Virginia Cooperative Extension
Virginia Tech • Virginia State University
www.ext.vt.edu

Virginia Master Naturalists

Virginia Master Naturalist Program Volunteer Policy Handbook

Authored by the Virginia Master Naturalist Program State Office, masternaturalist@vt.edu

Date of this edition

April 2026

Introduction to this Handbook

How to Use This Document

This document is meant to be used electronically.

Everything in the Table of Contents is clickable as are all links to URLs and documents. If an individual is viewing a printed copy of this document, please note that they would need to view the electronic version to access the resource links provided.

Updates to this Edition

Added section, Honoraria and Other Payments" outlining the policy on VMNs not being able to receive payments for giving talks.

Information about dual membership has been updated and expanded.

Updated non-discrimination statement per revisions from Virginia Cooperative Extension.

Updated section on pesticide use and recommendations

Links updated to correspond with new VMN website URLs and VCE website URL changes.

Policy Updates Between Editions

If deemed necessary by the VMN State Office and its sponsoring agencies, program policies and procedures may be revised between editions of the Volunteer Policy Handbook. Volunteers will be informed of these changes as applicable, and current policies will be posted on the Program Policies page of the VMN website.

Table of Contents

All items in this table of contents contain clickable, internal links to the associated section of this document.

Virginia Master Naturalist Program 1
Volunteer Policy Handbook 1
Date of this edition 1
Introduction to this Handbook 1
How to Use This Document 1
Updates to this Edition 1
Policy Updates Between Editions 1
Table of Contents 2
Introduction to the VMN Program 4
About the VMN Program 4
Mission 4
History 4
VMN Program Structure 4
At the State Level 4
At the Local Chapter Level 5
VMN Communications 6
Communication Tools 6
Changing and Sharing Contact Information 7
Becoming A VMN Volunteer 7
Age Eligibility for Minors 7
Screening of Applicants 7
Volunteer Basic Training 8
Better Impact: Online Volunteer Management System 9
Standards of Conduct, Use of Title, and Dismissal 10
Standards of Conduct for VMN Volunteers 10
Use of the VMN Title 10
Dismissal of VMN Volunteers 11
VMN Enrollment and Membership 11
Definitions and Requirements 11
Re-enrollment 12
Transfers, Reinstatements and Dual Memberships 12
Reporting Requirements for VMNs 14
Documenting Volunteer Service and Continuing Education Hours 14
Recording Hours in Better Impact 14
Volunteer Service Requirements and Guidelines 15
Reporting Volunteer Service Time 15
Volunteer Contribution Areas 15
Finding and/or Creating Approved Service Activities 16
Volunteer Service Guidelines 16
Continuing Education (CE) Requirements and Guidelines 18
Guidelines for Continuing Education 18
Reporting Continuing Education Time 19
Finding Continuing Education Opportunities 19
VMN State Program Continuing Education Offerings 19
VMN Certification and Recertification 19
Why Earn Certification? 19
How to Achieve Initial Certification 20
Certification Timeline for All VMNs 20
Certification Timeline for VMN Trainees/New Graduates 20
Recertification 20
Recognizing VMN Volunteers 21
Nametags 21
“Certified VMN” - Badge in Better Impact and Paper Certificates 21
Recertification Pins 21
Milestones - Accumulated Lifetime Volunteer Service Hours 21
VMN Program Awards 22
Risk Management for VMN Activities 22

Overview 22
Insurance 23
Risk Management Training 23
Civil Rights Compliance 23
Overview 23
Civil Rights Training 24
Member Demographics Reporting 24
Equal Opportunity, All Reasonable Efforts, and Nondiscrimination Statements 24
Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) . 24
Educational Contacts Definitions and Reporting 25
Guidelines for Media Usage 26
Copyrighted Material Use 26
Media Releases 26
Social Media 26

Introduction to the VMN Program

Welcome to the Virginia Master Naturalist Program! Whether they are experienced naturalists or just beginning to learn about the natural world around them, volunteers are joining this program to learn more about Virginia's natural resources and to contribute to natural resource conservation in their communities.

The Virginia Master Naturalist Program (VMN) is a formal, state-sponsored program. VMN volunteers are recognized as volunteers of the Commonwealth of Virginia and of Virginia Cooperative Extension, the lead sponsoring agency for the VMN Program. As such, VMN volunteers are expected and required to follow the policies and guidelines of the VMN Program.

The purpose of this Volunteer Policy Handbook (VPH) is to describe the mission and structure of the program, outline the program's policies and guidelines, and answer questions volunteers may have about their roles.

It is expected that all VMN members be familiar with this VMN Volunteer Policy Handbook.

About the VMN Program

Mission

The VMN Mission Statement: The Virginia Master Naturalist Program is a corps of well-informed volunteers who provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities for the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Some key aspects of that mission include:

- A focus on natural resources: This focus distinguishes our program from some other programs, such as Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners, which is focused on home horticulture.
- A focus on volunteerism: The primary purpose of the VMN Program is to train, develop, and support volunteers who will participate in natural resource conservation through volunteering.
- A focus on local communities: Although the program is statewide, it is a chapter-based program that encourages volunteers to focus their learning and service in their own communities.

History

The VMN Program was launched in 2005, after a team of individuals from several different state agencies researched programs in other states, planned a framework for Virginia's program, and hired a program coordinator. Many aspects of the VMN Program were modeled after the successful Texas Master Naturalist Program. We began establishing chapters and recruiting volunteers, and by the end of 2006, our first ten chapters were in place. We continued to add chapters over time, and now our VMN Program has chapters covering most of the state.

VMN Program Structure

The Virginia Master Naturalist Program is a program within Virginia Tech and Virginia Cooperative Extension. Virginia Cooperative Extension is the entity that assumes the overarching management and liability of the program. The VMN Program exists as a collection of local chapters that adhere to a set of objectives, procedures, and minimum requirements established at the state level. Virginia Master Naturalist volunteers are trained and certified at the local level through their respective chapters. Each local chapter has at least one Advisor from one of the program's sponsoring state agencies. Advisors support their chapter by advising and informing chapter members about relevant matters. Advisors also ensure that the chapter maintains a working relationship with the statewide program and adheres to its principles and guidelines.

At the State Level

Sponsoring Agencies

At the state level, the Virginia Master Naturalist Program is sponsored jointly by:

- Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE)
- Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR)
- Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)
- Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF)

- Virginia Museum of Natural History (VMNH)
- Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
- Virginia Institute of Marine Science's Center for Coastal Resources Management (VIMS-CCRM)

Sponsoring agencies provide financial support for the VMN Program that is unrestricted and not tied to specific local programs or deliverables. Sponsoring agencies may also provide in-kind contributions of one or more Chapter Advisors, Committee Members, and instructors for training courses.

The VMN Program Director and Program Assistant work with designated contacts within each of the seven sponsoring agencies to set the standards and requirements of the statewide VMN Program, review and approve new chapter development, and address matters of program policy, budget, and personnel. These sponsoring agency contacts advise the VMN state office on the operation of the program and assist with planning and supporting conferences, events, and trainings.

VMN State Program Office

The **Program Director** develops the annual work plan and budget, serves as the programmatic liaison with the sponsoring agencies, and supports day-to-day operations of the VMN program. The **Program Assistant** takes the lead role in the logistics and planning for conferences and meetings, collects and compiles annual reports, manages program purchasing and accounts, and generally supports the program, its chapters, and its volunteers. The Program Assistant updates and maintains program documents; is responsible for sending out the Bi-weekly emails; and assists volunteers with Better Impact (VMN's online volunteer management platform). Together, the Program Director and the Program Assistant support Chapter Advisors and volunteers by advising them on program policies, best practices, and other inquiries.

Financial Support for the State Program

Funding for the VMN State Program Office's operations comes primarily from its sponsoring agencies. Virginia Cooperative Extension provides funding for the Program Director faculty position. Funds from the other sponsoring agencies support the Program Assistant staff position, supplies such as volunteer recognition items, and travel expenses for program personnel.

Donations, which come mainly from VMN volunteers, are another important source of funding for the program. Donations are used to support many program activities, such as mini grants to chapters, volunteer awards, and events. Donations also help cover any base program budget needs that are not covered by sponsoring agency support.

Grants for specific projects also help fund the VMN Program. Grants may be from agencies, non-profits, or corporations, and they are generally tied to specific deliverables over a one- or two-year time frame.

All VMN State Office funds are channeled through Virginia Tech or the Virginia Tech Foundation. VMN is not a separate financial entity, nor an independent 501(c)3.

At the Local Chapter Level

Local Coordinating Committee/Chapter Board of Directors

When a chapter is in its early stages (i.e., before and during the chapter's first Basic Training Course), the chapter is run by the **Local Coordinating Committee (LCC),** comprised of local partner representatives and volunteers. The LCC will coordinate the chapter's first Basic Training Course.

