

Volunteer Handbook

Welcome & Mission

Thank You to Our Volunteers!

We deeply appreciate your time, dedication, and care—volunteers are **essential** to Horses Help SWI, Inc., and the impact you make in the lives of our clients is immeasurable.

At Horses Help SWI, our mission is to provide equine-assisted therapeutic services in a safe and inclusive environment for individuals with physical, cognitive, emotional, or social challenges. Using our trained herd of full-sized and miniature horses, we serve clients from southwest Iowa and southeast Nebraska, including individuals with Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, cerebral palsy, stroke recovery, and local at-risk youth and adults.

We offer adaptive riding lessons, carriage driving, and on-the-ground equine assisted learning (EAL) programs. Sessions are interactive and can include varying components such as stretching, core strengthening, balance improvement, and educational games like full sensory courses. Most sessions are one-on-one, though some may be in a group setting.

Our programs rely on the essential “horse-human connection.” Horses are highly intuitive and can sense and mirror human physical and emotional behaviors. When a client becomes comfortable with a horse, both can experience calming effects and learn to understand each other’s cues. **Fun fact:** horses can hear a human heartbeat starting at four feet away and may even synchronize their pulse rate to it!

The Importance of Volunteer (YOUR) Support

Volunteers are the heartbeat of Horses Help SWI. Your dedication allows us to provide safe, consistent, and meaningful experiences for our clients and horses. From assisting during sessions and caring for our horses to helping at events and supporting program operations, every task you do directly contributes to our mission. Your time, energy, and compassion make our programs possible, and we couldn’t do this work without you. **Thank you!**

Characteristics of a Star Volunteer

- ★ Reliability - *Regular attendance or provide adequate notice*
- ★ Punctuality - *Late arrival is frustrating for a student who is looking towards their weekly ride*
- ★ Be Relaxed - *An anxious volunteer contributes to a nervous rider and a tense mount for the whole team*
- ★ Alertness - *Despite your outward relaxation, always anticipate a quick change and need for an urgent dismount*
- ★ Empathy - *Avoid false sentimentality. It is important to have empathy and genuine regard toward riders*
- ★ Horse Knowledge - *Knowledge of horses is helpful, but many excellent volunteers have minimal previous experience*
- ★ Patience - *Endless amounts are necessary to adjust to the varied movements and reactions of individuals with disabilities*
- ★ Sensible, Modest, & Comfortable Clothing - *Boots, tennis shoes, and weatherproof boots are protection from seasonal outdoor changes or the deep dirt footing of the arena*

Our Programs

Equine-Assisted Activities/Adaptive Riding (EAA)

These are classes where participants ride horses and work with an instructor, horse lead and side walker(s). These individuals are working on riding skills while gaining core strength, balance, fine and gross motor skills, communication, sensory processing, socialization, and building self-esteem. Lessons can include music, nervous system regulation, simple math, reading, trivia, etc. and can also be incorporated or combined with EAA and EAL sessions. Time frames are approximately 30-minute sessions.

Equine-Assisted Activities/Cart Driving (EAA)

These are classes where participants drive on a specially designed cart, pulled by one of our miniature horses or our pony. Each driver will work with an instructor and horse lead. These individuals are working on cart driving skills but can also gain similar skills that they would riding on the back of a horse, such as core strength, balance, fine and gross motor skills, communication, sensory processing, socialization, and building self-esteem. Lessons including simple math, reading, trivia, etc. can also be incorporated in EAA sessions. Time frames are approximately 30-minute sessions. Cart driving can be an excellent option for a rider who is unable to ride a horse due to various circumstances. Cart driving can still allow for relationship building between the horse and rider.

Equine-Assisted Learning/Life Skills (EAL)

These are part of a non-riding program; but rather are geared toward personal growth, learning, relationships, specific skills learning and boundaries while being near a horse or focused on horse-specific tasks. In these sessions, we work on following rules and structures to complete tasks related to farm or ranch work, while giving each participant a sense of pride in a job well done. We learn to work together and why respectful, clear communication is so important. These sessions can be done privately or in a group, led by our in-house therapist, Jenn Leveritt. To protect the safety and privacy of our participants, these sessions are always closed. (ADD SOMETHING ABOUT GROUNDWORK/ATTUNEMENT/BONDING)

EAGALA Therapy (Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy)

Horses Help SWI offers EAGALA-model equine-assisted psychotherapy, a fully ground-based approach that pairs a licensed mental health professional with a certified equine specialist. These sessions focus on emotional growth, processing trauma, strengthening communication skills, and supporting mental and behavioral health. While volunteers do **not** participate in or support EAGALA sessions, it's helpful to know this service is part of what we offer to individuals and families in our community.

Individual/Small Group Horse Riding Lessons

Horses Help SWI provides individual riding lessons designed to build horsemanship skills, rider confidence, and a deeper understanding of the horse-human connection. Lessons are tailored to meet each rider's goals and emphasize safety, communication, and partnership. These lessons are led **entirely by staff** and sometimes assisted by volunteers.

