

VOLUNTEERING

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- FCPA should leverage the interest conveyed by the public in volunteering in FCPA's dog parks.
- FCPA can and should support formation of park volunteer teams (PVT) in dog parks via the existing PVT program. To support their formation, as well as the formation of Dog Park Friends Groups, FCPA should provide more robust information about dog park PVT and Friends Group opportunities on the dog park webpage.
- There are 3 volunteering paths that can be taken in FCPA dog parks: individual volunteers/dog park monitors, park volunteer teams (PVTs) and Friends Groups. An ambassador program could be explored in the future, though this would require additional staff support to develop guidelines and manage the program.
- FCPA should utilize the dog park monitor checklist for volunteers which was refined as part of this study and explore options for digitizing it in the future.
- FCPA should utilize the incident report form for volunteers, developed as part of this study.

ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

Through the dog park survey, as well as a review of best practices for public dog parks nationwide, it was found that dog parks operate most effectively and are most positively received when oversight by staff is supplemented by organized community support, e.g., in the form of volunteering. There are currently three pathways for volunteering in FCPA's dog parks: Individual volunteers (dog park monitors), Park Volunteer Teams (PVTs), and Friends Groups.

There were two main questions that the study sought to answer as it relates to volunteering: should FCPA encourage citizens to get involved with volunteer teams to care for existing and future dog parks and if so, what strategies should FCPA employ? And, what duties are appropriate for dog park volunteers to perform? This section presents FCPA's findings to these questions.

Should FCPA encourage citizens to get involved with volunteer teams to care for existing and future dog parks? If so, what strategies should FCPA employ?

Benchmarking of volunteer practices related to groups and teams across other jurisdictions throughout the country revealed a strong reliance on sponsor groups²² to support the operations and maintenance of dog parks. Most sponsor groups engage in fundraising and other revenue-generating activities to sustain dog parks. In addition,

²² A group of volunteers interested in a specific facility such as dog parks, who are committed to a high level of involvement, up to and including managing the facility, volunteering, fundraising, recruiting, and managing volunteers, hosting special events, and forging partnerships with businesses and other community partners.

they typically organize the volunteer support needed for dog park maintenance, operations, and improvements.

While FCPA no longer uses the sponsor group model, it has developed numerous partnerships with volunteers for park facilities through Friends Groups, which serve a similar purpose²³. These groups have come together in common interest around a specific park or program and provide invaluable support to FCPA. Currently, Westgrove PACK is the only dog park-focused Friends Group working with FCPA. FCPA has also established a Park Volunteer Team²⁴ (PVT) program, though there are no dog park-focused PVTs that are currently active. Volunteers who are part of a dog park-related Friends Group or a PVT have the same roles and responsibilities as individual volunteers (e.g., dog park monitors) but these types of affiliation have different requirements. For example, the formation of a dog park PVT would not require insurance on the part of the PVT, as PVTs are considered FCPA volunteers, and as such are protected under the County's insurance provisions. Formation of a dog park Friends Group, however, would require insurance and liability coverage separate from the County. These requirements are illustrated in further detail in *Figure 32* at the end of this section.

Through the provision of more robust information by FCPA surrounding these existing group volunteering pathways, community involvement in these programs at dog parks could strengthen.

In addition, research done as part of this study provided many successful examples of jurisdictions employing individual volunteers as ambassadors²⁵ to actively promote positive dog park visitor etiquette. It was found that such roles require extensive volunteer screening, training, and oversight. FCPA currently does not offer a dog park ambassador volunteering opportunity, but individuals interested in volunteering at dog parks can sign up with FCPA to volunteer as a dog park monitor. The roles and responsibilities of a dog park monitor are detailed below.

What duties are appropriate for dog park volunteers to perform?

Research of industry literature regarding dog parks and feedback received from the public through the survey, suggest volunteers can best assist FCPA by supporting some operations and maintenance tasks, monitoring dog park use and activity by other

²³ More on FCPA's Friends Group program, including the Friends Group Handbook, can be found here: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/friends>

²⁴ More on FCPA's Park Volunteer Team program, including the PVT Handbook, can be found here: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/park-volunteer-team>

²⁵ A dog park ambassador possesses excellent interpersonal skills and is knowledgeable about canine behavior and skilled in reading dog social cues. For example, an ambassador would be able to distinguish between dog aggression vs. dog play and then be able to address skillfully with handlers. This volunteer role also provides education (e.g., friendly reminders) about dog park rules as well as dog park etiquette. In terms of required training or experience, ambassadors would be required to have advanced knowledge of canine behavior. They would have the ability to read canine signals and understand communication and play-behavior differences across breeds and would have American Kennel Club (AKC) or similar certification.

visitors, documenting observations, and reporting issues to staff. This applies to both new and existing FCPA dog parks.

