

**Introduction** Thanks for volunteering to help at a construction site. Your efforts will make a difference not only to one particular family in need of decent, affordable housing but also the whole neighborhood.

In this [Construction Volunteer How-To article](#) we discuss a variety of subjects we want you to read about that don't fit neatly in any other article.

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### The beginning of the day [TOP](#)

**Cancellations** Please be aware that your or your group's scheduled date for volunteering might have to be cancelled, perhaps even at the last minute. The usual reason is bad weather. Also, as you know from the [Safety article](#) (which we hope you've read or will read next), you can expect the sites to be shut down if the heat index reaches 103 degrees Fahrenheit. You can also expect an early end to the day if precipitation or high winds make the work too dangerous.

**Forms and ages** Certain age restrictions apply to work on demolition and construction sites. Also, make sure you have read and signed the appropriate release and waiver forms.

**Parking** At the beginning of each working day and often enough thereafter it is almost always necessary to park one or more construction vehicles as close as possible to the job site. Accordingly, please don't park your own vehicle in these choice locations and don't let any other volunteer do so either. If you arrive and see a bunch of volunteers' cars parked all around and you wonder how lucky you got that there's room right in front of the site, you probably didn't read this very paragraph, so please read it now.

Also, some of those construction vehicles will be towing trailers that want to be backed into the driveway, so make sure there's enough room on the *other* side of the street for them to do so. It can be really time-consuming when we have to track down the owner of a vehicle that needs to be moved and then to wait for it

to get moved, especially if a dozen people are just standing around waiting for that to happen. Please be generous in deciding where you park.

**Patience** The beginning of the day at a volunteer construction work site – just as at any work site – is different from most of the day. Most of the day everything hums along fine, but at the beginning there are often special problems to be solved. That’s just the nature of a job site at that time of day.

For example, sometimes – whether on a regular construction site or on a volunteer site – it is practically impossible every single day to have available *all* of the tools and materials and supplies and other objects that it turns out are needed to get *every* particular project started *right away*. (This is why The Home Depot and Lowe’s are open so early every morning and why at that time of day they’re filled with so many customers wearing construction boots and driving trucks.) Circumstances change unpredictably, and sometimes a tool or a something else that you would never have thought you’d need turns out to be necessary. Although we always strive to make sure everything that’s needed is available, we hope you will strive to be patient with us when we inevitably, occasionally come up short.

We also hope you will be patient with us when plans change, which they inevitably, occasionally do. Most of the time, if you’ve been told you’ll be working on projects A and B you will, but it always happens every so often that plans change – sometimes more than once and sometimes at the last moment – and you end up working on projects C and D.

Furthermore, every so often you might be expecting to work at one particular site and find yourself working at a completely different one. (Yet further, it’s not all that uncommon for some members of your group to go to one site and the rest to another.)

Running volunteer work sites – and this is true of any other construction company – *always* eventually involves unpredictable events and circumstances. Our staff will adapt as efficiently as possible, which we want you our volunteers to be prepared to adapt to too.

**Attitude** We will also point out here that at the beginning of the day some novice volunteers are less certain than others of their skills and abilities. We know some of you are hesitant to jump in and do something because you’re afraid you’re unqualified or might cause an injury or damage something, and that’s a good tendency for novices. Or maybe you think you’ll just be in the way. But we want *every* volunteer to enjoy the benefits of helping, so please feel free at any time to approach anyone in charge and ask what you can do to help. For that matter, if you see one or more people anywhere doing anything at all, feel free to walk up and ask whether you can help. If the answer is No, just try again elsewhere or later.

Everyone in charge on a volunteer construction site will always *want* to put you to work, but you must understand that it is not always possible for every volunteer to be assigned a specific task with specific instructions to perform at every given moment.

Regardless of your skill level, it is your attitude – your eagerness to help, your willingness to do anything and try something new – that will keep you as busy as you can be throughout the day.

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## The middle of the day – lunch [TOP](#)

We don’t typically take a morning or afternoon break, but we do break for lunch at around 11:30. (We always supply water and some paper cups throughout the day, and we hope you’ll bring your own refillable water bottle so we don’t have so many paper cups littering the site.) Below is a list of several options for lunch, and your group’s members should decide ahead of time what you want to do. It’s always helpful if you let the on-site staff know what your lunch plans are as soon as you do.

- Bring your lunch and eat it at the site.
- Have someone go get lunch from a restaurant, or have it delivered, and eat at the site.

