

Coalition Philosophy 101:

How to be a Coalition Volunteer in the World



Thank you for your commitment to helping chained dogs by volunteering with Coalition to Unchain Dogs. Working with the Coalition is an unusually gratifying volunteer experience. With regularity, we see the results of our work in the bright faces and playful body language of the unchained dogs as we release them into their newly fenced yards. We are also rewarded by the gratitude of their humans, and by knowing that the dog/human relationship will be enhanced because we've given them a space in which to enjoy each other's company.

Coalition volunteers are warmly welcomed in the neighborhoods in which we work. We establish lasting relationships with the people we build fences for and we have earned a good reputation in the community. Our volunteers communicate with our clients and their neighbors in ways that instill trust in the organization -- and in some cases result in friendships developing between clients and volunteers. As a matter of fact, we met some of our current volunteers while helping them unchain their dogs.

Our reputation and effectiveness are in large part due to the fact that our volunteers operate under a very simple philosophy:

We are non-judgmental and we treat all clients, their property, their neighbors and other Coalition volunteers with respect and kindness. Period.

In practice, this philosophy manifests itself in many ways, including these:

--We do not make negative assumptions about people based on the fact that they chain their dog. The dogs' guardians care about their dogs and have done their best for them, given their life experience and their physical and financial means. They want a better life for their dogs, just as we do. This is why we were invited into their yard to build a fence.

--We believe it is counter-productive, and disrespectful, to give unsolicited advice. There are many steps involved in unchaining: outreach, spay/neuter, post-hole digging, fence building, follow-up, seasonal visits to add tarps or straw. During each step, Coalition volunteers are providing a model for animal care, and information about dogs' needs, without criticizing or lecturing.

-- Each Coalition chapter has an outreach coordinator (generally the chapter director) chosen by the Coalition's Board of Directors. The outreach coordinator is the only person authorized to disseminate information to clients about dogs' needs in general and the specific needs of their dogs in particular. The outreach coordinator is very familiar with the dog's humans and has a relaxed, ongoing dialogue with them over the course of several visits, before and after the fence is built.

-- Volunteers should not make comments to anyone at the work site about how skinny a dog is or that he has no food in his bowl, or that he has knocked over his water. We always leave a large water bucket, which is difficult to knock over, with every dog we help. We are very unlikely to be there at the dog's feeding time, so an empty food bowl is to be expected. The dog may be skinny because he had worms. Skinny dogs put on weight after they've been unchained because, before the fence-build date, they have been neutered and the outreach coordinator has dewormed them. In addition, once the dogs are off their chains, the resulting reduction in stress contributes to weight gain.

--The only Coalition members who should approach people about participation in our program are the specified outreach coordinators for each Coalition chapter. They bear the burdens of presenting our program in a way that is non-judgmental, getting all the information we need to effectively serve the dog's needs, and presenting the spay/neuter requirement in just the right way at just the right time. With only the official outreach person doing outreach, we know exactly how it is being done, and we avoid accidentally insulting people and/or turning them off to the Coalition. The dogs suffer in the end if our great reputation in the community becomes compromised by unintentionally inappropriate or counter-productive words or actions.

The Coalition exists and thrives because of our volunteers; everyone brings strengths to the group and some people are better than others at certain tasks. Not everyone can do spay/neuter transport, not everyone can create a website and not everyone can do outreach. Only the designated outreach coordinators are authorized to do outreach and be the spokespeople for the Coalition in this capacity; others should refrain from doing outreach unless they have been authorized to do so by the Coalition's founder and director, Amanda Arrington.

--Volunteers may observe that the outreach coordinator sometimes interacts in a familiar and/or playful way with some of the clients at the fence build. This is because they ARE familiar with them, having already spent considerable time with them on previous visits. If any of us acted that familiar with the dog's owners upon just meeting them, it may seem presumptuous. When participating in fence building, volunteers should not initiate interaction with the dog owners. Many times there is a "back story" to the situation that only those who do outreach can know about. Our ability to help the dog(s) depends on a very delicate balance in relationship building.

--We know that we cannot make every situation perfect. We are satisfied in knowing that we provide a service that ALWAYS dramatically improves the lives of dogs, even in those cases in which getting them off the chain and having them sterilized are the only changes in their lives.

--We do not make disparaging remarks about any fence recipient (past or present) to anyone.

--Likewise, we do not make disparaging remarks about any race or class or category of people. Coalition to Unchain Dogs takes its non-discrimination policy very seriously. We operate under the assumption and expectation that our representatives and volunteers believe in the right of everyone to be treated with kindness and respect, as well as to be given equal treatment under the law.

Therefore, in all of our activities, we will never discriminate based on race, gender, religious beliefs or lack thereof, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, age, veteran status or any category protected by law. In addition, if the Coalition determines that any volunteer or representative has engaged in verbal or physical conduct that denigrates or shows hostility toward an individual or group because of race, gender, income level, religious beliefs or lack thereof, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, age, veteran status or any legally protected category, appropriate action will be taken against the offending individual. This action could include exclusion from all present and future Coalition activities.

--We do not offer to take a client's dog off of their hands, nor do we offer to take dogs from the neighborhoods that we work in. In addition to not wanting people to get the impression that the Coalition is out to take their dogs away, we try to think of the larger picture. The person will probably get another dog at some point in their lives, as will their children. We believe a greater good comes from providing a better model for dog care through our fence-building program. This way, the fence recipients, their neighbors, their friends and their children will learn more about a dog's needs through the example set by the client and their fence we built for them. If we take a dog out of a situation, rather than working to both improve the situation and provide a model, we are doing a disservice to other dogs this person and their family members will acquire later.

