

## **SHOREWALKERS HIKE LEADER GUIDELINES**

Shorewalkers has been leading hikes in the New York City metro area for more than 35 years. Our mission is to enhance, enjoy, and protect the parks, promenades, and paths along the waters in and around NYC, downstate New York, and Northern New Jersey. Our biggest event is the annual The Great Saunter, a 32-mile walk around the Manhattan shoreline on the first Saturday of May, which attracts 2,500 participants each year.

Our annual membership fee is \$20 for individuals. Family memberships are \$30 for two people, \$45 for three people, and \$60 for four people. People can join on Shorewalkers.org. Current officers are Pamela Cress, President, Nicholas DiNapoli, Vice President, Sigrid Stropnik, Treasurer, and Ellen Juro/Christine Yost, Secretaries.

We have more than 40 hike leaders who lead over 200 hikes a year in the five boroughs, Westchester, the Hudson Valley, New Jersey, and Long Island. We have about 1,500 paid members and list our hikes at Meetup.com in our Shorewalkers Members Only group.

Leading hikes is fun, interesting, challenging, and rewarding. It is a very social volunteer opportunity that develops and rewards leadership skills, good decision-making, and thorough planning. Planning and leading hikes lets you learn about the areas where you hike and your own capabilities and gives you the opportunity to meet people of diverse backgrounds, experience, and interests. Being a Shorewalker hike leader also entitles you to free Shorewalker membership.

### **Becoming a Shorewalker Hike Leader**

We are always grateful to have new volunteer hike leaders. For safety and liability reasons, we screen each potential new leader, and we feel most confident in those people who have been on a number of our hikes and have acted as a sweep on hikes. Before you lead your first hike, an experienced hike leader will walk the route with you, to review the route and your plan for leading the hike, to answer questions, and to discuss safety and other issues.

Shorewalkers also requires that each leader provide a mailing address, phone number, and email address. All hike leaders must be Shorewalker members. If you are not already a paid member at the time you lead your first hike, a free membership will be established for you.

Shorewalkers hike leaders are protected by strong federal and state laws that provide liability protection to volunteers. Also, all participants in Shorewalker activities agree to liability waivers. Finally, Shorewalkers has General Liability insurance for third-party claims. Hikers and leaders are covered up to \$5,000 in medical expenses, as secondary insurance to their primary. If a hiker is hurt and sues the organization, general liability will cover \$2 million in claims. However,

protection after the fact is no substitute for proper planning and proper supervision of the hike. Following these guidelines will help you lead safe and successful hikes.

## **Planning a Hike**

### **Choosing Where to Walk**

The best way to choose where to walk is to pick a route, topic, or location that interests you. Your knowledge of and enthusiasm for the area will make the hike more interesting and enjoyable for the hikers. Your interest doesn't have to be fully formed when you start planning a hike – you can educate yourself and finetune the details in the planning process.

A few ideas for sources beyond Google maps are:

- Websites such as Untapped Cities ([untappedcities.com](http://untappedcities.com)), Atlas Obscura ([atlasobscura.com](http://atlasobscura.com)), and Forgotten New York ([forgotten-ny.com](http://forgotten-ny.com)), each of which publishes detailed posts on New York City, such as “The Top 10 Secrets of NYC’s Floyd Bennett Field.”
- For trail hikes, the New York New Jersey Trail Conference website ([nynjtc.org](http://nynjtc.org)) has an interactive guide to choose trail hikes in New Jersey and New York.
- Maps like the NYC Bike Map or even the MTA subway map are useful for planning hikes through parks and past interesting sites.
- Checking the Meetup calendar for past walks led by Shorewalkers or other walking groups such as Outdoors Club and AMC can spark an idea for a route.

### **Scouting**

Thorough scouting ensures you're knowledgeable and confident about the route so you can attend to the needs of the hikers and enjoy their company rather than finding your way. It also gives you the chance to pull together the information you'll need to tell the hikers in advance (see **Describing the Hike**).

While you're scouting, it's useful to use a smartphone GPS mapping app, such as MapMyWalk or Strava, to create a map that you can review later.

If you're planning a hike on a walkway, such as the Hudson River Greenway, you may be able to lead the hike after walking the route just once.

If you're developing your own route, it may take several scouting walks before you are able to lead the hike knowledgeably and comfortably.

- On a first walk, you might explore the area you've chosen and consider what the best route would be. Afterward, you can review your maps and your GPS track to develop a more detailed route.

- On a second walk, you can cover the detailed route, considering things like where it's safest to cross intersections as well as where and when you might take a lunch break.
- A third walk will ensure your confidence in the all of the turns and details.