- Go to eat at one or more nearby restaurants.
- Depending on what meetings are going on there, you might be able to have your lunch at the office if your site is close enough.
- Some groups make rather a production of lunch, and you may do so too. You or people from your group you specially designate can set up card tables on the site and lay out a feast of homemade or store-bought delectables, you can set up a grill for burgers and brats, or anything else you like. If you have a grand repast of this sort in mind, please let the site supervisor know as soon as possible so we can help you be efficient and reasonably comfortable.

Generally, we hope you will take as long as you need to for lunch but no longer. Also, for reasons that are explained in detail [here](#), please keep in mind that lunch is dangerous.

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## The end of the day [TOP](#)

**Roll-up and tool sweep** At the end of each working day, the site supervisor will announce or signal\* that it's time to *roll up the site*, which means stopping work and putting everything away properly so everyone can go home.

\*Among those in the know – which will include you in just a few seconds – the signal for rolling up the site is this: Point your index fingers at each other horizontally, then rotate your hands in the air like they're pedaling a bicycle.

At the end of each working day, the staff member(s) must track down all the tools and other stealable objects such as ladders, called a *tool sweep*. All these objects must be stored properly somewhere, whether on a truck or in a trailer or in the house or somewhere else. The staff members' day cannot end till this is done, whether you help or not, no matter how long it takes.

We want you to find time at the end of the working day – when we know you and everyone else are probably tired – to do a tool sweep and otherwise help roll up the site. Walk around the house inside and out and snatch up anything that needs to be collected. Look on the tops of walls, where no tool should but some tool might be. If you know where it goes, put it there. If you don't – and most novices don't – keep looking and asking around. If you see a window that's open, close and lock it. If you see an air hose, coil it up (in really big loops) and deliver it wherever anyone tells you it goes. If you see a strip of nails, snatch 'em up not because they'll get stolen but because they'll rust pretty fast. If you espy a hammer lying in the grass, add it to wherever the other hammers are.

If you see a ladder, grab it or grab a helper and grab it and put it wherever it goes. If ladders need to be lashed to a roof rack before transport, either let a staff member know that it isn't lashed yet or lash it yourself. Lashing ladders to trucks takes a bit of thought to get right so take your time or get help.

**Nail apron** If you've got a nail apron, we'll thank you to take the time to empty the pockets and place the various contents wherever they belong. If you just dump a nail apron with a bunch of nails or screws in it into a bucket or somewhere, they will often spill into the bucket or onto the ground when it's removed therefrom, which is way more wasteful of time and money than taking the time to empty it properly to begin with. Thanks.

**Painting** If you have been painting, at the end of the day we do want you to help to clean and rinse the brushes and rollers and so on so they're ready for, for example, a whole new color the next day. Please allow enough time to do a good job of this end-of-day activity, because otherwise we end up spending a lot more time and money than we need to. Also, make sure carefully to seal all the paint containers. Basically, we don't want any paint to dry anywhere except on whatever it is you painted.

**Mudding and grouting** The same applies to mudding and grouting for tile work such as the kitchen and bathroom floors. When you're finished with the tools, make sure they are carefully cleaned and dried.

**Concrete** And the same applies to concrete tools. Every so often volunteers get the chance to help finish

freshly poured concrete such as for driveways and sidewalks. Those tools must be kept free of concrete whenever they aren't being used.

**Daisy-chain extension cords** We usually use several long extension cords every day from the beginning to the end of the house-building process, which means those cords have to be removed from the site and stored somewhere at the end of each day and then removed from storage and used the next day. If you know how to make a daisy chain out of an extension cord, please take the time to do that rather than simply coiling it. Coiling isn't *nearly* as good as daisy-chaining, and here are six reasons.

- About half the time, a coiled extension cord will get tangled from the time you finish coiling it to the time it's hauled out for use the next day, which requires more time for someone else to untangle than if you had daisy-chained it. *It is impossible to tangle an extension cord that's been daisy-chained.* You can drop it or hang it on something or pick it up a dozen times any old way and it just simply can't tangle.
- Often enough two coiled extension cords will mesh into each other when hung on a hook or even dropped onto the ground together, so that later someone has to untangle not one but two cords. It is impossible for this to happen with a cord that's been daisy-chained.
- A large-gauge, 100-foot drop cord that's been coiled gets heavy, especially if you have to carry it a long way up a treacherous hill. If it's daisy-chained you can simply drag it behind you and allow the planet to support most of the weight. You can't do this with a drop cord that's been coiled.
- If the cord is daisy-chained you can un-loop only as much of the length as you need rather than having to uncoil all of it. Plus which, when you're done you can even re-loop the part you un-looped.
- When you coil an extension cord it either twists on its long axis, which is always harmful to the cord, or you have to take the time to prevent that problem, which means you have to untwist it 360 degrees for every loop you make. The daisy-chained loops never twist the cord at all.
- In the same way that looping an extension cord into a daisy chain is oddly satisfying for you, so for someone else the next day is un-looping it satisfying. You just undo the plugs end and pull and it magically undoes itself. What you thought was a knot was not.