With volunteers serving as the eyes and ears of park staff, staff can then identify messaging improvements around rules or etiquette through a combination of signage, social media, website updates, etc., and can respond to maintenance needs in a more targeted fashion. Furthermore, ongoing, systematic reporting of maintenance needs by dog park volunteers could also assist FCPA staff by speeding up identification and staff response to unsafe or unappealing situations.

The specific duties that volunteers can assist with, regardless of volunteer type (individual volunteers/dog park monitors, PVTs, Friends Groups), include:

- Inspecting the dog park facility
- Filling pet waste bag dispensers
- Checking trash receptacles
- Checking for missing or improper signage; post authorized FCPA notices and flyers
- Documenting violations of dog park rules
- Communicating issues to FCPA staff
- Reporting incidents as needed

These duties, along with the requirements of each volunteer type, are detailed in the recommendations section below.

WHAT WE ALSO HEARD

In the survey, 25% of respondents (over 700 respondents) indicated that they would be interested in obtaining more information about volunteering opportunities with FCPA dog parks and provided their contact information to FCPA. This indicates there is high interest in volunteering and suggests there could be potential for formation of dog park volunteer teams.

Interested in finding out about volunteer opportunities with dog parks?

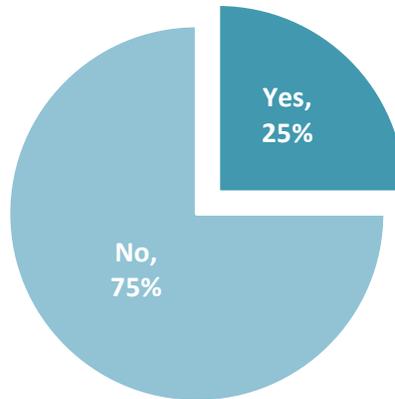


Figure 31: Survey: Percent interested in finding out about volunteer opportunities with dog parks
Notes: Based on responses from dog owners and dog walkers. Contact information was received from 719 survey respondents who were interested in finding out about volunteer opportunities with FCPA dog parks.

In addition, the survey revealed that inattentive owners in FCPA dog parks rank second as a key concern among respondents, surpassed only by surface conditions.

More generally, issues related to rules and enforcement were among the top list of subjects that commenters in the survey cited as the one thing that would most improve the dog park they primarily visited.

Combined, these expressed concerns underscore the importance of volunteerism in FCPA's dog parks, which helps to promote visitor etiquette and actively supports rule enforcement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

VOLUNTEER TEAMS

As evidenced by the work done by existing FCPA dog park volunteers, as well as FCPA's research and input from the survey, it is clear that volunteers and volunteer groups play a critical role in supporting FCPA's operations and maintenance of dog parks.

First, based on the high interest in volunteering in FCPA dog parks as indicated in the survey, it is recommended that FCPA continue to leverage this invaluable resource and wealth of community support.

In addition, it is recommended that FCPA promote, cultivate, and provide support to volunteer teams as a means of caring for future and existing dog parks. This can be

accomplished through FCPA's existing Park Volunteer Team (PVT) program. A PVT can support a specific park, program, or facility. The duties of a dog park PVT would be the same as that of the individual volunteer/dog park monitor, as detailed in the next section.

The development of a PVT is an organic process; it is envisioned that volunteers who sign up individually as dog park monitors may over time network to form PVTs for specific dog parks. Formation of a PVT would require a volunteer to serve as the key point of contact (i.e., PVT Lead) between those interested in the PVT and FCPA, who would then reach out to FCPA's Park Operations Division Volunteer Coordinator to coordinate. From there, FCPA would guide the PVT Lead and interested volunteers through the team formation process.