The graduates from the first Basic Training Course are expected to maintain and coordinate the efforts of the chapter through the establishment of a **Chapter Board of Directors (BOD),** sometimes also called **the Leadership Team**. Minimally, the BOD will consist of a President, Vice President/President-elect, Secretary, Treasurer, Membership Chair, Basic Training Chair, Volunteer Activity Chair, and Chapter Advisor(s). The Chapter Board, with guidance from the VMN State Program Office and in accordance with program policies, will create and maintain its own Bylaws and Operating Handbook.

Upon establishment of a chapter's first elected Board of Directors, the work of the Local Coordinating Committee is completed, and that committee is dissolved. For more details on starting a new chapter, please contact the VMN State Office.

Volunteers

VMN chapter members are enrolled, trained VMN volunteers who are actively participating in and

recording their time on approved service activities, chapter administration, and continuing education activities.

All enrolled VMN volunteers are members of a local chapter. There are no state-level or unaffiliated VMN volunteers.

Local Partners

It is important for Virginia Master Naturalist chapters to capitalize on local resources and expertise through partnerships. **Local partners** may include schools, nature centers, non-profits, local offices of natural resources agencies, and any other organizations that might be stakeholders in a natural resource volunteer program. These partners may assist with chapter development, provide resources such as a meeting place or course instructors, and provide volunteer service activity opportunities. All local partners must adhere to the VCE/VMN nondiscrimination policy.

Resources:

- Civil Rights Compliance section of this handbook

Financial Support of Chapters

VMN chapters are funded primarily through training fees associated with their Basic Training course. These fees are expected to be in line with the costs of running the course and basic chapter operations. Some chapters also have required annual dues. The dues help support other expenses of the chapter, such as website hosting, mailing costs, recruitment materials, and project supplies. Each chapter establishes its own dues according to its bylaws.

It is important to note that, financially, each VMN chapter is its own independent entity with its own IRS identification number and its own bank account. The financial matters of the chapter do not fall under the purview of the VMN Program State Office nor that of Virginia Cooperative Extension or Virginia Tech. VMN chapters are not tax-exempt through any of these entities. Chapters that choose to seek tax-exempt status from the IRS do so independently.

VMN Communications

VMN volunteers are part of a large network, and communication across this network is critical to the program. For both the VMN State Program Office and local chapters, email is the primary means of sharing information and updates. Volunteers will be able to participate in the program most effectively if they have an email address that they can check on a regular basis, even if only from a public location with internet access.

Communication Tools

- **Bi-weekly Email:** All currently enrolled volunteers will receive an email from the VMN State Office every other Tuesday. This bi-weekly update will include program information, selected continuing education and volunteer opportunities, and other timely announcements. The Bi-weekly email is also posted on the VMN website, and the archives are available for approximately two months. In addition, there may be occasional emails sent separately when there is critical news that must be distributed between the Bi-weekly emails. Volunteers may not opt-out of receiving the Bi-weekly email or other emails sent through the online volunteer management system.
- **The Pollinator:** All currently enrolled volunteers will receive this quarterly VMN Program e-newsletter. Articles from the newsletter also are posted on the VMN home page, and a PDF version of the current edition is also available online. Volunteers may choose to remove themselves from this communication by using the 'unsubscribe' link at the bottom of the newsletter.
- **VMN State Website:** Along with archives of the Bi-weekly email and The Pollinator, the VMN website has numerous documents about program policies and procedures, training resources, continuing education webinar recordings, and more.
- **Role or activity-specific email lists:** The VMN State Office maintains several email group lists for the purposes of organizing and supporting specific volunteer roles and activities. Volunteers will be automatically added to these lists when relevant. Examples include the VMN Educators Bureau members and the email group for chapter leaders.
- **Social media:** The VMN State Office maintains a public Facebook page that is used to share news from our sponsoring agencies, relevant natural resource information, stories of VMN volunteer accomplishments, and volunteer recruitment information. VMN volunteers may

choose to follow the page, but it is not required. Information that is critical to all VMN volunteers will be shared through email.

- **Chapter communications:** VMN chapters may have their own Facebook pages and groups, email lists, newsletters, and websites for sharing information with their members. The Better Impact volunteer management system provides a place for chapter news and important messages that is visible when a volunteer is logged on.

Changing and Sharing Contact Information

Volunteers may edit their profiles in our online volunteer management system to update their contact information change their communication preferences. Some possibilities include:

- editing their email address, phone numbers, or mailing address;
- adding a secondary email address so that they receive communications at two different email addresses;
- indicating whether they wish to receive texts;
- indicating whether they wish to have their email address, phone number and/or physical address shared with other volunteers in the VMN program.

The VMN State Office's practice is that a volunteer's contact information will not be shared without permission from the volunteer. It is expected that chapter leaders will also follow this practice. Exceptions may occur if there is a need to share a volunteer's contact information with a representative from one of our sponsoring agencies for the purposes of managing volunteers or specific volunteer activities.

Becoming A VMN Volunteer

VMN volunteers are dedicated, trained people who are excited about the natural world. They have a willingness to volunteer their time towards the conservation of the natural resources around them, through education, science, and stewardship.

Candidates for the VMN Program are required to complete an application and go through the screening process. Once accepted, candidates will complete a formal Basic Training Course given by the chapter to which they are applying for membership. Chapters will decide which applicants are best suited to be potential volunteers. This decision will be based on local needs and criteria, use a screening process, and adhere to the VMN/VCE nondiscrimination policy.

Age Eligibility for Minors

The VMN Program is targeted towards adult volunteers. There are also likely to be some highly motivated youth and parent-child teams who would fit into the program. Youth who are 14 to 17 years old may participate, if they (1) have parental consent; (2) apply and enroll in the program using the application and enrollment procedures established by the chapter; and (3) are accompanied at trainings, field trips, and volunteer service events by a parent or other designated adult guardian who is directly responsible for them. Like all Basic Training course candidates, the chapter must first approve the youth as a VMN trainee before starting classes. Should the parent/guardian not be able to accompany the underage VMN trainee at any event, the chapter's hosts may exclude that underage trainee from attending that class or field trip. If the parent or guardian is going to be an active participant in the VMN training and program, then that person must also be enrolled in the VMN Program using the same procedures as the other applicants.

Screening of Applicants

VMN volunteers are put into a "position of trust" with VCE, our sponsoring agencies, and our partners. VMN volunteers are:

- working unsupervised;
- running the VMN Program at the local level as our state program representatives;
- engaging in activities with a potential of risk, such as working with children, leading events for the public, etc.

Because of these responsibilities, it is imperative that due diligence is taken before accepting trainees into the VMN Program. This due diligence is accomplished by screening the applicants through applications, interviews, reference checks, and, in some cases, criminal background checks.

Volunteer Basic Training

All VMN volunteers must complete a Basic Training Course administered by one of the local chapters. The course includes a minimum of 40 hours of combined classroom and field experiences, with a minimum of 10 of those hours spent in the field. Each chapter sets its own basic training course schedule, so the actual hours for training may exceed this minimum.

Basic Training Goals and Objectives

Every VMN basic training course should achieve all three of these overarching goals:

- Provide trainees with knowledge and skills related to natural resources and conservation education that is applicable to VMN volunteer activities and service; and prepare them for continued lifelong learning on these topics.
- Instill an affinity for the VMN program and the chapter in the trainees so that they feel connected to the group and build social connections that facilitate their continued long-term engagement as VMN volunteers.
- Connect trainees to nature places (parks, natural areas, demonstration sites), people (other VMNs, expert instructors, agency personnel), organizations (partners), and service activities in their local community.

Because of its geographical diversity, the natural resources of Virginia vary widely. Therefore, each local chapter will customize their training program to focus on their local ecosystems and volunteer needs while ensuring that the overarching goals are achieved, and the following learning objectives are included.

Virginia Master Naturalists will know:

- all aspects of their role as a Virginia Master Naturalist;
- the mission and objectives of the VMN Program;
- the guidelines for participation and how to access them (including Civil Rights training and this VMN Volunteer Policy Handbook);
- Risk Management training;
- what a naturalist is and does and the significance of naturalists and natural history;
- the biogeography of Virginia, including the physiographic regions and the geological and ecological aspects that make them distinct;
- basic concepts of ecology;
- basic concepts of geology;
- basic resource management principles;
- some native flora and fauna in the region;
- the general process of science;
- the roles of Virginia state agencies in the management and conservation of natural resources.

Virginia Master Naturalists will be able to:

- use a key to identify organisms;
- use a field guide;
- share knowledge with others (verbally and/or in writing);
- make and record observations in nature;
- recognize when they do not know the answer to a question, but be able to seek out answers from people, books, or other reliable resources.

Trainee Assessments

Each chapter will do a two-part assessment of trainees as part of the Basic Training Course. This assessment includes an open book written assessment, and a practical component that may include skills such as using a dichotomous key or giving a presentation. The specific requirements of the assessments are determined by the local chapter.

