

Where to hold a Natural Helpers Retreat

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Once you have your school administration on board to begin implementation of a Natural Helpers program, the next series of questions comes to the forefront::

- *Where do we hold a three-day retreat for 30-60 teens and adult program facilitators and chaperones (including two overnights)?*
- *How do we fund the facility rental (which will require a certificate of liability insurance)?*
- *How do we cover healthy meals and snacks at a reasonable cost?*
- *What happens if my school cannot afford a dedicated retreat facility?*

These are important questions which are best answered BEFORE you begin to bring students into the discussion and engage parent support.

Dedicated Residential Retreat Facilities:

Throughout NYS state, there exist dedicated retreat facilities operated by private, or sometimes religious or community owners. Think of a typical residential camp that you may have attended yourself. These are often used by adult groups of various kinds and are easily accessible, typically by school bus.

Retreat facilities often include:

- at least one large open meeting area which can accommodate a large number of participants
- comfortable dorm areas and clean bathrooms
- a professional kitchen which you may choose to use or not
- refrigeration for students who may need to bring their own food
- food selections for students with allergies and gluten free preferences
- A local catering facility which may have an existing business relationship with the facility
- a site for a campfire (VERY popular with teens but not required)
- a local hospital or emergency medical facility in case of emergency

Like any field trip, the school code of conduct is enforced on a Natural Helpers retreat. If anyone violates this, parents will be contacted and the student will be sent home.

Here are some examples of popular retreat settings for Natural Helper retreats on Long Island. We will add to this list as we are informed of other facilities:

<https://www.campalvernia.org/retreats>

<https://campdewolfe.org/>

<https://www.quinipet.org/>

Please Note: Retreat facilities often do renovations over the winter. Please contact the site well in advance to discuss availability and your program needs.

Other options: A church or community youth center may also have a site which may be used for a day program, but most likely not for overnights.

Is there really a difference if we do not do the overnights?

In a word - YES!

At the end of each night on a residential NH weekend, students and staff spend time together in an informal, safe setting. They play board games, listen to music, and just chat with each other. Cell phone use is permitted only for emergencies.

It is this bonding experience, especially after the second night which includes an activity called **Sharing** that most Natural Helpers will remember for the rest of their lives.

Students are not allowed to wander the grounds and there is a reasonable "lights out" time enforced. It is not easy to get such a large group of teens to actually go to sleep, but they eventually will. They also know that breakfast on the second day of the retreat is served early because of a full agenda.

However... if you can only launch NH without the use of a dedicated facility and overnights - so be it. Through active participation and practice, the NH curriculum teaches facilitative listening skills, responding effectively to peers in crisis, and the importance of mental health self-care. These skills play well across the lifespan and in college and beyond.

Funding:

The cost of NH retreats will vary by facility. Funding is covered by one of more of these choices:

- School district stipend for all or part of the retreat expenses
- Students pay a per participant fee (average \$50 - \$150)
- PTA or booster club stipend
- Local grants
- Corporate grants
- Fundraisers
- Donations

NOTE: Teachers are typically NOT paid for their participation on a NH retreat. It is considered an honor to be nominated by students and participation is purely voluntary.

Of interest to many students and parents is that when NHs graduate and attend college, they really enjoy meeting other NHs from around the country. Many students who were originally trained as NHs have gone on to careers in the mental health field. This aspect of giving back to one's community and offering compassionate care is a unique side-effect of training as a Natural Helper. It is what our grandparents and elders offered those of us who were fortunate enough to experience it - unconditional love, non-judgment, a voice that said we were loved just as we were - and a cookie! (or in the case of adolescents, a slice of pizza)