### **Key Considerations for all Routes**

- Your capabilities. Completing the hike should only require 70 percent of your capabilities. If 10 miles is your walking limit, then your hike should be no more than 7 miles long. This is so you will always be relaxed and able to lead without being distracted by your own physical struggle to complete the hike and you have plenty of reserves in case an emergency requires additional effort.
- Restrooms are extremely important. Pick a meeting spot that has a public restroom nearby and include additional bathrooms along the route. An urgent need to pee will make even the nicest hiker anxious and cranky. Make your hike enjoyable for you and all the hikers and plan for rest stops.
- Dropout points are also important. As you plan and scout the hike, make note of nearby subway and bus stops. Download the subway and bus maps onto your phone.
- Build safety into your route. Limit street crossings; respect traffic signs and signals; use crosswalks; avoid busy intersections, broken pavement, construction sites, and steep and slippery paths.

### **Describing the Hike**

The hike description is your invitation to the hikers. It should be friendly and fun and provide enough information so the hikers can decide if the hike is appropriate for them and can arrive at the hike informed and prepared.

Include this information in your hike description on Meetup:

- Length of the hike in miles and hours (start by assuming a 2.5-mile per hour pace and then add time for lunch breaks, rest stops, and any sightseeing along the way).
- Meeting place and time, directions to get there, the beginning and end point of the hike.
- Dropout points, the places to buy food and drink, and the lunch spot
- Terrain: sidewalks, park paths, trails, etc., and whether it is flat, hilly, rocky, sandy.
- Pace: slow, moderate, or fast. The reality is that the speed of the hike will be determined by the hikers and how you manage them along the way. But stating a pace in the hike description will at least give people an idea of what to expect.
- Note any challenging parts of the hike: a steep hill, a long stretch without restrooms or a dropout point, a long stretch in the sun.
- Note any admission fees for museums or attractions you may visit on the hike.
- What to bring: water, snacks, lunch, sun hat, hiking shoes instead of sneakers, if necessary, a MetroCard if the way home is a bus.
- Include links to any out-of-town train or bus schedules, such as MTA Hudson Line.

- Contact information: Your name, phone number, and email address for hikers to contact you with any questions about the hike. If you are concerned for your privacy, you can simply use your first name and last initial and an email address and omit your phone number.
- If you have a GPS track of the route, load the track onto Google maps and post a link to the map in the hike description.
- Include a featured photo of a walk highlight from along the route.
- Set the maximum number of walkers. For a walk with multiple stops and commentary, 15-20 is usually a comfortable size; an individual hike leader can handle 25-30; co-leaders can handle 40. An Open Walk is defined as a walk with few turns or street crossings, such as a Saunter Stretch. Set maximum walkers at 65-80+, depending on the number of hike leaders. Our no-show rate averages 20 percent and can be factored in your decision for attendee max.

In addition to all of the important technical details, also include in the hike description the fun parts of the hike: parks, views, historical sites, an interesting place for lunch. Add appropriate internet links to provide background information, such as a link to an art museum website if the hike includes an exhibit.

### **Trail Hikes**

Since most Shorewalker hikes are on paths and sidewalks in the city, it is important to provide additional information for trail hikes.

- Indicate mileage and elevation gains on moderate and difficult trail walks. Many walkers overestimate their abilities. Ten miles on a trail is very different from a 20-mile walk on city streets.
- Be detailed in your hike descriptions. Follow the examples below:
  - Easy - carriage roads and some hills
  - Moderate - may be some rock scrambling, high exposure
  - Difficult - steep hills, rock scrambling
- Include in the descriptions items that participants should bring and clothing to wear. For moderate and difficult hikes the minimum should be hiking boots, two liters of water, food, and snacks. Indicate whether you recommend hiking poles.
- Screen participants at the trailhead. If they're not properly equipped, they should be turned away as this would be an indication that they have not done trail walking. Those who are turned away should be told they should start with easier trail walks such as the Bat to Bear trail, hikes in Pocantico Hills, or the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail before attempting a more challenging trail hike.

## **Sweep**

If you can arrange it, having a sweep will make your day easier. The sweep's job is to remain at the back of the group to make sure no hikers get left behind, whether because they are slower walkers or they stopped to take pictures. Ask a hiker who you know is a strong walker with good judgment and an agreeable personality to sweep and make sure the sweep has a good idea of the route. If you do not arrange a sweep in advance, you can ask a hiker to take on the role as the hike progresses. Sometimes strong hikers prefer a slower pace and will become the sweep by default. Be sure to exchange phone numbers with the designated sweep so that you can stay in touch if the group is separated.