To earn the VMN Basic Training Course Diploma, participants must pass each of their assessments. What constitutes as a "pass" will be determined by the local chapter's Basic Training Committee.

Absenteeism During Training

Each chapter will set a chapter standard for the maximum number of classes that can be missed during a given Basic Training Course without the volunteer needing to retake the course in its entirety. This standard is to ensure the trainee's commitment to the program. To graduate from the course, VMN trainees are required to attend the minimum number of classes and field trips set by the chapter. Because of the need to ensure all VMN Trainees have received training in all curriculum topics, any missed classes, even within the maximum allowed, must be made up.

Should a trainee not fulfill the class makeups and assessment requirements by the end of the scheduled course, they have 12 months from the end of the course to complete them. If there are extenuating circumstances that prohibit completion within that timeframe, a trainee should discuss the issue and their intentions with the chapter.

Graduation from the Basic Training Course

When a Trainee has completed their course work, including any necessary makeups, completed the Risk Management and Civil Rights trainings in Better Impact, and passed both assessments, they are considered a Basic Training Course Graduate. Upon graduation, volunteers can be given a Basic Training Course Diploma and will receive a VMN name tag that they will wear when they are volunteering. Many chapters host a chapter-wide event to celebrate the graduates and introduce them to other chapter members.

Resources:

- Basic Training Resources on the VMN website

Better Impact: Online Volunteer Management System

VMN uses an online volunteer management system called Better Impact to keep track of all volunteer records. Every VMN volunteer has a profile in Better Impact. Their profile is created when they fill out the online application.

Individual VMNs use Better Impact for the following:

- Filling out their application to the VMN Program.
- Keeping their contact information current.
- Recording their areas of interest.
- Finding and signing up for volunteer activities and continuing education opportunities.
- Recording volunteer service and continuing education hours.
- Keeping up with chapter news.

Chapter Leaders and the VMN State Office use Better Impact to:

- Communicate with all VMNs
- Track graduation and certification statuses
- Keep a record of volunteer service hour milestones
- Keep a record of trainings completed
- Track annual Re-enrollment
- Run reports to determine bi-annual volunteer recognitions.
- Keep a record of each volunteer's current status within the Program.

Volunteer Statuses in Better Impact

Volunteer Statuses in Better Impact indicate whether a volunteer is enrolled or not. When a new, potential volunteer fills out the application, their status in Better Impact is listed as "Applicant". During the screening process, potential volunteers may be moved to "In Process" status. The "In Process" status might also be used when a volunteer is working on Reinstatement.

When screening is complete and a volunteer is accepted into a Basic Training Course, their status is updated to "Accepted". The volunteer will keep this status as long as they remain an enrolled volunteer in the VMN Program.

The "Accepted" status indicates that a volunteer has completed annual Re-enrollment, all of their required trainings are up to date, and they are in good standing within the VMN Program. Only volunteers with an "Accepted" status will receive communications from their local chapter and the VMN State Office so it is important that volunteers maintain this status.

When a volunteer becomes inactive, their status in Better Impact is changed to "Archived". A volunteer's profile does not get deleted. By archiving rather than deleting, the historical chapter and program data is not lost and, if a volunteer ever wants to be Reinstated, their record is still intact.

A volunteer's status is changed to "Archived" for many reasons, including but not limited to:

- The volunteer has opted to withdraw from the VMN Program.
- The volunteer did not graduate from their Basic Training Class.
- The volunteer did not complete annual Re-enrollment.

- The volunteer was dismissed from the VMN Program.

Once a volunteer's status is changed to "Archived" in Better Impact, the individual is no longer enrolled in the VMN Program, may not represent themselves as a VMN volunteer, and is no longer covered by the VCE liability insurance. Also, a volunteer may not log any volunteer or CE hours done during the time they were "Archived".

Standards of Conduct, Use of Title, and Dismissal

Standards of Conduct for VMN Volunteers

Virginia Master Naturalist volunteers shall at all times:

- Act in accordance with the VMN Volunteer Policy Handbook and the applicable policies of the chapter, sponsoring agencies, and partners with which they serve.
- Present a positive public image that speaks well of the Virginia Master Naturalist Program and its sponsoring agencies.
- Be respectful and courteous of others in all communications and interactions.
- Maintain and report accurate records relating to their training and service.
- Accept supervision and support from VMN sponsoring agency employees while involved in the program.
- Comply with the nondiscrimination policies of the VMN Program and its sponsoring agencies and make all reasonable efforts to reach underrepresented audiences with VMN Programs.
- Actively participate as a positive team member with other individuals in the VMN Program.

Local chapters should be instrumental in making members aware of these Standards of Conduct as well as their own chapter bylaws, policies, and procedures. Chapters shall be vigilant and responsible for ensuring members and affiliates are following expectations.

Use of the VMN Title

After completion of the Basic Training Course requirements to become a Virginia Master Naturalist volunteer, the official title shall be Virginia Master Naturalist (VMN) or Certified Virginia Master Naturalist. Use of these titles is a privilege, and these titles are to be used only by individuals trained as VMNs and while serving as VMN volunteers under the auspices of the VMN Program. This relationship should be clearly stated in nametags, signage, etc.

The VMN title is to be used only when doing unpaid volunteer work associated with and approved by the VMN Program and the local chapter.

The Virginia Master Naturalist volunteers provide accurate, unbiased natural resource information. VMN volunteers should not engage in political advocacy; lobbying; political or private promotion of issues, agendas, or businesses; or personal endeavors on behalf of the Virginia Master Naturalist Program in an official capacity or while serving in one's role as a Virginia Master Naturalist.

Wearing VMN clothing items and name badges

VMN does not have a uniform. VMN chapters or the state office may produce items such as shirts and hats with the VMN logo following the VMN standards for logo use. These items may be worn outside of VMN volunteer service, and they may be worn by individuals who are not VMN volunteers, unless a chapter adopts a more stringent local policy for specific items they have created.

The VMN nametag should be worn only by VMN volunteers while engaged in approved VMN activities.

Commercial Activity

Implying a VMN endorsement while participating in any commercial activity, within any commercial marketing, or in association with other commercial products or businesses is improper and a violation of VMN policies. VMNs may not use their title for business or personal gain.

Resumes or Job Applications

VMN training and experience may be given as qualifications when seeking employment. Once employed, however, those credentials may not be displayed by the VMN member or the employer.

Honoraria and Other Payments

VMN volunteers may not charge nor receive speaker fees for presentations that they are giving within the scope of their VMN volunteer service.

Chapters are allowed to charge a fee for any programs they are putting on to cover the cost of the program, such as materials and venue fees.

Political Advocacy

The Virginia Master Naturalist Program is not a political advocacy group, and it is not appropriate for VMN volunteers to engage in political advocacy while serving in their VMN volunteer role. The volunteer must understand that while representing VMN, they are unbiased educators or helpers, not supporters of a viewpoint.

Some examples of political advocacy that are inappropriate in the VMN volunteer role include:

- writing a letter as a chapter stating a political viewpoint on an issue to an organization;
- when announcing a position in a public forum, stating that one represents the Virginia Master Naturalist Program or its state sponsoring agencies;
- using VMN chapter email groups to promote an individual position on a political issue or to promote events or organizations with a political agenda.

It is, of course, allowable to write letters to government officials as a private individual or make statements at public meetings as private individuals. An individual may state that they are a Virginia Master Naturalist volunteer but may not state that you are representing the stance of the organization as a whole, a chapter, or its sponsoring agencies.

It is also true that not all engagement with decision-makers is political advocacy. For example, VMN volunteers in a chapter might adopt a local park and engage in discussions with the park manager to advocate for more management of invasive plants in the park. This sort of engagement is not political advocacy and could legitimately be part of a VMN activity.

In addition, even though there are events or activities that are offered by an organization with political advocacy wings (which many environmental organizations have), a VMN may volunteer at this event or activity if it meets certain criteria. For example, VMNs might have a table at an event, as long as it is educational in nature, such as for a Farm Bureau event where there are other similar non-profits. Or, they might be performing direct natural resource conservation tasks, such as planting riparian buffers for Wild Ducks Unlimited.

Dismissal of VMN Volunteers

VMN volunteers serve at the sole discretion of the Virginia Master Naturalist Program, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and other sponsoring agencies. VMN, VCE, and other sponsoring agencies may at any time, for whatever reason, decide to terminate the volunteer's relationship with the organization or to make changes in the nature of their volunteer assignment.

When a volunteer is not representing the VMN Program well, is not following program policies, or is not behaving in accordance with the Standards of Conduct, then the Chapter Advisor must be made aware of the situation. The Advisor should hold an in-person meeting with the volunteer to discuss the behavior and possible solutions. If no acceptable solution is found, or if the problematic behavior continues, the Chapter Advisor may, in coordination with the VMN State Program Office, approve and carry out a dismissal of the volunteer.

