

CONTACTS INFORMATION FOR VIRGINIA MASTER NATURALISTS

Why do we have to log the demographics of our educational contacts?

First, the Virginia Master Naturalist program is a state-run, state-funded program. When volunteering as a Virginia Master Naturalist, you are considered to be an unpaid staff member of the Commonwealth of Virginia. The lead agency sponsoring the program is Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE). VCE is required to comply with USDA Civil Rights nondiscrimination policies, rules, and regulations. Specifically, VCE must establish and maintain a system for collecting and reporting data on clientele participation in Extension programs. This data system must obtain racial, ethnic, and gender data on all significant aspects of program participation. The contacts data are also supplied to the state government to illustrate the extent to which we reach Virginians with our educational programs. The Virginia Master Naturalist Director reports the contacts made by VMN volunteers to VCE on a regular basis for inclusion in their required reports to the federal government.

Second, we are mandated to use all reasonable efforts to reach out to underserved audiences with the Virginia Master Naturalist program itself and the programs put on by VMN volunteers. To document how well we are achieving this goal, we need to have demographic data on the VMN volunteers and on the much larger number of people who receive educational information from VMN volunteers. The demographic data of the VMN volunteers is documented annually on chapters' annual reports. To collect the demographic data of the participants in volunteers' educational programs, we must rely on the volunteers. Without the data, we can't know what audiences we are reaching.

What counts as a contact?

A direct contact refers to a face-to-face interaction in which research-based educational information is exchanged. This interaction could be an interpretive walk, a booth with natural resource information at an Earth Day event, or a nature talk in a classroom, to name a few examples. Interactions that are of a business nature (e.g. communicating with someone about when the next Master Naturalist class will be offered) do *not* need to be recorded as contacts.

It is also possible to have indirect contacts via email and phone calls. However, it is rare for these types of interactions to occur with Virginia Master Naturalists. Emails and phone calls tend to be either of a business nature or internal to the program.

If more than one volunteer addresses an audience during an educational program, each volunteer should report the entire audience as contacts.

How do we collect contacts?

Federal guidelines for the collection of demographic data allow for two formats: Self-Reporting and Observer-Collected.

Self-Reporting contact data

The first format is Self-Reporting, meaning the individual documents his/her own demographic information. This is the preferred method for collecting race and ethnicity data of clientele because it is the most accurate. VMN volunteers may use the VCE Contacts Self-Reporting Form for this method, or create their own similar form. This method is only practical, however, when you have a captive audience, such as participants in a workshop you are leading. Participants do not have to report their demographics; it is optional. However, when you explain why you are collecting the data and that the form is anonymous, people are usually willing to fill out the form.

Observer-Collected contact data

The second method for collection of contacts allowed by federal guidelines is called the Observer-collected Format. In this method, the staff member or volunteer collects the demographic data using direct observation of the clientele. This method is much more practical than the Self-Reported method when you are giving out educational information at a booth or having other brief interactions. Importantly, it is also more confidential in these circumstances.

It is OK if you are not 100% accurate in your determinations of someone's race or ethnicity because this data are being reported as an aggregate, i.e. not associated with any one program participant. For this purpose, VMN volunteers may use the VCE Observer-Collected Contacts form, a VMN volunteer time sheet, or they may create their own similar form.

In a situation with large number of people such as a booth at an Earth Day event, one volunteer can be sharing the educational information while another volunteer is putting tick marks down in the appropriate boxes on the form based on observations (not based on asking the participants.) It is not illegal for you to record this information yourself based on your observations! What you should not do is put out a single form on which all the participants are supposed to document their demographics. This strategy would create a situation in which a participant's demographic information would not be confidential, because other people might see him/her marking the boxes.