

Volunteer Handbook



Last updated: Jul 5, 2025

2717 Gaston Farm Rd. Chester SC, 29706

Welcome Message

Dear Strides of Strength Therapeutic Services Volunteer,

When you decided to volunteer at Strides of Strength Therapeutic Services (SOS), you became a very important part of our team. Our programs here at SOS could not operate without the assistance of dedicated volunteers like you. Taking that into consideration, please remember that we and the participants are relying on YOU for our services to operate successfully. If a volunteer doesn't show up when scheduled, or if they agree to help and then suddenly change their mind, it makes a huge difference in the quality of our services. Please remember that we cannot provide these wonderful opportunities to those who need them if we do not have assistance from our volunteers.

There are many volunteer opportunities available at SOS, so anyone can help, no matter what their equine, therapy, or educational experience. Offered services and volunteer opportunities will be discussed in greater detail below, but some opportunities are as follows: side walking during therapy sessions, assisting with fundraising and events, helping with summer camps or Farm School classes, and assisting with our Sensory Garden expansion and upkeep. As a member of our SOS team, you will help provide our patients, students, and families with the many benefits of equine-assisted services. Our volunteers make the biggest difference in the lives of people with disabilities and special needs within our community.

All volunteers are required to complete their paperwork and attend an introductory training session before helping with our equine-assisted services. Assisting our patients in a session requires maturity, responsibility, and discretion from the volunteer. Additional training opportunities will be available for volunteers who would like to learn more and take on more responsibility. The handbook as follows outlines what is expected of our volunteers as well as general information concerning our programs. To help you perform this job to the best of your ability, please read and study the information in this handbook.

Thank you for choosing Strides of Strength Therapeutic Services, and welcome to our family!

Sincerely,
Beth Gaston, Founder and CEO

Organization Overview

Strides of Strength Therapeutic Services, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) charitable and educational organization founded in 2018. Born out of her love of horses, her profession of physical therapy, and her understanding of the human-horse connection, Beth Gaston developed Strides of Strength Therapeutic Services, Inc.



Mission, Vision, and Values

Our Mision	Our Values	Our Population
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We strive to provide comprehensive therapeutic services and programs utilizing a variety of professional restorative aids, nature based learning, and skilled equine movements to facilitate physical and emotional growth, learning, and healing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foster - Growth, learning, and healing in those with mental, physical, and emotional disabilities• Provide - High-quality, effective services and programs to those community members with special needs to allow them to reach their greatest potential• Commit -To providing leadership, staff, and volunteers who uphold our goals and enhance the lives and well-being of our patients and their families• Increase - Our financial base through donations, fundraisers, grants, and endowments that will further grow, support, and sustain our organization• Afford - Participants an experience that otherwise may not be available due to financial limitations, and/or lack of access due to location.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our population includes children and adults with mental, physical, emotional, and functional disabilities.• Strides of Strength Therapeutic Services, Inc. does not discriminate based on race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital or family status.

Policies & Guidelines

Volunteer Training

Volunteers must be 14 years of age to participate and able to lift 50 lbs. All volunteers for SOS must be mature enough to handle the responsibility of assisting and protecting the patient and be physically fit to walk for up to two hours. SOS reserves the right to determine if a volunteer is not yet ready to take on the responsibility of assisting in sessions. Volunteers are required to attend the orientation training session and one safety training session each year. We must offer our patients and participants the safest environment possible. By training our volunteers to handle certain situations and practicing regularly, we can react to emergencies in a safe and orderly fashion.

Volunteer Paperwork

Volunteer paperwork must be completed before your first session as an SOS volunteer. The paperwork includes:

- Liability Release Form
- Volunteer Handbook Form
- Rules Form

If you plan on volunteering at SOS long-term, please be aware that the paperwork must be updated yearly to ensure all information is up-to-date and that you stay in compliance with rules and regulations as they change.

Volunteer Sign-In

It is important for you to sign in when you arrive at SOS each day. Maintaining records of volunteer hours is a requirement of accreditation. It also helps with grants and fundraising and provides an accurate record for those who need verification of hours. Remember to sign-in every time you volunteer. The sign-in clipboard will be kept inside the tack room, but please ask a staff member if you have any trouble finding it.

Arrival and Departure Times

Please plan to arrive at least 30 minutes prior to session times and plan to stay 30 minutes after the conclusion of the sessions.

Volunteer Information

We want to keep you informed of everything that happens at SOS. To do so we post information on our Facebook and Instagram pages. We also send group texts to all volunteers and occasional emails for more day-to-day information so please let us know if your contact information changes. We highly recommend subscribing to our monthly newsletter as well!