--Regarding the client's property: We refrain from sitting on their cars, or putting our stuff on their cars. If we need to move something out of our way while building a fence, we ask the client where they'd like us to put it. Apart from moving things that need to be moved, we do not touch anything that does not belong to us. We take all of our trash with us when we leave. We park in the street, not the driveway. We leave the premises to find a restroom.

--Regarding the property of the client's neighbors: We do not enter their yards or touch anything that does not belong to us in front of their houses. We try to be as unobtrusive as possible while in the neighborhood.

--When volunteers listen to music while working, they do so through ear buds or headphones. We do not play music through speakers for all to hear. The client and/or their neighbors may not be in the mood to hear music (especially of someone else's choosing) at that time.

--We do not drink alcohol or indulge in recreational drugs at the worksite.

--We ask the dog's owner if the dog is friendly before trying to pet it. We generally don't give treats to dogs, especially in multiple dog yards because it could cause a fight between the dogs. In any case, we ask the owner's permission before giving the dog anything.

--Experience has taught us that dogs can become overwhelmed or over-stimulated if volunteers are inside the fence with them as we release the dogs into their new yard. So, we try to resist the urge to stay inside the fence with them. This is especially important in multiple dog households because over-stimulation or anxiety caused by too much excitement can sometimes cause the dogs to fight. Generally, only a videographer should be inside the fence in multiple dog households. In single dog households, one other volunteer can be inside the fence to initiate play.

--Volunteers leave their own dogs at home. Bringing dogs to the work site can add unnecessary chaos and upset (or put into danger) the dogs we are building the fence for and/or their humans.

--Minor-aged volunteers should be old enough to follow directions well, and should be closely supervised at all times by the adult who brought them to the fence build.

--We don't generally offer dog owners or their children free stuff that is unrelated to the fence (e.g., clothing, toys, bicycles, etc). This sort of charity (although motivated by compassion) can make the client feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or insulted. It could be inferred that you believe that they can't (or don't know how to) take care of themselves or their children. You may even be robbing a parent of the joy of giving the child a similar item at a later date, when the parent feels it is time for the child to have such a thing.

--We build the fences for the sake of the chained dog. We do not ask to know the owner's income. It is obvious that the vast majority of our fences are built for dogs whose humans are unable to pay for the materials and labor for a fence. Occasionally, we build a fence for a dog whose owner does appear able to pay for a fence, but we build the free fence anyway. There may be a financial burden of which we are unaware. But we would build the fence for the dog even if this were not the case. A chained dog is a chained dog, and the fence needed to free the dog from her chain would not be built if we didn't build it.

--We do our best to leave our egos at home. Every volunteer appreciates every other volunteer. We are all working to help chained dogs, and it takes every one of us to do it. We all contribute as much as we can, and do not judge others who may have less time to spare because of other responsibilities. We try to be kind, patient and respectful toward one another.

--Amanda Arrington, as the founder and executive director, is the spokesperson for the group as a whole. To insure consistency in our message, when reporters approach us, we direct them to Amanda or to the designated spokesperson for the local Coalition chapter (usually the chapter's director). Also, before speaking (or writing) in a public forum on behalf of the Coalition, it is good to run our ideas past Amanda.

--When you wear a t-shirt or other attire with the Coalition logo on it, you will be viewed as representing the Coalition. For this reason, please refrain from wearing Coalition attire when attending political rallies, public hearings, demonstrations, etc. If a reporter quotes or videotapes a Coalition volunteer's opinion, and reports that opinion as the opinion of the Coalition because the volunteer was wearing a Coalition t-shirt, it can cause misconceptions and confusion. This has actually happened and we'd like to avoid any future incidents of this sort. It is possible that the Coalition does not have a public position on the matter at hand, or that the Board is in the

process of writing a position paper about it. It is important that the Coalition's position on any topic, as well as the way in which it is expressed, be consistent and be approved by the Board of Directors.

--There are volunteers, including some who come to fences, who help in other ways: grant-writing, fundraising, bookkeeping, digging post holes, transporting dogs, designing tools, distributing posters, doing interviews, designing web pages and brochures, making videos, helping people start groups in other areas of the country, buying and organizing tools and materials, doing outreach, organizing and training volunteers, writing thank you notes, press releases and various other documents, reclaiming materials when fence recipients move – and the list goes on and on. In all of these activities, we remember that the way we present ourselves reflects on the Coalition as a whole and is important to our success in helping chained dogs.

--Volunteers are encouraged to have an open line of communication with their chapter director regarding problems or concerns. But if problems arise that are not being addressed, or if there are policies outlined in this Coalition Philosophy document which are not being adhered to, please contact: Amanda Arrington at director@unchaindogs.net or Lori Hensley at lori@unchaindogs.net

To reiterate, Coalition to Unchain Dogs takes a very unique approach to improving animal welfare in our community. It is this unique approach that has made us successful and growing larger every day. And, because of the success of this approach, we continue to inspire countless other groups across the country to launch programs such as ours. We respect the people we build fences for, we respect each other as volunteers, and we respect the Coalition as a vessel for profound and lasting change.

Thank you for all that you do, and will be doing, to improve the lives of dogs.

Amanda Arrington
Founder and Director,
Coalition to Unchain Dogs