All parties should receive written notification that the individual’s role as a VMN volunteer has been terminated. From that point forward, the individual shall be “archived” in Better Impact and may not volunteer as a VMN nor represent the VMN Program in that or any other chapter.

VMN Enrollment and Membership

Definitions and Requirements

All Virginia Master Naturalists must be enrolled volunteers. This means that they have been screened, are listed as “Accepted” in Better Impact, and are either currently participating in a Basic Training Course or have graduated and completed annual Re-enrollment. Certification is not required to be an enrolled volunteer.

It is required that every currently enrolled VMN volunteer be a member of a chapter. There is no

place in the VMN Program for "unaffiliated volunteers". Chapters that require dues for membership may remove (archive) members who do not pay dues according to procedures defined in their chapter bylaws. In such a case, the volunteer ceases to be an enrolled VMN volunteer until they are again a member of that chapter or a different chapter. Volunteers should consult with their chapter leaders and chapter documents about when and how to pay dues and whether waivers are available for those who need it due to financial circumstances.

Any volunteer who does not graduate from basic training and makes no effort to do so will be archived in Better Impact and will no longer be considered enrolled in the VMN Program. Any volunteer who does not complete annual Re-enrollment or who has been dismissed from the VMN Program cannot be an enrolled volunteer.

State Residency

Individuals who live in states neighboring Virginia are welcome to participate in the Virginia Master Naturalist Program. In-person volunteer service, however, must be done in Virginia in order to count towards the VMN Program, with a few case-by-case exceptions. See the section titled Volunteer Service Guidelines – Volunteer Activities That Cross State Borders later in this document.

Re-enrollment

Re-enrollment is the practice of asking every VMN volunteer to renew their membership in the program on an annual basis. All VMN volunteers must complete their re-enrollment in Better Impact or with a paper form on an annual basis to remain volunteers in good standing of the VMN Program.

Who needs to Re-enroll?

Any VMN Volunteer who was enrolled in the VMN Program the previous year in any capacity and who intends to continue being an active VMN volunteer in the upcoming year must re-enroll. Re-enrollment is not tied to a VMN volunteer's certification status nor number of hours of service.

New volunteers complete enrollment as part of their application process and the VMN State Office will determine when they must start completing annual Re-enrollment. The determination of whether a volunteer must complete Re-enrollment is tied to their initial enrollment date, not the basic training course graduation date.

What Happens if a VMN Volunteer does not complete Re-enrollment?

If a VMN Volunteer does not complete their Re-enrollment in Better Impact or with the paper form by the deadline (see the Annual Timeline section below), then they will be "Archived" in Better Impact. This means the individual is no longer enrolled in the VMN Program, may not represent themselves as a VMN volunteer, and is no longer covered by the VCE liability insurance. The VMN State Office will inform any individuals who are archived what that change in status means.

If a VMN Volunteer has been archived for not completing Re-enrollment, and they are interested in being reinstated in the VMN Program, they should contact the VMN State Office. They will be required to complete the Reinstatement process.

Annual Timeline for Re-enrollment

The Re-enrollment Period will be open annually from December 1 – January 31. During this period, the VMN State Office will process Re-enrollments on a rolling basis. Starting on February 1, the VMN State Office will begin the process of archiving all volunteers who did not complete Re-enrollment and notify them what the change of status means. Notifications will be sent to chapter board members when this process is complete.

The VMN State Office does not check a volunteer's dues payments as part of the annual re-enrollment process. However, some chapters may require volunteers to be current on their dues payments to remain an active member of that chapter, and schedules for dues payments vary among chapters. Volunteers should consult with their chapter leaders and chapter documents about when and how to pay dues.

Resources:

- Volunteer Policies and Procedures page of VMN website

Transfers, Reinstatements and Dual Memberships

Transfers Between VMN Chapters

When an active member "in good standing" (that is, not dismissed or suspended from the VMN Program, nor subject to other disciplinary action), moves to a

different part of the state or wishes to become active in an alternate chapter, a transfer may be implemented. Transfers will be handled by the VMN State Office. To begin the process, an enrolled member should send an email to their chapter or the VMN State Office to request the transfer. From there, the chapter leaders and the State Office will take over to get the transfer approved and processed.

Transfers from Another State

The VMN Program welcomes volunteers from other states who have been a part of a natural resources volunteer training program and highly values their interest and enthusiasm. However, the Virginia Master Naturalist Program does not recognize state-to-state transfers.

These individuals will be required to take the VMN Basic Training Course as a new VMN trainee and go through the same enrollment and screening process that all new applicants go through.

Basic training and continuing education/volunteer service hours earned under a different state's master naturalist-type program do not transfer.

Reinstatements

At times, individuals may have a lapse in their enrollment as a VMN volunteer and have their status changed to "Archived". Individuals who wish to be reinstated to the program after a lapse in enrollment must meet the following criteria:

- The individual must not have been dismissed due to any disciplinary action.
- The individual must have graduated from a VMN basic training course.
- The individual must be or become current on the required risk management (every three years) and civil rights trainings (once a year) for volunteers.
- The individual must fully update their profile in Better Impact.
- The individual must complete the Re-enrollment questions in Better Impact.
- If the lapse in enrollment was greater than one year, the individual must receive an orientation to the chapter and program from a chapter leader during which they review current policies and procedures.

Reinstatements will be handled by the VMN State Office and the process will be as follows:

1. The individual must make a request for reinstatement with the VMN State Office, leadership of their previous chapter, or leadership of the new chapter that they wish to join.
2. If the request was sent to a chapter, they will forward it to the VMN State Office
3. The individual will be granted access to Better Impact with "In process" status and an email will be sent to them with instructions for how to complete the following items: a) Update their volunteer profile, making sure that all required questions are answered and that contact information is complete and up to date; b) Complete the Re-enrollment questions; c) If they do not have current risk management and civil rights training qualifications, complete the e-learning modules for each of these topics.
4. The individual will have two weeks from when they received the information from the State Office to complete the Reinstatement tasks or they will be Archived again and will need to reach out to the VMN State Office if they wish to try again.
5. If the individual wishes to be reinstated in a chapter other than the one they were enrolled with when they became Archived, then the steps of a transfer must also be applied.
6. It is important to note that a volunteer cannot log volunteer or CE hours done during the time they were not enrolled in the VMN Program.

Dual Membership – Membership in More Than One Chapter

Being a Virginia Master Naturalist is a significant commitment, and actively participating in training, volunteer activities, chapter activities, and chapter administration takes a lot of time. For that reason, Virginia Master Naturalists are strongly encouraged to choose just one chapter for their membership.

It is recognized, however, that some volunteers have the time and energy to fully commit to two chapters and have worthwhile reasons for membership in two chapters (such as two residences, or a long history of participation with a nearby chapter). Desiring to stay connected to their old chapter without intending to volunteer hours on any activities in that region is not a sufficient reason to be allowed dual membership.

A volunteer fully committing to two chapters means that they will actively participate in both chapters and log hours in both chapters. It does not mean that

they are required to complete and log 40 hours of volunteer service and 8 hours of CE with each chapter.

Certification, Recertification and Milestones for volunteers with dual membership will be calculated by the VMN State Office using hours entered in both chapters. This calculation must be done at the state level because each chapter can only see the number of hours entered for that chapter. Only the volunteer and the State Office can see the hours entered for both chapters. Volunteers with dual membership will need to choose the appropriate chapter when reporting hours. They may not report the same hours done on one activity (volunteer service or CE) in both chapters.

Dual membership will be handled by the VMN State Office, who will review the request and determine if it should be approved. Once approved by the State Office, the request requires the approval of the Board of Directors of both chapters. Enrolled members can initiate the process of requesting dual membership by sending an email to their chapter leadership or to the VMN State Office. From there, the chapter leaders and the State Office will take over to get the dual membership approved and processed. The volunteer will choose which chapter they would like their recognition items sent to.

Annual Timeline

Transfers, reinstatements, and dual memberships will not be processed in January due to end-of-year reporting priorities.

Reporting Requirements for VMNs

Documenting Volunteer Service and Continuing Education Hours

Recording and reporting volunteer efforts is a very important part of being a Virginia Master Naturalist volunteer. Both the VMN Program and the sponsoring agencies benefit greatly from this small but very critical effort by the VMN member.

It is important that chapter membership data is as accurate and up to date as possible so that we can report to our funding agencies, both state and federal, a more truthful representation of the size of our program.

A surprising number of volunteers are very active, but do not regularly report hours. Documenting all time spent acting in the VMN volunteer role is part of the Standards of Conduct for all volunteers. Accurate reports of volunteer efforts are important for many reasons, such as:

- They provide documentation of what activities were done when and by whom for risk management purposes.
- They assist the state sponsoring agencies and local partners in getting much needed federal/state monies, grants, or other funding to support their natural resource programs.
- They help the state sponsoring agencies and local partners evaluate their investment in the VMN Program and thereby continue to support the program.
- They may be used for in-kind match for external grants.
- They provide documentation used for chapter and statewide awards.
- They ensure our program's compliance with civil rights requirements.
- They make it possible for the VMN State Office to create accurate annual infographics for each chapter.