Absences and Cancellations

For our organization to be consistent and successful, volunteers are suggested to commit to specific sessions that best fit their schedule. We realize that emergencies and illnesses can occur, but please try to let us know 48 hours in advance if you cannot volunteer so we can find a replacement. If you have any questions, please call Beth at 803-374-6255, or speak to a staff member while you are at the farm.

What to Bring

We recommend that you bring your own water and snacks with you as we do not have either readily available for use. As you know, during the summer it gets exceptionally hot so it is important to stay hydrated. See dress code below.

Dress Code

- **Footwear:** Closed-toed, comfortable shoes, no sandals. Hard-soled shoes or boots with low heels are required for riding.
- **Long Pants:** No skorts, culottes, capri pants, or dresses/skirts. Riding breeches, form-fitting jeans, or tights are acceptable. Finger-tip length shorts are acceptable on hot days.
- **Shirts:** Tank tops with thick straps are acceptable on hot days. If unsure, please ask a staff member. No low cut or midriff showing tops. No explicit or inappropriate text is permitted. SOS sweat wicking or cotton shirts are available!
- Please dress appropriately for winter weather.
- **Jewelry:** No jewelry that could get caught in manes and tails or could be grabbed by patients. (dangling earrings, necklaces, large rings/bracelets, etc.)
- Perfume can attract insects, and some patients/participants may have allergies, so we advise neutral perfumes and lotions.
- **Electronics:** Cell phones should either not be carried or be silenced/turned off during sessions. Please do not answer a call while volunteering. It is important to keep your attention on the participant or horse for which you are responsible.

Inclement Weather

- If the temperature is lower than 40 degrees at the time of sessions, all SOS programs will be canceled.
- If a storm is approaching during a session with high winds, lightning, or heavy rains, patients/participants will dismount, and sessions will end for everyone to return home safely.
 - Staff will check the weather daily to make determinations on canceling or continuing sessions/programs when stormy weather is forecasted.
- If lightning is within 10 miles, sessions will be canceled. There must be 30 minutes without a strike to resume sessions/programs.
- In the case of snow/ice, all sessions for SOS programs will be canceled.

Feedback

As an (SOS) volunteer, your feedback is a valuable resource. Your ideas, comments, suggestions, etc., help us to constantly improve our programs. When giving feedback, please speak to a staff member before or after programs.

General Emergency Procedures

Please inform an equine staff member or therapist of any issues, both animal and person-related, no matter how minor they may seem. Equine and Human first aid supplies are available when needed. If you are asked to call for further assistance due to human injury, please dial 911. The address of the farm is:

2717 Gaston Farm Rd. Chester, SC 29706

For animal-related emergencies, the veterinarian's number is located on the bulletin board in the office.

Procedures and Safety Rules

The following rules apply to all SOS services and program patients, participants, staff members, volunteers, and anyone visiting SOS at Gaston Farm Road Equestrian Center. These rules are designed to ensure safety, a primary concern here at SOS. Please help us to enforce these rules.

General Rules

- All volunteers must have annually updated and fully completed documents with signatures to participate.
- No abusive, threatening, or violent behavior towards people or animals will be tolerated on property.
- No running, screaming, or boisterous behavior is permitted on the property.
- Alcohol, illegal drug use, smoking, open flames, or weapons of any kind are prohibited on premises or at any SOS-hosted events.
- Please do not handle program horses unless supervised by a staff member.
- No one may ride a program horse unless supervised and approved by a staff member.
- Volunteers who arrive at SOS under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs, or who bring weapons to SOS will be asked to leave immediately, and their association with SOS may be terminated.
- Please make sure all gates to pastures are securely latched.
- Horses may only be tied as directed by the staff. Never tie a horse with his bridle to the fence.
- Horses cannot see directly behind them, so talk to them as you approach. Never approach from behind, and if you are behind a horse, talk to them so they know where you are. Always approach from the side or front.
- When walking around a tied or held horse, do not walk under or over the lead rope or directly under the horse's neck.
- Do not kneel or squat around a horse.
- When turning a horse out in the paddock, lead them in and turn them around completely so their head faces the gate before letting them loose.
- All medical waste must be kept separate from manure, trash, and disposed of in the proper bins/sharps container provided.
- All personal injury or property damage must be reported to SOS personnel, so that an official incident report may be filed.
- Please clean up after your horse/horses including the arena after riding/schooling.
- A signed Liability Release is required for everyone riding or directly interacting with any horse at this facility. (Grooming, feeding, entering the stall, leading, lunging, riding, etc...)