Meet Our Staff

Kori Nelson, Executive Director – Provides overall leadership for the organization, focusing on funding, partnerships, sustainability, and public outreach

Andrea Dunn, Lead Instructor & Horses Help SWI Ambassador – Oversees participant services and programming.

Ashley Berwick, Barn Manager & Staff Horse Lead – Oversees horse care, barn operations, and equine training support.

Jessica Todd, Volunteer Coordinator & Communications – Manages volunteer lifecycle and oversees internal/external communications.

Mickey Moore & Bethany Baker, Chore Captains – Help ensure that daily AM barn chores run smoothly, safely, and efficiently.

Debbie Watts, Horse Trainer – Provides training and conditioning for program horses, implementing positive reinforcement methods and preparing horses for participant sessions.

Jenn Leveritt, Mental Health Therapist – Provides therapy services for participants in EAGALA sessions.

Meet Our Herd

Our equine partners are an essential part of our team. Each brings their own personality, strengths, and special skills to support our participants and community.

Peanut is a 5-year-old miniature bay mare who loves off-site visits and engaging with people of all ages throughout our community.

Adrianna is a 20-year-old gray miniature mare. Her favorite job is pulling her two-wheel cart, which she does with confidence and pride.

Romeo is a 6-year-old brown and white paint miniature gelding with one half-blue eye. He is extremely social and currently in training for off-site and group programming.

Candy is our 18-year-old Amish pony and a bay paint in color. She has a big personality and loves pulling her four-passenger cart all around the property.

Coco is an 11-year-old chestnut Quarter Horse mare currently in training for programming. She loves attention and can often be found waiting for scratches at the gate.

Jojo is a 3-year-old black and white paint Gypsy cross mare and the daughter of one of our former resident horses, Opal. She will begin training for the riding program once she is a bit more mature.

Sukie is a 19-year-old Percheron mare with a beautiful gray coat and gentle expression. A true gentle giant, she enjoys both ground-based and riding programming.

Santi is an 18-year-old gray Arabian gelding with a dressage background. He is exceptionally kind with riders, stands tall for his breed, and is a barn favorite.

Ivan is a 12-year-old gray POA gelding currently in training for our riding program. He is a sweet, smart horse who enjoys learning new skills.

Luke is a 10-year-old Haflinger gelding with a stunning golden chestnut coat. He is in training for driving and is used in both group and individual programs. Luke is a lovable and entertaining character.

Opie is our Equicizer (or EQ), a mechanical horse designed to simulate the size and movement of our equine partners. Opie helps participants build confidence, balance, and proper posture, providing a solid foundation before mounting a live horse.

Ways to Volunteer

Important Communication Disclaimer

Volunteers can sign up for shifts on [TimeCounts](#), text Jess at Horses Help (712) 339-4058 or verbally alert a staff member when you'd like to come.

If you can't make your shift the day of, please text us **as soon as possible** at (712) 339-4058 to let us know. Andrea, Kori, Ashley & Jess have access to checking the messages regularly. All schedule questions can be directed to Jess via text or at jtodd@horseshelpswi.org.

Chore Crew

Role: Help care for horses and their habitat

Duties: Bringing horses in/out, feeding, stall cleaning, basic horse care, refilling hay and water while working under the guidance of a staff Chore Captain

Requirements:

- Physical work: lifting hay, repeated scooping, working in all weather
- Morning availability
- Be at least 16 years old
- Train with Ashley before taking on chore shifts

Dress Code & Safety: Closed-toe boots required; gloves recommended; dress for the weather (layers in winter); No earbuds/headphones while working; stay aware around horses and surroundings; approach horses calmly from the side; report injuries or broken equipment immediately

Schedule:

- Summer (May-August): 7:00–9:00 AM
- Fall–Spring (September-April): 8:00–10:00 AM
- Daily, rain or shine

Benefits: Spend meaningful time outdoors caring for horses

Side Walker

Role: Provide physical support to participants during mounted sessions

Duties: Walk or jog alongside horses or carts, using approved holds as directed by the instructor

Involvement: Adaptive Riding & Cart Driving Sessions (not used in EAGALA sessions)

Requirements:

- Be at least 18 years old
- Be able to walk/job and lift up to 50 lbs
- Complete Side Walker training with us (training session, mock session, and supervised live session)

Benefits: Directly support riders in a rewarding therapeutic setting and build bonds with both participants and horses

Horse Leader (Groom & Tacker)

Description: Prepare and support the horses during sessions, lessons, and events

Duties: Grooming, tacking, warming up horses, monitoring horse needs, and assisting instructors

Involvement: Adaptive Riding, Cart Driving, Beginner Lessons, and on/off-site events

Requirements:

- Comfort with walking/jogging next to horses
- Be at least 18 years old
- Complete Horse Leader training with us (multiple sessions + supervised live session)

Benefits: Build hands-on skills in horse care, handling, and leadership

Event Support

Description: Assist with special programs and community events

Duties: Set-up and clean-up, crafts and group activities, light support around horses, and representing Horses Help SWI as an ambassador

Benefits: Participate in outreach and experience meaningful community connections

Barn Rules and Safety Guidelines

Horse Handling and Barn Access

- Only trained and approved volunteers may enter spaces with loose horses, and only when directed by staff.
- Only designated horse leaders/handlers may bring horses from outside pens.
- Volunteers should not enter outside pens unless trained and asked by staff or a horse leader for a specific task. Once complete, please return to the volunteer areas.