Recording Hours in Better Impact

VMN volunteers must report their approved volunteer service and continuing education hours, contacts, and other requested information in our online volunteer management system, Better Impact. Other requested information might include a description of the activity, impacts, locality, etc. Volunteers should talk to their chapter's Volunteer Management System Administrator or Membership Chair if they need assistance with this user-friendly online reporting system. For any volunteer that does not have access to a computer or mobile device or access to the internet, they should contact their chapter about the best way to have their hours recorded in Better Impact.

Resources:

- A training video and a one-page instruction sheet for first-time volunteer users of Better

Impact and a more detailed document describing how to use Better Impact features to find and sign up for volunteer opportunities are available online.

Volunteer Service Requirements and Guidelines

Volunteer service is time spent on Virginia Master Naturalist activities that have been approved by each local chapter. Time spent on VMN chapter leadership positions, such as serving as a Board or Committee member, are also eligible for approved volunteer service. Service may involve a series of short, unrelated volunteer experiences, a long-term commitment to a single activity or resource, or anything in-between. A VMN volunteer may earn hours working independently or as part of a team.

Volunteer service must be dedicated to the beneficial management of the natural resources and natural areas within a volunteer's communities, and the service must be for public benefit, not personal gain. All service activities must first be approved by the chapter leadership before engaging in the activity as a VMN volunteer. (See section Finding and Creating Approved Service Activities for more information.)

Trainees may begin earning and recording volunteer service and CE hours (outside of their class hours for Basic Training) after the first class of their Basic Training Course. They do not have to wait for graduation to earn and record hours. Certain volunteer activities, however, may not be available to Trainees until they have completed specific aspects of their training, such as risk management.

Reporting Volunteer Service Time

Time spent in the preparation and management of an approved activity may be counted as Volunteer Service hours. When training is a requirement for the volunteer to be able to assist with an approved activity, the volunteer may report those specific training hours as either Volunteer Service or Continuing Education hours. For instance, if a butterfly identification class is required for those helping with a butterfly survey, that class can be counted as volunteer service hours for that approved survey activity, provided that the volunteer did indeed help with the survey.

In addition, VMN volunteers may count time spent on travel to conduct chapter-approved volunteer service as part of their service hours. Volunteers are strongly encouraged, however, to choose service opportunities close to their communities, rather than choosing activities that have very high travel time compared to the actual service time. Volunteers should add travel time to the total hours they earned for the activity on that day and record them as a total.

Volunteer Contribution Areas

VMN volunteers may complete volunteer service hours in four categories, which are defined below: Education and Outreach, Science, Stewardship, and Chapter Administration.

Education and Outreach Activities

This area indicates activities or programs in which the VMN educates the public. It may include interpretive programs at parks; presentations and tabling/booths at fairs, markets, and other public events; and educational presentations to identified audiences, such as community groups, school groups, or homeowner associations. This area also includes training of other non-VMN volunteers or identified groups of volunteers to assist VMNs in delivering a program. Educational efforts include the time spent planning, organizing the logistics of, implementing, and evaluating the program. In addition, this area includes volunteer service as an instructor for a VMN Basic Training course or a continuing education opportunity. If the volunteer serves as a planner or organizer (rather than instructor) for a chapter's basic training course or continuing education events for members, those service hours should be reported as Chapter Administration.

Science Activities

This area indicates service involving data collection, monitoring, biological inventories, and other science-oriented activities. These activities may be called citizen science, community science, participatory science, or other terms, depending on the activity and partners involved. Examples include stream monitoring, vernal pools monitoring, and organized bird and butterfly counts. The activities may be part of statewide projects or projects specific to a local partner.

Stewardship Activities

This area indicates hands-on volunteer activities intended to improve habitat and other natural resources, or, in some cases, to improve the ability of the public to access these resources. These activities typically occur on public lands and may include invasive plant removal, habitat restoration, and trail building/maintenance. As with other service activities, these activities must be for public benefit, not personal gain, and must first be approved by the chapter.

Chapter Leadership/Administrative Time

This area indicates efforts spent on chapter organization, VMN volunteer management, training, and other management roles. It may include leading general membership meetings; planning and supervising VMN training classes (not teaching, which would instead be reported as Education service hours); working on a chapter newsletter; communication efforts; and any other activities that maintain and support the effectiveness of the chapter and the statewide program.

Chapter administrative time does not include time spent on management of chapter-approved service activities. Those hours would instead be reported as Volunteer Service hours for the activities to which they are related.

Finding and/or Creating Approved Service Activities

Every chapter has a list of approved service activities for chapter members. If a volunteer has an activity that they would like to do but is unsure whether it is approved or how it is listed in Better Impact, they should ask the chapter's Volunteer Activity Chair (sometimes called Project Chair, Volunteer Service Chair, or another similar title) before doing the activity.

If a volunteer would like to create a new service activity for the chapter, they should ask the chapter's Volunteer Activities Chair what the process is for submitting new service activities for approval. All service activities must be approved by the local chapter, and every chapter has a process for reviewing new service activities. This approval needs to be granted before there is any accumulation of VMN hours on that activity.

If a volunteer is considering a new service activity, they should be sure to first check their chapter's existing activities, as the proposed activity may fit into one of those already approved, including more general categories. For example, if they want to help pull invasive species at a particular county park, their chapter may already have an activity that includes a variety of stewardship activities, including pulling invasive plants, in all the county parks. Alternatively, there may be an existing activity that could be broadened to include new aspects or locations, rather than adding an entirely new activity.

Resources:

- Using Better Impact Features as a Volunteer: Match Your Interests to Find Opportunities, Receive Notices and Reminders About Your Activities, and See Who Else Has Signed Up

Volunteer Service Guidelines

Understanding the VMN Volunteer Role

It is important for VMNs to know and understand when they are acting in their VMN volunteer role, versus a personal role, versus a role solely in another organization. For this reason, the VMN State Office encourages volunteers to be intentional with their VMN volunteer service. Planning ahead to determine when a volunteer will be acting in their VMN volunteer role versus not will help to determine appropriate behavior for the activity. When in the VMN role, individuals should acknowledge that role and represent themselves as a VMN volunteer by wearing the VMN nametag, introducing themselves as a VMN, and following VMN Program guidelines and policies. VMN volunteers should only report volunteer hours for which they were acting in their VMN role. They should not report activities completed outside of their VMN role as VMN service, even if those activities relate to natural resource conservation.

It often happens that Virginia Master Naturalist volunteers are volunteering with state agencies and other organizations. As a result, they may have overlapping roles for the same activity. For example, a VMN volunteer who is volunteering on an approved VMN activity at a State Park may be acting as both a DCR volunteer and a Virginia Master Naturalist volunteer.

VMN volunteers should follow any volunteer guidelines of the organization for which they are volunteering. In this example, that might include a separate application, additional training, and additional reporting of volunteer hours for the State Park. It is fine if both the organization and the Virginia Master Naturalist Program recognize and count those volunteer hours.

The exception is that VMN volunteers should not double-report hours on activities within other VCE Master Volunteer programs (such as Extension Master Gardeners) in which there is a *required* level of service. VMN volunteers who are also volunteers in any of these VCE-run, Master Volunteer programs should choose which program to report volunteer hours with.

Virginia Master Naturalist Volunteer Activities with Private Organizations and Landowners

Not all activities must be done on public lands or with public organizations. Activities with private not-for-profit organizations that have natural resource or environmental education missions are often acceptable. Examples include 4-H Centers and nature centers.

Stewardship activities on other private lands (such as individual landowners' properties) are generally not appropriate for VMN service. Depending on the specific situation, this type of activity may be approved on a case-by-case basis. Volunteers may submit possible service activities to their chapter board for approval, and they will be evaluated using criteria provided by the VMN State Office.

Administrative Time for Other Organizations

Virginia Master Naturalists frequently hold leadership roles in other natural resource organizations. Volunteer service done with these other organizations may count towards VMN volunteer service hours if the time is spent on a chapter-approved activity that benefits natural resources. However, administrative time for the other organization that is not project-oriented is generally not appropriate for VMN volunteer service hours. Board meetings, member recruitment, and fundraising activities for another organization should not be done while acting in one's VMN volunteer role.

For example, if a VMN volunteer is also on the Board of their local Virginia Native Plant Society chapter, that VMN volunteer may be acting in their VMN volunteer role when putting on a public education program pertaining to Virginia flora. However, this same VMN volunteer should not be acting in their VMN volunteer role when engaging in general Virginia Native Plant Society Board activities, such as planning and working on fundraisers or member recruitment. Remember that VMN volunteers are volunteers of the state and are covered by the state for liability when acting in that role on approved activities, and it would not be appropriate for the state to be covering liability for activities internal to other private organizations. Administrative activities directly with one of our Sponsoring Agencies at the agency's request may be approved by the chapter on a case-by-case basis.