Also, as discussed in the *Sponsored Improvements and Donation Opportunities* findings section, research found that sponsor groups were another form of group volunteerism that were strongly relied upon by other jurisdictions. FCPA's Friends Group model serves a similar purpose, and it is recommended that this model remain in place for those interested in this volunteer pathway that offers a higher level of volunteer involvement at dog parks. Friends Groups can perform volunteer duties like those of individual volunteers/dog park monitors and PVTs but also have the ability to fundraise for improvements and host events, if included in the Friends Group's Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). As mentioned previously, Friends Groups are required to provide their own insurance and liability coverage separate from Fairfax County, whereas individual volunteers and PVTs are considered FCPA volunteers and are not subject to this requirement.

To further support the formation of dog park PVTs and/or Friends Groups, it is recommended that FCPA provide more information about these opportunities on the dog park webpage.

DOG PARK VOLUNTEER DUTIES

As part of this study, FCPA refined a dog park monitor checklist to ensure clarity around specific volunteer duties (as identified in the Analysis and Findings section). It is recommended that FCPA promote the use of this checklist to allow dog park volunteers to document their observations. The volunteer duties outlined in the checklist directly address the concern expressed by the public regarding visitor etiquette and issues surrounding rules and enforcement. The purpose of the checklist is to provide FCPA's Park Operations Division (POD) with documented dog park violations, as well as maintenance and operational conditions. The reporting received from multiple volunteer monitoring shifts over time at each dog park will enable staff to adjust specific resources and operation practices accordingly, although POD's response time to issues indicated on the checklist will vary according to staff availability and prioritization of the issues reported.

As the volunteer program expands, it is recommended that this checklist be digitized. This could be established in the form of a mobile phone application, so that volunteers could seamlessly submit their observational data. The mobile application utilized by FCPA's Park Monitor program in response to COVID-19-related park closures in the spring of 2020 could serve as a model for a Dog Park Volunteer/Monitor mobile application.

In addition, a dog park incident report form patterned after the general FCPA Incident Report form has been created to allow for improved documentation and tracking of dog park incidents. It is recommended that this incident report form be made available to dog park volunteers and its use covered during volunteer training.

Combined, these two tools (dog park monitor checklist and incident report form) can be utilized to further strengthen FCPA's dog park volunteering program.

As presented in the Analysis and Findings section above, individual volunteers who serve as dog park ambassadors are a popular and successful model employed by some jurisdictions. Based on the especially high concern expressed by respondents in the survey regarding dog park visitor etiquette, it is recommended that FCPA explore an ambassador program in the future.

The role and core duties of an ambassador would be the same as an individual volunteer/monitor. However, the ambassador would have more involvement and discretion to address dog behavior within dog parks. Because ambassadors are required to have more advanced knowledge of canine behavior and their duties put them at a greater risk, an ambassador program would require more extensive volunteer screening, training, and oversight strategies than FCPA has developed to date. The development of this program would require additional dedicated staff resources to develop standards and procedures, publicize the program, manage communications, monitor volunteer activities, and provide additional logistical support.

A table summarizing the different responsibilities and requirements of dog park volunteering options (both existing and recommended) is presented below.

VOLUNTEERING

	Individual Volunteer Opportunities		Group Volunteer Opportunities	
	Individual Volunteer (Dog Park Monitor)	Dog Park Ambassador (Does not exist but recommended to explore in future)	Volunteer Team	Friends Group
Observe conditions and violations in park and note on checklist. Familiar with dog park rules. Fills out incident report as needed. Encourage compliance but does not take enforcement measures.	X	X	X	X
Fill pet waste bag dispensers, check trash receptacles, and pick up pet waste as needed.	X	X	X	X
Post FCPA authorized notices and flyers at the direction of FCPA staff and remove outdated and unapproved notices such as unauthorized business cards or literature.	X	X	X	X
Can donate to the Park Foundation for improvements to dog park	X	X	X	X
Volunteer activity covered under County insurance	X	X	X	
Expertise in canine behavior. Provide friendly reminders about dog park rules and dog park etiquette. Requires AKC certification.		X		
Volunteer activity requires insurance independent from Fairfax County				X
Requires establishing a 501 (c)(3) and an MOU				X
Can raise funds for improvements, conduct business on parkland and/or advertise, if defined in MOU				X
Can run events in coordination with FCPA, if defined in MOU				X

Figure 32: Dog Park Volunteering Options Table