Vehicles and Parking

- Anyone operating a motorized vehicle on the premises must have a valid driver's license.
- Follow the 5 mph Speed Limit.
- Please park along the driveway straight forward from the entrance gate or underneath the oak tree.
- No skateboards, in-line skates, or roller skates are allowed in the barn or on the grounds. Baby strollers are permitted.

*Please note that the rules may change and/or be updated at any time. All changes will be posted and sent to all volunteers.**

Interacting with People with Disabilities

If you have never had the opportunity to meet people with disabilities, this aspect of volunteering can be intimidating and a little frightening at first. You may be feeling insecure about how to act or react to people who may look, sound, move, and behave differently from what you usually expect. Don't forget that we are all humans with emotions, feelings, and personalities, so be kind and be yourself and everything will work out.

- Have fun! Talk about the same things you would with any other person. A disability does not limit or dampen a person's sense of humor.
- A person with a disability is an individual first and is entitled to the same dignity, respect, and considerations expected by anyone else.
- Treat adults as adults. Only help a person with a disability if they ask for assistance. You may help, but if it is declined, do not be offended.
- When assisting an individual with a disability, always ask "how" you can help. Do not take over.
- Self-satisfaction is important for the patient or participant. Help sparingly because it is important that the individual experiences the satisfaction of accomplishing the task themselves.
- Always address the person with the disability directly. Do not speak about them as if they are not present.
- Avoid asking embarrassing questions. If the participant wants to share, they will.
- Do not shout. Hearing aids make noises louder, not clearer. Blindness does not affect hearing. When speaking to someone with a hearing impairment speak slowly, and clearly, and face them directly while speaking.
- If a person has difficulty speaking, allow them to finish their sentence. If you do not understand what they are saying, ask them to repeat it kindly. Do not pretend you understood if you didn't.
- When meeting a person with visual impairment, always identify yourself and tell them you are leaving if you walk away.
- Do not push a person's wheelchair, grab their arm, or try to help without asking. Never move someone's crutches, walkers, canes, service animals, or other mobility aids without permission.
- When speaking to a person with a disability who uses a wheelchair, find yourself a chair or crouch down at a comfortable distance so that you can converse on the same level.
- Respect the confidentiality rights, dignity, and privacy of the participant.
- Be optimistic about life in general and the participant's outlooks in particular, however, don't encourage unrealistic goals or attitudes.

“People First” Language

The patient or participant should always be placed before the disability. It is a “person with a disability” - not a “disabled person.”

- Never refer to a person by their disability, for example, a “paraplegic” or a “blind” person. The accepted terminology is a “person who has paraplegia” or a “person who is blind.”
 - People are not “confined” or “bound” to wheelchairs. They “use” these devices for mobility and to enhance their freedom. It is more appropriate to say, “an individual who uses a wheelchair.”
 - Completely avoid emotionally laden terms such as “suffering with a disease”, “afflicted with,” or “burdened by.” A person with a disability may “have” an illness or maybe “challenged” by a condition, but one should never assume that a person is suffering, burdened, or afflicted.
 - When writing or speaking about individuals with disabilities, always focus on ability, accomplishment, and quality of life.
 - Avoid using “us” and “them” language when speaking of people with disabilities versus people who are able-bodied.
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Emergency Situations

Emergency Dismounts

If an emergency dismount is required, please listen for instructions from the therapist or a staff member while remembering the steps to follow which are listed below:

- Emergency dismounts should be conducted quickly, efficiently, and safely. The purpose of an emergency dismount is to get the patient off and away from the horse and away from any other danger that may exist.
- The patient will be dismounted by the sidewalker or spotter; if there is one spotter, the dismount occurs from either side. If there are two sidewalkers then the sidewalker on the left will perform the dismount. Or if near fence, the inside sidewalker dismounts.
- The sidewalker/spotter will firmly grip the patient around the hips and pull the patient off the horse towards the sidewalker. The sidewalker then turns the patient away from the horse and places themselves between the horse and patient. The patient is then escorted or carried to a safe place. If there are two sidewalkers, the sidewalker on the right side will ensure the patient's foot clears the horse and help the patient off to the left.

Spooks

Our horses at SOS have undergone training, but due to their animalistic nature it is possible for the following to occur:

- If a horse spooks, remain calm, do not yell, and stay with the patient as best as you can. Immediately assume a thigh hold to help keep the patient centered.
- As the horse moves, sidewalkers need to continue their support to the patient, staying close to the horse's side as it moves.
- If the horse's behavior becomes dangerous, the team may call for an emergency dismount.

What can cause spooks? Keep your eyes out for the following when participating in a session:

- Moving objects such as plastic bags, boisterous play, loud vehicles, and more.
- Loud noises such as yelling, car exhaust, construction, and more.
- Sudden exposures such as encountering water, a new shadow, certain powerful scents, and more.