Volunteer Activities that Cross State Borders

On-the-ground volunteer service such as leading an in-person educational program, conducting stewardship, or collecting scientific data must be performed in Virginia to count as VMN volunteer service hours. There may be opportunities for regional projects that cross state borders and chapters may evaluate those on a case-by-case basis. Volunteer service that is completely virtual and computer-based, such as many chapter administrative activities, may be done anywhere.

Wildlife Permits

If the proposed activity involves the disturbance, collection, and or display of anything related to wildlife, volunteers will need the applicable permits related to research, collection, salvage, and/or display of wildlife and wildlife parts.

VMN volunteers must comply with federal and state laws and regulations when collecting or displaying live or dead birds, wildlife, and their related parts, even for educational purposes. Wildlife parts include such items as feathers, nests, skins, bones, and turtle shells. As described by the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, "Collection includes all sampling activities that remove, even temporarily, any individuals from the natural environment. Collection also includes habitat disturbance such as turning over rocks/logs, putting down cover boards etc. as well as the capture and handling of species. Salvage includes all taking of species found dead. A permit is required for Scientific Collection and/or

Salvage activities anywhere in the Commonwealth of Virginia including federal lands." In addition, a different permit is required for the public exhibition of live animals for educational purposes. Furthermore, a federal permit from the US Fish and Wildlife Service is required before any person may take, transport, or possess migratory birds, their parts, nests, or eggs for scientific research or educational purposes.

The VMN Program State Office cannot administer statewide permits to VMN volunteers, nor can it exempt VMNs from the permitting process. When possible, VMN volunteers are encouraged to work with a local partner organization as sub-permittees under the partner's permits. Otherwise, VMN chapters may choose to apply for permits that list all the chapter members who will be involved in these activities, or individuals may choose to apply for their own permits. Each type of permit includes a fee and requirements for annual reporting on what activities were done and what was collected.

Resources:

- Information from the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources on Permits for Collecting, Exhibiting, and Releasing Wildlife
- USFWS Migratory Bird Permits

Pesticide Use and Recommendations

The registration and use of pesticides are governed by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS). Activities involving the use of pesticides or advising the public on the use of pesticides carry high liability for the VMN Program and its sponsoring agencies and partners. This section is included in the VMN Volunteer Policy Handbook with the intent of reducing this risk, preventing pesticide misuse or misinformation, and protecting the public and environment from potential harm. All VMN volunteers must comply with established Extension policy related to pesticide use and recommendations, and their service activities must be approved by the local unit or chapter before they take part in them.

Policies Regarding Chemical Pest Control Recommendations

VMN volunteers may not suggest any specific chemical controls, nor create information (e.g., fact sheets, displays) that includes specific chemical controls. VMNs may state generally that chemical controls may be recommended for certain species, and that landowners should contact an Extension agent and/or Virginia Department of Forestry forester for specific recommendations to match their species, settings, and needs. Similarly, VMNs may provide factsheets and other materials provided by VCE or other agency sponsors that contain pesticide information.

Policies Regarding Pesticide Use as part of VMN Volunteer Activities

It is possible that some VMN volunteers could be involved in the application of pesticides in demonstration plots, exhibits, or habitat restoration sites as part of their approved volunteer activities. By state law, these activities are only allowed for the volunteer under two possible pathways. The volunteers could be certified as either commercial pesticide applicators or registered technicians as required by the Virginia Pesticide Control Act. Alternatively, the volunteers could be operating under the pesticide control exemptions for volunteers working under very specific circumstances. For details on these two pathways and other details on VCE policies regarding pesticide use and recommendations by volunteers, please see the VCE Pesticide Policy Statement #93-001 (revised April 2026).

Continuing Education (CE) Requirements and Guidelines

Guidelines for Continuing Education

Continuing Education is additional training, beyond the Basic Training Course. It provides VMN volunteers an opportunity for further learning and to focus on specific topics that interest them and that relate to the volunteer work they wish to do. The CE requirement for certification helps volunteers show a demonstrated commitment to advancing their naturalist skills, knowledge, and abilities. It provides even experienced volunteers with tools to work more effectively on service activities.

Virginia Master Naturalist volunteers are lifelong learners who likely are learning new things through many different opportunities, including talking to

other knowledgeable people, reading, watching videos, personal observation, and other means. Not all this learning qualifies or should be documented as CE. For example, time spent watching television shows and movies does not meet the criteria for Continuing Education, nor does time spent reading books. CE is meant to be instructional and to involve a knowledgeable trainer, leader, or facilitator. Interactive trainings in which discussions can be initiated and questions asked and answered are ideal.

CE must focus on content relevant to Virginia. CE may be virtual or in-person.

Reporting Continuing Education Time

Continuing education hours are counted as one hour for each hour of training received. Travel time to and from the CE activity is not accepted as CE hours and should not be reported.

Finding Continuing Education Opportunities

Continuing Education opportunities may be made available by the local chapter, VMN Program sponsors, chapter partners, or other reputable organizations that provide research-based training. They may be offered in-person or through virtual formats, such as webinars and online courses. Virginia Master Naturalists should receive approval from their chapter *prior* to attending any Continuing Education event. Chapters may choose to pre-approve Continuing Education offerings from some of their sponsors and partners.

The VMN State Office notifies volunteers of Continuing Education opportunities that it offers, as well as some opportunities offered by state agency sponsors and other organizations. Chapters are expected to notify volunteers of local opportunities. In addition, volunteers may seek out opportunities themselves and submit them to their chapter leaders for approval.

VMN State Program Continuing Education Offerings

The VMN State Office is devoted to providing regular continuing educational opportunities for its members through conferences, workshops, webinars, and other events that volunteers can apply toward their required CE hours.

VMN Webinars

These regular informational webinars provide volunteers with an opportunity to interact remotely with a 'live' educational presentation about a natural resource topic or VMN administrative subject. These webinars are presented by well-informed instructors in those areas and allow for a more intimate and convenient way for volunteers to learn, where they can ask questions. These webinars are recorded and then saved to the VMN website for the convenience of volunteers who were not able to participate at the time of the webinar. There are many previously recorded webinars to choose from that the volunteer may use as credit toward their CE hours requirement for certification.

VMN State Conference

The Virginia Master Naturalist Statewide Conference and Volunteer Training is an opportunity for VMN volunteers to share ideas and learn from each other, to participate in high-quality continuing education sessions, and to learn about a region of Virginia that may be different from their home communities. The event is held annually, and every third year is virtual. The in-person events move to a different region of Virginia each year and are hosted by the local chapter(s) in that area.

Resources:

- Continuing Education Webinar Series page of the VMN website
- State Conference page of the VMN website

VMN Certification and Recertification

Why Earn Certification?

While the VMN State Office does aim to have every volunteer get Certified at least once, annual Certification is not required to remain an enrolled volunteer and the VMN State Office understands that it is not always possible for every volunteer to achieve Certification every single year they are enrolled in the VMN Program.

There are, however, many reasons for, and benefits to, being Certified. These include but are not limited to:

- While someone can be a VMN volunteer with a lesser number of volunteer service hours, our sponsoring agencies believe that 40 hours per year is a good goal to work towards, as it demonstrates the kind of volunteer commitment and contribution that they hope to cultivate in the program. The CE requirement matches with the program's focus on lifelong learning.
- Achieving initial certification is an indicator that a person who goes through the training course is successfully retained as an active volunteer who has given back at the same level that they received in the training.
- Many volunteers are motivated by having a title to earn or a goal to reach.
- Many volunteers are motivated by earning pins, certificates, etc., which they can do through certification and re-certification.
- Some volunteers use the title on their resume or for other allowable purposes. Some employers will have Certified VMN as a preferred qualification for jobs.
- Some chapters have given certain perks to their members who are Certified.

How to Achieve Initial Certification

The requirements for initial certification are:

- graduation from a VMN Basic Training Course;
- completing and logging in Better Impact a *minimum* of 40 hours of chapter-approved volunteer service; and
- completing and logging in Better Impact a *minimum* of 8 contact hours of chapter-approved continuing education.

Once these requirements are completed, the volunteer will be recognized for the achievement with a badge in Better Impact and a paper certificate. The volunteer remains a Certified Virginia Master Naturalist the remainder of the calendar year in which initial certification was achieved and all of the following calendar year, provided that the volunteer re-enrolls.

Certification Timeline for All VMNs

VMNs who have not achieved their initial certification can do so in any given calendar year. They can earn certification by completing and logging in Better Impact, 40 hours of chapter-approved volunteer service and 8 contact hours of chapter-approved CE, between January 1 and December 31 of that year.