## **Leading a Hike**

**Gathering:** Greet the hikers as they arrive and introduce yourself. Give the hikers a chance to talk to you and ask any questions. Answering questions up front will save time and trouble later in the hike. When the hikers feel informed about the plan, they are more confident and relaxed and both you and they will enjoy the hike more. Uninformed hikers are anxious and insecure. Here is where a good hike description can save you time and save the hikers anxiety. If you did not provide your cell phone number in the hike description, consider providing it to the hikers at the beginning of the hike so they can contact you if they get separated from the group. (And then be sure to answer your phone and check your text messages during the hike.) Also install the Meetup app on your phone, so you can check it during the hike in case hikers try to contact you through Meetup.

**Check-in:** Download a list of attendees from Meetup and check-in participants as they arrive. Members accept the liability waiver when they register or renew their memberships. Shorewalkers Terms & Conditions are posted on our Shorewalkers.org home page and at Meetup.com in "What We're About."

**Starting the hike:** Wait 15 minutes after the scheduled time to begin the hike. When you are ready to start, introduce yourself to the hikers, give a brief rundown of the route and answer any questions. If you have a sweep, introduce them and let the hikers know that they should not fall behind the sweep. If the number of hikers is less than 30 or so, you can ask them to stand in a circle and count off, so you can keep a count throughout the hike. You can also ask the hikers to look after each other and let you know if somebody is missing when it is time to resume the hike after a break. Ask the hikers to let you know if they decide to drop-out of the hike. If a hiker does leave early, simply thank them for coming and check that they know their way home. Always check bathrooms before leaving a rest stop.

**Safety:** The most important thing to keep in mind on the hike is safety.

- Be careful when leading the group across streets – if the entire group cannot cross before the traffic signal changes, wait where they can see you. If they become anxious about being separated from the group, they may decide to dart across the street against the light.
- Point out any potentially dangerous spots like potholes or slippery surfaces.
- When turning corners, make sure everybody sees that you're turning, so they don't get lost behind you.
- When you reach a fork in a path, be sure the hikers know which way to go.
- Periodically check for people falling behind and give them a chance to catch up.
- If you want to share information, it's best to stop and let the group gather around you, rather than talking as you walk – the hikers may get distracted and not watch where they are stepping. Stopping to point out a view or historical site is also a way to allow the slower hikers to catch up to the group and to allow everybody to take a rest and have a drink of water. On hot summer days, find a spot in the shade to stop and talk.
- Always obey traffic signs and signals; do not let impatient hikers goad you into unsafe action.
- In case a walker is hurt or injured while on the walk, render appropriate medical care based on the situation and your ability to help. For example, if a walker is dehydrated and looks faint, you might carry electrolyte tablets. On a city walk, an injured walker who is mobile can be assisted to a taxi. If a walker is in distress beyond your ability to provide care, immediately call 911.

After safety the most important thing is fun. Chat with the hikers, share what you know about what is along the route, listen to what the hikers have to share. The hikers are generally pleased to be on a hike and see and learn new things and grateful for the work you put in to lead the hike.

Remember that you are the hike leader, and this is your hike. Sometimes well-meaning hikers will attempt to sway you from your chosen path by recommending a route they think is better. You may feel pressured or eager to please but do not lead the group on a route you have not personally planned. Thank the hiker for the interesting information and suggest that you may consider it for a future hike, then continue on your chosen path.

Some hikers are slow, which can get tiresome. Other hikers are fast and may draw you away from the bulk of the group without you realizing it. Set a steady pace at the beginning of the hike and monitor how well the group keeps to that pace. If the fast hikers get impatient, you may be able to give them directions to walk ahead of you on the route and meet you at some spot ahead, such as a park or road one mile ahead. For the slower hikers, if you have a sweep, the sweep will remain at the back of the group and make sure everybody stays on the route. But don't become so confident that the sweep has things in hand that you risk losing track of the back of the group – be sure the sweep can always see you or knows where you're headed next. If there is no sweep, moderate your pace enough so that the slower hikers can keep you in sight and are aware of any turns in the route.

At the end of the hike, thank the hikers for coming and make sure everybody knows how to get home. Ask the hikers how they enjoyed the hike to get some feedback that may be useful to you next time you lead a hike.

### **After the Hike**

**Meetup post-walk:** Monitor comments on Meetup, thank the walkers and sweep, and post your photos. Change walker status for those who were absent from status of “Went” to “Did Not Go” if excused, or “No Show.”

**Let us know how it went:** We are always interested to hear about your experience leading a hike. Alert Shorewalker admins immediately if anybody is injured or gets ill on the hike or engages in inappropriate behavior by emailing [Shorewalkersny@gmail.com](mailto:Shorewalkersny@gmail.com). But also, please just give us your impressions and feedback as a hike leader on how Shorewalkers can make leading hikes easier and more enjoyable.