDS serves and among the diverse MDS constituents
- Possession and/or use of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, all illegal substances and firearms while serving with MDS is forbidden
- Abide by the MDS dress code while on MDS project and work sites
- Adhere to safe work practices at all times

Dress Code (MDS Board Action Feb 2006)

- For safety, closed-toe shoes are required on job sites.
- Out of respect for the communities in which we serve and the diverse volunteer groups who serve, all volunteers are asked to wear shirts with sleeves, modest necklines and covered midriffs. Shorts/skirts are to be knee-length.

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Project Leadership Training and Evaluation

MDS expects each Yearlong Volunteer to become a Leadership Volunteer during their time of service with MDS. Following is a general timeline for training and service. Included are several evaluation benchmarks for the volunteer and MDS to determine if service with MDS is mutually beneficial. If the relationship is not working for either the volunteer or MDS, the term of service can be terminated by either party.

Orientation & Training

3 days

Lititz, PA Office

The cohort will learn about the MDS organization and mission, meet staff, learn about Leadership Volunteer roles, gain tools for conflict resolution and community living, review tool names, and get to know other Yearlong Volunteers in their cohort.

Learning on an MDS Project Site

8 weeks

location to be determined

The cohort will travel to an MDS project to learn basic skills of house construction, office management, or cooking under the guidance of MDS Leadership Volunteers. Each Yearlong Volunteer will be assigned to serve as a Long-Term Volunteer at an MDS project, not in a leadership position. The cohort might not remain together at this point. Project Directors may place Yearlong Volunteers in leadership positions as they deem appropriate.

MDS Volunteer Team staff will be in conversation with the Project Director during this time to monitor each volunteer's progress in learning tool names, gaining knowledge of construction and leadership skills, respect for leadership, and learning to live in community.

Fall Respite

1 week

home or respite location

Yearlong Volunteers may take one week of respite away from the project in late October or early November (see Respite guidelines).

Learning on an MDS Project Site

4-6 weeks

location to be determined

Travel to another MDS Project site to continue developing skills.

Training

1 week

Lititz, PA

In mid-December, Yearlong Volunteers will attend a week of training in Lititz, PA alongside other MDS Leadership Volunteers. The first three days will be General Leadership Training and the last 2 days will be Role-Specific Training (Construction Leaders Training, Office Manager Training, or Cooks Training).

Winter Break

2-3 weeks

home or respite location

MDS projects close temporarily for a winter break from mid-December to early January. Yearlong Volunteers are encouraged to stay with any MDS volunteers they met in the fall, or travel home (if in the U.S.).

At the close of the fall season, MDS Volunteer Team staff will meet each volunteer in person or remotely to discuss their experience so far and discuss the way forward. Volunteer Team staff will be in conversation with Project Directors with whom the volunteer served, receiving their feedback and evaluations.

MDS is not a formal training program, however, MDS provides opportunities for volunteers to learn from other Leadership Volunteers. MDS will collect feedback from the volunteer and their Project Directors to

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evaluate their progress and help MDS and the volunteer discover where might be a good fit for further service.

MDS expects the volunteer to improve their own skills and capacity for MDS leadership. If it is clear that the volunteer exhibits capacity for leadership, the attitude of a servant leader, and shows progress in learning the relevant skills, MDS's intent is to schedule them as a Leadership Volunteer as soon as they are ready to serve in that role.

If the volunteer does not show capability to move into a leadership role or to learn relevant skills (construction or otherwise), MDS may continue to schedule the Volunteer as a Long-Term Volunteer. If the volunteer displays attitudes and behaviors unfitting to MDS or is not making sufficient progress, MDS may conclude the volunteer's time of service. If the volunteer feels that service with MDS is not a good fit for them, they may also choose to conclude their service with MDS.

January through July

Yearlong Volunteers will be scheduled to serve at an MDS project following the Christmas break. They may be placed in leadership roles if their Project Directors deem it appropriate. Volunteers will continue to learn from other Leadership Volunteers, as they did in the fall. MDS Volunteer Team staff will advise Project Directors of each volunteer's abilities and progress during the fall season.

From January to July, volunteers will be placed at several different projects as needed. Members of the cohort may or may not serve together during these months. Volunteers will continue to grow in their leadership and role-specific skills to allow Project Directors to use them in leadership roles on a project by the spring months (March-May), after making incremental progress along the way in the winter months (January through March). Volunteer Team staff will have ongoing check-ins with the volunteers and their Project Directors to evaluate the progress being made.

February – Annual Celebration

All Yearlong Volunteers will attend the MDS Annual Celebration (AC) in February to learn more about MDS as an organization, meet volunteers and staff, and hear stories of disaster survivors. MDS will arrange travel, lodging, and registration and cover these costs. MDS Volunteer Team staff will have a mid-year debriefing and check-in with the volunteers at the AC to evaluate their progress and the quality of their experience.

January through July Respite

Each Yearlong Volunteer will be given the opportunity to take two (2) respite breaks between January and July with at least eight weeks between each respite (see Respite guidelines) In addition, one long weekend (Friday off) will be provided during the summer months.

End of July/August

Following their final week of service, the cohort will return to the Lititz, PA office for one or more days of debriefing. Individual and group debriefing will take place at the direction of the Volunteer Team.

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Respite Care Guidelines

Respite Care is provided to Yearlong Volunteers in recognition of the demands of project leadership and long-term service. Respite Care is to provide time away from an MDS project for self-care, relaxation, and recreation. Respite Care must be arranged in advance (preferably 4 weeks), with the approval of MDS Volunteer Team and with notification to the project leadership.

We encourage Respite to be taken at the volunteer's home, if feasible, or the volunteer may travel to another location within the US. The following guidelines must be followed:

- MDS will provide up to \$1000 for each Respite week. This \$1000 allowance will cover:
 - food during travel to Respite (this differs from the Long-Term Travel Reimbursement Policy)
 - food and lodging during Respite
 - the cost of travel (rental car, air, train, or bus) and one checked bag **TO** the Respite site in the US or Canada. Volunteers will be responsible for all paperwork required to enter Canada.
- MDS will cover costs (outside of the \$1000 allowance) for travel from the Respite location to the next project assignment after Respite.
- Expenses beyond \$1,000 during the Respite week are the responsibility of the volunteer.
- Any funds not used from the \$1000 allowance may not be transferred to another Respite week nor reimbursed to the volunteer.
- MDS will provide up to \$300 for lodging for the 3-day weekend. MDS will not provide funding for flights for the long weekend.

Acknowledgement:

I acknowledge that I have received, understand, and am committing to the program guidelines outlined in this document. I also recognize that circumstances may require adapting these guidelines at times.

Volunteer:

_____	_____	_____
Print Name	Signature	Date

MDS Staff:

_____	_____	_____
Print Name	Signature	Date

Volunteer Information - Documents\Programs\Year-Long Volunteers