Certification Timeline for VMN Trainees/New Graduates

Trainees automatically receive an extended timeline for the calendar year certification requirement. This extended timeline enables Trainees to count all volunteer service and continuing education hours earned from the first day of their basic training through one year after graduation. Since this time period is longer than 12 months, it gives the Trainees a longer window of time to complete and log the volunteer service and CE hours necessary to achieve initial certification.

If a Trainee is not able to complete their initial certification during the extended timeline, then certification hours are assessed on a calendar year basis.

Recertification

Once an enrolled volunteer has achieved their initial Certification, they can maintain that Certification by doing the following during any calendar year:

- Complete and log in Better Impact a *minimum* of 40 hours of chapter-approved volunteer service.
- Complete and log in Better Impact a *minimum* of 8 direct contact hours of chapter-approved continuing education.

Enrolled volunteers can work toward renewing their certification every calendar year. Recertifications are rewarded with a unique state pin that is different every year.

To be eligible to earn the Recertification pin, an enrolled volunteer must either have already achieved initial certification in a previous year or have completed an additional 40+8 of volunteer service and continuing education hours in the same calendar year that their initial certification was awarded.

Enrolled volunteers who exceed these minimum hours for certification in a given year will not be able to bank volunteer or CE hours for credit in a following year. However, all volunteer service hours will be added to their 'lifetime' service hours accumulation, for which milestones and other recognitions are awarded. See the next section, Recognizing VMN Volunteers for more information.

Recognizing VMN Volunteers

The VMN State Program Office provides the following recognition items to VMN volunteers as they move through the program. Volunteers should make sure their personal profile in Better Impact is up to date so that their local chapter can make sure they receive their well-deserved recognition items.

The information provided here is an overview for volunteers. More details about the process for how chapters receive these items can be found in Admin Info Sheets on the Volunteer Management page of the VMN website.

In addition to the more tangible recognition methods described here, volunteers and their accomplishments are regularly recognized in the Laurels section of The Pollinator, the VMN Program's quarterly newsletter.

Nametags

Upon completion of their Basic Training Course, VMN volunteers will receive their VMN nametag so that they are recognizable when volunteering on an approved activity. Chapter leaders are responsible for ordering the nametags.

"Certified VMN" - Badge in Better Impact and Paper Certificates

Upon achieving their initial certification, VMN volunteers receive the official Certified Virginia Master Naturalist title, an electronic badge in Better Impact, and a paper certificate from the VMN State Office.

The VMN State Office automatically checks all volunteer records twice a year in July (Mid-year Reports) and January (End-of-Year Reports). When initial certification has been achieved, the VMN State Office will award the volunteer a badge in Better Impact and send a paper certificate. At the end of each reporting cycle, packages with Certificates and other recognition items are sent to chapters for distribution to volunteers.

Volunteers may (but are not required to) Request a Certification Check as soon as they think they have completed and logged 40 hours of volunteer service and 8 hours of continuing education after graduation from their Basic Training Course or within any given calendar year. This request will prompt the State Office to check the volunteer's record, and, if the requirements have been completed, the electronic badge is added in Better Impact and the volunteer is listed to receive a certificate in the next chapter package.

Resources:

- Volunteer Recognition (VMN Website)
- Volunteer Info Sheet_How To Request a Certification Check

Recertification Pins

Certified VMN volunteers are eligible for recertification every calendar year by completing and logging 40 hours of volunteer service and 8 hours of CE (also called the annual "40+8") between January 1–December 31 of that calendar year. Previously certified VMN members who meet these requirements will receive a recertification pin unique for that year.

Volunteers achieving initial certification are not generally eligible for a recertification pin for the upcoming year because their initial certification is still in effect. However, ambitious new volunteers may earn the recertification pin for the upcoming year by completing an **additional 40+8** of volunteer service and CE hours in the same calendar year that their initial certification was awarded.

Milestones - Accumulated Lifetime Volunteer Service Hours

Regardless of "Certified" status, VMN volunteers can still earn service hour milestones by logging all service hours they do in their VMN volunteer role. As these volunteer service hours accumulate, the

Virginia Master Naturalist Program recognizes specific milestone achievements.

These milestones are cumulative and honor those volunteers who have given 250, 500, 1000, 2500 and 5000 hours of service, receiving pins that notate each milestone achievement. A volunteer may reach these milestones within one year or over the course of several years.

When volunteers achieve their first milestone, they are given a silver VMN base pin and the appropriate milestone rocker panel that attaches to the base pin. This milestone rocker will note the number of hours of service. As each new milestone rocker is awarded, it replaces the previous rocker. Should the volunteer not wish to keep the now redundant milestone rocker, it can be returned to the VMN State Program Office or the local chapter so that it can be reused.

At 5000 hours of service, the volunteer is given a new, gold VMN base pin and added to the VMN Golden Circle. Golden Circle volunteers have demonstrated incredible dedication to service that benefit's Virginia's natural resources and to the VMN Program as a whole.

Volunteers in the Golden Circle are:

- given a gold base pin to use with milestone rocker bars;
- invited to attend the VMN Statewide Conference for a discounted fee;
- listed and recognized on the Golden Circle page of the VMN website;
- invited, when opportunities arise, to provide input on some decisions and initiatives of the VMN State Office.

VMN Program Awards

The VMN Program issues annual awards. The categories change each year depending on what is relevant. Awardees are recognized in announcements sent to all VMNs and in the VMN statewide newsletter. Nominations are solicited by the VMN State Office, and a committee made up of members from our sponsoring agencies reviews the nominations and chooses the recipients.

Award categories may include (but are not limited to):

- New Volunteer of the Year
- Volunteer of the Year
- Chapter Leader of the Year
- Advisor of the Year
- Activity of the Year
- Diversity and Inclusion

A chapter may also establish its own local awards. An example of such an award might include "the most hours served" or "Chapter Master Naturalist of the Year".

Risk Management for VMN Activities

Overview

Every day, Virginia Master Naturalists are engaged all over our state in a wide variety of activities. They could be out in the woods teaching youth about the wonders of nature, hiking on a remote trail to retrieve a wildlife camera, paddling a kayak to gather water samples, planting a roadside pollinator habitat, educating a homeowner about invasive species, or many other activities involving education, citizen science, or stewardship.

Everything that Virginia Master Naturalists do involves some sort of risk. It could be risk to their own health and safety, risk to the health and safety of participants in the programs they lead, risk to property (like those new pollinator plants they are planting), risk to the natural resources, or risk to the reputation of the volunteers, chapters, program, state agency sponsors, and local partners with whom they are volunteering.

Risk management means all the strategies we use to try to reduce the likelihood that some action we take will cause harm. Risk management is the responsibility of every Virginia Master Naturalist volunteer.

One of the benefits to volunteering through the VMN Program is that our sponsoring agencies provide training and support to protect you as the volunteer, the public we interact with, the VMN Program, and their own organizations. Because Virginia Cooperative Extension is the lead sponsoring agency for the VMN Program, they assume the risk management and liability for our volunteers. For this reason, we follow VCE volunteer policies, with adaptations made as needed

to address the multi-agency nature of the VMN Program.

Insurance

Enrolled Virginia Master Naturalist volunteers are covered by Virginia Cooperative Extension's general liability insurance only while acting in their volunteer role on approved activities. Violations of the law or willful acts outside of the volunteer's scope of duties are not covered.

If a volunteer is injured while performing volunteer duties, medical claims are that volunteer's responsibility (personal insurance or cash payment). The Workers' Compensation Plan provided for employees of the Commonwealth of Virginia does not apply to volunteers.

Accidents involving personal vehicles (even when used for business) are the responsibility of the owner. All accidents must be reported to the insurer of the vehicle. Virginia Tech does have coverage for excess over personal coverage, only if personal auto liability limits were exhausted and Virginia Tech was determined to be liable because the individual was conducting approved VMN volunteer activities.

Risk Management Training

All Virginia Master Naturalist volunteers must receive training in risk management that includes guidelines for youth interactions as well as other risk management policies. The initial risk management training for all VMN volunteers is given as a required part of their Basic Training Course. Volunteers need to refresh this training every three years in accordance with Virginia Cooperative Extension policy.

To facilitate the risk management training process and tracking, a risk management e-learning module is available in Better Impact to all volunteers. It includes a short video, a reading, and downloadable files for volunteers to use, such as the emergency card, incident form, and planning tools. It also includes a multiple-choice assessment. Upon completing the assessment with a score of 80% or better, the volunteer will automatically receive the Risk Management Training Qualification and Badge, and the expiration date will be set for three years from that date. It is up to each chapter to determine whether and how volunteers should report the time spent on this training.

Volunteers should review the risk management training materials for information on liability insurance coverage, what to do in an emergency, specific considerations for working with youth and other vulnerable populations, and other risk management topics.