(If after all these reasons you decide to coil the cord anyway rather than daisy-chain it, it will be less likely to tangle if you do these two things: (1) Unless your forearm is a yard long, which it isn't, don't coil a cord around it. Instead, whether in your hands or on the ground, make loops that are about three feet long. As noted, either way this will twist the cord, so do keep untwisting it as you go. (2) Then use the last few feet to wrap several times around the middle of the loops you just made and tuck in the end securely.)

Go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaEv9wm6gy0> for one demonstration of how to daisy-chain an extension cord so you can learn how. Although it's an amateur video, it is both accurate and thorough. Also, there might be someone on your site who can show you how to do it. Also, once you fully understand how much better this method is, you'll probably find yourself using it on your cords at home, so go ahead and learn it now. Also, although seeing it is better than reading about it, here's the method in words.

(1) Double the cord on itself. (2) Starting at the center of the cord as opposed to the plugs end, make a simple overhand knot or a slip knot. (3) Holding the new loop thus created in one hand, reach your other hand through it and grab hold of the rest of the doubled cord. (4) Pull a portion of that doubled cord back through the loop your hand is in, which will create a new double-loop. (5) Repeat steps 3 and 4 till you've reached the plugs end. (6) Pull the plugs through the last double-loop to lock that end and you're done.

Notice that in step 4 you can decide how much length of cord to pull through the previous loop each time. If you're in a hurry, pull a lot. If you're not, pull less so that the cord is tidier and shorter. This is just basically crocheting on a giant scale, where your hand is the hook.

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## Tools [TOP](#)

**Tool belts.** If you have a tool belt, we encourage you to load it up with your favorite tools and bring it. We do not supply tool belts. We might have cloth nail aprons available, but for many tasks your leather or nylon tool belt is better. Also, you might want to put your name on your tools so they don't get mixed up with other tools.

**Borrowing tools.** Speaking of tool belts, if you see a tool belt lying around, you can be sure it belongs to someone in particular, whether a staff member or a fellow volunteer or perhaps even a sub-contractor. Please understand that **you do NOT have permission** to borrow tools from any tool belt.

Similarly, if you see a tool lying around with someone's name on it, **you do NOT have permission** to use it.

If you do get permission to borrow someone's tool, which you might if you ask nicely, you must obey three simple rules, which are as follows:

- (1) **Do not lend a borrowed tool to anyone.** It is up to the owner whether to lend a tool to someone, not you. If you lend it away then the owner or you or both of you will have to track it down.
- (2) **Do not even set a borrowed tool down.** If you set it down and someone who hasn't read this section wanders by and sees the tool and has a need for it and picks it up, it could end up anywhere on the job site and not get found for two years or ever, which is probably not what the owner expected when you borrowed it and certainly not what that owner deserves.
- (3) **Do return a tool you borrowed *the very instant* you're done with it.** This rule really subsumes the first two.

If you are unwilling to obey these three rules then don't ask to borrow the tool to begin with. The lender has the right to expect that his or her own personal tools will be where they're supposed to be at all times.

**Abandoning tools.** Novices on a job site often do something that professionals rarely do, which is to set down a tool and walk away from it. If you are new to a construction site – and you probably are – we hope you'll strive to remember how important it is to keep track of any tool you lay your hands on.

When you're done with your hammer (or your cat's paw or your nail set), don't just set it down absent-mindedly in the grass (or on a ladder or on top of a wall) and walk away. Instead, carry it around with you if you're going to need it again or place it somewhere handy, ideally with the other hammers or at least with a collection of other tools.

**Mistreating tools.** Construction companies that use volunteer labor spent more money than is necessary each year replacing and repairing tools such as hammers and circular saws and extension cords and nail guns that need not have been replaced or repaired quite so soon if volunteers over the years had been more careful not to lose or damage them.

The tools you use today will be used, we hope, by many more volunteers for many more months and years to come. We hope you will treat these objects as though they were your own.

Also, if you think a tool has been damaged, especially if it might now be more dangerous, please let the site supervisor know right away.

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**Conclusion**   [TOP](#)

We hope this article of miscellaneous information helps us help you and vice versa. Most of it applies to most of our volunteers most of the time.

**Thank you for volunteering to do construction work on a job site. We want you to be prepared for what to expect from beginning to end and to be as useful to the overall mission as you can be.**

Useful Miscellany – last edited January 22, 2010

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