Interactions with Horses

- Do not pet horses in outside pens or reach through stall bars.
- Avoid petting horses on their heads or faces — this is their personal space.
- Use only program tack and equipment, and return items to their proper place after use.
- Only staff may bridle horses.
- Please do not feed horses treats or allow them to lick your hands. Horses are on special diets, and treats or licking can encourage biting. ***Only designated staff or volunteers may use Positive Reinforcement (treats).***

Safe Practices Around Horses

- Always approach a horse at the shoulder and speak as you approach. Remember, horses cannot see directly in front of or behind them without moving their heads.
- When moving around a horse, place a hand on their body and talk to them so they know where you are.
- Avoid sudden movements such as waving arms, running, or jumping, which may startle horses.
- Never sit, kneel, or lie on the ground near a horse.

Volunteer Expectations

- Please arrive no earlier than 5-10 minutes before your scheduled shift. A staff member must be present for volunteers, participants, or guests to be on site.
 - Chore Crew: Please wait until Chore Captain arrives to enter facilities in AM
- Park in the grassy lot to the right of the entrance. No volunteer vehicles beyond the indoor arena.
- Personal pets are not allowed at the barn. (Service animals are permitted with prior notice to staff.)
- Children under 16 must be directly supervised by an adult who is not otherwise engaged in volunteering.

During Sessions

- If you are not directly involved with a session, please stay in designated waiting areas or ask the barn leader for tasks. Keep noise to a minimum to avoid distractions.
- Phones must be silenced in the barn and turned completely off (no vibrate) in the arena. Do not answer calls while assisting with a session.
- All humans that are mounted in riding sessions must wear approved safety helmets.
- Always clean up after yourself and your horse (hair, manure, trash, etc.).
- Do not go anywhere by yourself with a participant.

Instructor Authority

- The session instructor is responsible for all aspects of the session from the time the first horse is taken out until the last horse is put away. Always follow their directions.
- Report any unsafe situations immediately to the session instructor or barn leader.

Working with Participants

At our program, participants are the heart of everything we do. Many of them live with disabilities, and each person brings their own unique way of learning, communicating, and experiencing the world. ***Our role as staff and volunteers is to enrich their experience by meeting our participants where they are, supporting their growth, and making their time with us positive, safe, and meaningful.***

Equine-assisted services are not just fun activities — they are multifaceted and dynamic experiences. Every moment with a participant is an opportunity to build confidence, encourage independence, and foster joy. Whether you are leading a horse, sidewalking, helping with grooming, or offering encouragement, you are part of a team that makes these moments possible. We greatly appreciate your willingness to assist with these activities

Key reminders when working with participants:

- **Respect individuality:** Each participant has their own strengths, challenges, and learning style. Be patient and flexible.
- **Promote independence:** Offer support as needed but encourage participants to try things on their own whenever possible.
- **Use positive communication:** Smile, use encouraging words, and celebrate every effort — big or small.
- **Model professionalism and care:** Remember you are a role model in and out of the arena. Your attitude sets the tone for the participant's experience.
- **Prioritize safety and comfort:** Physical and emotional safety come first. Always follow staff direction and program guidelines.

By volunteering here, you are not only assisting in lessons or activities — you are helping to create an environment where participants can thrive, succeed, and build meaningful connections.

Communication

Email Us!

Kori Nelson (Executive Director) - Knelson@horseshelpswi.org

Andrea Dunn (Lead Instructor/Ambassador) - Adunn@horseshelpswi.org

Jessica Todd (Volunteer Coordinator & Comms) - Jtodd@horseshelpswi.org

Ashley Berwick (Barn Manager/Lead Chore Captain) - Aberwick@horseshelpswi.org

General Volunteer Email – volunteer@horseshelpswi.org

Call or Text Us!

(712) 339-4058 – This is our landline number that also receives/sends texts. Texts are monitored by Kori, Andrea, Jessica, and Ashley. Please save this number in your phone to contact us for more immediate contact.

We aim to respond to calls/texts/emails within 24 hours. Please do not text or call staff on their personal numbers.

Weather-Related Updates

If sessions must be cancelled due to weather, we will contact you directly and post updates on our social media channels.

We may cancel if windchill/feels-like temperature is below 20°F, thunderstorms, lightning, extreme wind, unsafe footing, or any other unsafe conditions.

Social Media

Instagram - [@horseshelpswi](https://www.instagram.com/horseshelpswi)

Facebook - [@horseshelpswi](https://www.facebook.com/horseshelpswi)

TimeCounts (Volunteer Schedule Hub) – timecounts.app/horses-help-swj

Website – horseshelpswi.org

For videos featuring the power of Equine Assisted Services, check out this [YouTube Playlist](#)