Resources:

- All the risk management resources are available in Better Impact by clicking "Training" in the My Profile menu.
- Link to Vol Info Sheet_How to Complete E-Learning Modules in BI
- Risk Management section of the VMN website

Civil Rights Compliance

Overview

As Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) is the lead sponsoring agency for the Virginia Master Naturalist Program, we share both the values and the responsibilities of VCE related to diversity and civil rights compliance. VCE policies apply to the VMN Program as they do to other Extension programs. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) values human diversity because it strengthens our system, our programs, and our lives. Besides a moral and intellectual appreciation and desire for diversity, VCE also has a legal responsibility to offer equal access to educational programs and equal opportunity in employment for people without discrimination based on age, color, disability, gender, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, or military status. VCE adheres to federal and state statues, regulations, and Virginia Tech and Virginia State University policies regarding civil rights in our role as a cooperator with the United States Department of Agriculture.

Everyone carrying out actions on behalf of the Virginia Master Naturalist Program is responsible for making sure that the program and the activities it offers are inclusive for all. A commitment to diversity and to ensuring equal opportunity for those wishing to benefit from our program and services is central to the VMN Program. This handbook highlights a few of the aspects of civil rights compliance that VMN volunteers might encounter most frequently. For more details on civil rights compliance, please see the civil rights training materials and additional resources listed.

Civil Rights Training

All VMN volunteers must have Civil Rights training as a part of their Basic Training Course. This Civil Rights training must be renewed annually for as long as a volunteer remains enrolled in the VMN Program. Annual civil rights training is a federal requirement for all VCE volunteer programs.

To facilitate the civil rights training process and tracking, a civil rights e-learning module is available in Better Impact to all volunteers. It includes a short video and additional readings that provide more details. Upon checking the box to say they have completed the training, the volunteer will automatically receive the VCE Annual Civil Rights Training Qualification and Badge, and the expiration date will be set for one year from that date. It is up to each chapter to determine whether and how volunteers should report the time spent on this training.

Member Demographics Reporting

We ask participants in our program to voluntarily disclose their gender, age, race, and ethnicity within their profile on Better Impact. That information will not be used to determine eligibility for the VMN Program. It will be used for determining compliance with federal civil rights laws and for gauging the effectiveness of diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies. By reporting this information, you will assist us in assuring that the VMN Program and activities are administered in as nondiscriminatory a manner as possible. The cumulative chapter demographic data are reported on each chapter's annual report.

Equal Opportunity, All Reasonable Efforts, and Nondiscrimination Statements

All VMN activities must comply with the VCE Equal Opportunity policies and be conducted in a manner that assures equal opportunity for all. Furthermore, effort must be made to advertise VMN Programs to all people who might be interested in or benefit from them.

All Reasonable Efforts

All Reasonable Efforts refers to the strategies used to advertise programs to underrepresented audiences. We should let people know about opportunities to participate in VMN Programs through a wide variety of methods, such as fliers, websites, social media, newspaper announcements, radio, etc. In addition, we need to make further efforts to reach underrepresented audiences, such as contacting community groups that serve these audiences and advertising in ways that specifically target these audiences.

Nondiscrimination Statement

The VCE nondiscrimination statement serves as an important tool to notify people of their right to participate in Extension programs, including Virginia Master Naturalist Programs.

"Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and local governments, and is an equal opportunity employer. For the full non-discrimination statement, please visit ext.vt.edu/accessibility."

This statement must be included on all printed program announcements, flyers, brochures, and other *publicly distributed* documents and publications. This statement is not required on internal documents that are not available to the public.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, the following guidelines should be followed:

1. Consider the accessibility of meeting rooms that are used to conduct classes and meetings. Choose ADA compliant rooms if possible.
2. No interested parties may be denied services because of a disability unless it is impractical to accommodate their needs or if accommodating them would create an unacceptable health or safety risk or significantly alter the nature of the program.
3. Every reasonable effort must be made to design and deliver VMN Programs that encourage participation of individuals with special needs.
4. Use this required ADA statement when advertising VMN Programs. This statement must be used in all methods of promotion of VMN events and programs:

"If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services, or other accommodations to participate in this activity, please contact _____ (name, office) at (phone number/TDD*) during business hours of _____ a.m. and _____ p.m. to discuss accommodations five days prior to the event. *TDD number is (800) 828-1120."

Note: Volunteers typically use their chapter advisor's name and phone number for the purposes of the ADA statement, but they need to communicate with the advisor before doing so to ensure they are using the correct phone number and that the advisor knows what program is being advertised.

Educational Contacts Definitions and Reporting

Extension is required to collect data on the race, ethnicity, and gender of our program participants and educational contacts. These data help us determine if our potential audience is actually using our services, reveals if certain racial or ethnic groups or genders are not receiving services, and improves outreach efforts to underserved groups. When leading or presenting at a program organized by Virginia Cooperative Extension, volunteers may be asked to assist a local Extension agent or support staff in collecting demographic information for them to report. For other educational programs not organized by Virginia Cooperative Extension faculty or staff, VMN volunteers should report the total direct and indirect contacts within Better Impact using the appropriate feedback fields. Many volunteer activities may not include contacts, and volunteers may report zero contacts in those cases.

A Direct Contact refers to the face-to-face interaction with clientele where there is an exchange of educational information. For example, if a volunteer leads a nature walk for a group of people at a local park, the individuals attending would be counted as direct contacts. Programs delivered through videoconferencing that include two-way interaction between the presenter(s) and audience may be reported as direct contacts.

An Indirect Contact refers to several other means by which an exchange of educational information may be made, including email, newsletters, phone, social media, and recorded presentations without live interaction. Educational materials delivered by mass media methods such as TV, radio, and newspaper articles should not be counted as contacts because the individuals with whom information was exchanged cannot be effectively identified or quantified according to VCE guidelines.

It is important to be able to distinguish between contacts of an educational nature and those of a "business" nature. VMN volunteers should only report educational contacts with whom there was an exchange of educational information, usually related to natural resources in the case of the VMN program. Business contacts would include responses to inquiries about the time and place of events, referrals to another program, confirmation of registration, and other communications that are not sharing science-based knowledge through an educational process.

Resources:

- Civil rights resources are available in Better Impact by clicking "Training" in the My Profile menu.
- Link to Vol Info Sheet_How to Complete E-Learning Modules in BI
- Detailed information about the current wording for the VCE nondiscrimination statements and when and where to use them
- Detailed information about the current wording for the ADA statements and when and where to use them
- VCE Description of All Reasonable Efforts, Equal Access Assurance template, and Participant Self-Reporting Form – see the Risk Management and Civil Rights page of the VMN website
- The Extension Contacts Reporting Fact Sheet provides further details about the definitions of direct and indirect contacts and guidelines for reporting. It also contains details about collecting and reporting demographic data, although VMN volunteers will not be responsible for that in most cases.

Guidelines for Media Usage

Copyrighted Material Use

VMN volunteers may often create educational or marketing materials such as presentations, brochures, flyers, displays, blog posts, newsletters, and webpages. With the wealth of resources available from the internet, it is tempting to take images and other resources for use in those educational materials. Volunteers who are authoring educational materials should be aware of a few basic points of copyright laws and should not use images or other content authored by someone else without documented permission.

Resources:

- Copyright basics and information on Creative Commons licenses (University Libraries, Virginia Tech)
- Finding, Using, and Sharing: An Introduction to Copyright, Fair Use, and Creative Commons Licenses for Virginia Master Naturalists
  - Slides from presentation
  - Video of presentation
  - Finding Openly Licensed Photos and Illustrations (University Libraries, Virginia Tech)

Media Releases

A signed media release is needed when photographing or recording people who are not VMN volunteers if the image or recording is to be published, posted online, used to promote the VMN Program, or used in other ways. If the person is a minor, a parent or guardian must sign the release.

VMN volunteers have media release agreements in their profiles on Better Impact. While the vast majority of VMN volunteers have agreed to the media release, a small percentage of volunteers have opted to not have their image used by the chapter, program, or sponsoring agencies. Do not publish images of these individuals. When photographing or recording other VMN volunteers, please clearly announce that a photo will be taken and allow everyone the opportunity to step out of the frame if they prefer not to be photographed.

Resources:

- Media releases – This page has links to a Virginia Tech media release form and media release text for use on an event registration form.

Social Media

VMN chapters may have their own social media pages, groups, or handles. When communicating through these social media tools, remember that program policies still apply and that the page or group is representing the VMN Program and its sponsoring agencies. Information shared should be research-based and from a reliable resource. Avoid sharing biased information, product and business endorsements, and political posts.

If VMN volunteers have personal, individual blogs, Facebook accounts, and other social media presences, they are encouraged to include a "disclaimer" that information shared on these sites are their opinion and not necessarily those of the VMN Program or its sponsoring agencies. An example would be: "Information represents my personal opinions, but not necessarily those of the Virginia Master Naturalist Program or its sponsoring agencies."

Resources:

- Virginia Cooperative Extension social media policy

Visit Virginia Cooperative Extension: ext.vt.edu

Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments. Its programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, military status, or any other basis protected by law.

April 2026