Falls

Though falls are very rare they can and do happen.

- If the patient/participant falls, stay with them and follow the directions of the therapist or staff member.
- Do not panic if there is a fall, keep yourself calm and continue to help to keep the patient/participant calm
- Sidewalkers may be asked to assist by retrieving a first aid kit, calling for emergency medical assistance (911), or locating the patient's emergency medical form (located in the patient file drawer in the clinic)
- An incident report must be completed by staff and other individuals involved for every incident.

Volunteer Positions Available

All SOS programs require volunteer assistance to run safely and successfully. Below are descriptions of each volunteer opportunity and what a volunteer will do for each program.

Sidewalker

Hippotherapy is our main service at SOS and has the biggest necessity for volunteer help. Hippotherapy is the skilled use of equine movement in physical, occupational, and speech therapy sessions with patients. Equines serve as an important therapy tool to engage sensory, neuro-motor, and cognitive systems to promote functional outcomes. Most of our therapy sessions involve 30 minutes of clinic time and 30 minutes on horseback.

Volunteers for Hippotherapy are commonly referred to as “sidewalkers.” The role of the sidewalker is to be an extension of the therapist to encourage the patient to grow and develop to their full potential. Sidewalking is the most hands-on position during Hippotherapy and will have a significant influence on the success of the session. Sidewalkers are second responsible for the patient after the therapist and provide supervision for the patient from the time they arrive until they leave. The team of Therapist, Sidewalker, Horse Handler and Equine, must work harmoniously and smoothly for the benefit of the patient. The role of the sidewalker varies greatly between patients. It is important to understand the patient’s needs and knowledge of their goals. Please ask the therapist if you have any questions.

There may be many opportunities to talk socially with the patient, and you are encouraged to do so. However, please do not disrupt the session. Many participants have trouble concentrating so please take care not to interrupt the direct line of focus between patient and Therapist.

Please take note of the rules and reminders below and make sure to follow them when volunteering as a sidewalker.

- The therapist will inform sidewalkers about the kind of assistance the patient needs.
- If a patient has one sidewalker, the therapist and sidewalker should walk on opposite sides of the horse (unless instructed otherwise).
- Sidewalkers should keep talking to a minimum but communicate with the team when needed.
- Never place your hand or fingers in any of the saddle’s rings or buckles while side-walking.
- If a patient or horse behaves inappropriately or in an unsafe manner, notify the team immediately.
- Never leave your position next to the patient. Never leave your patient to pick up a dropped item unless instructed, inform the team.
- If you need to stop for any reason, tell the team, the whole team will stop with you.
- Inform the therapist if you cannot continue your role as a sidewalker for any reason.
- DO NOT interfere with the horse by petting, poking, leaning, or bumping. Allow the horse handler to do the job of moving the horse forward.

As you may guess sidewalking providing physical support to a patient can be tiring. Inform the team if you begin to feel fatigued. When moving, therapists will decide who goes first and change sides one at a time, walking around the front of the horse and resuming the hold on the opposite side so the patient is never without a physical hold.

Volunteer Positions Available

Sidewalker

Some of the common “holds” or hand placements for assisting a patient are as follows:

- Thigh hold - Sidewalker places a forearm gently over the thigh and holds the front of the saddle, pad, or surcingle. Do not apply excessive pressure with your forearm. Pressure on the thigh can increase or cause spasticity, especially for people with Cerebral Palsy.
- Ankle hold - Hold the back of the ankle/cup the back of the heel. DO NOT hold the shoe as sometimes shoes come loose or fall off meaning you are not holding the patient.
- Calf hold - Rest a hand on the patient’s calf.
- Spotter position - Sidewalker walks beside the patient, prepared to give hands-on physical support if needed.

Please view the American Hippotherapy Association’s video located on our website, www.stridesofstrength.org.

Farm School Class (Assistant)

The Farm School classes at SOS focus on improving education skills while learning about horses, caring for them, and working with them. These classes are run in 6-week sessions for students and have varying levels of depth as the age groups rise. Currently, classes are run for preschool, elementary, middle school, high school, and adult age ranges.

Farm School volunteers work as classroom assistants to help with organization, teaching, and help the students when needed. When assisting with Farm School it’s important that you get along well with children and adults of all ages. Experience in teaching or working with kids is preferred, though it is not necessary as we can teach/train our volunteers as needed. Farm School classes usually follow the same format of a warmup activity, followed by a teaching section and worksheets, and finish up with a hands-on activity that correlates to the lesson of focus that day.

Summer/Winter Camps (Assistant)

Summer and Winter camps at SOS provide a fun and educational environment for kids to spend time off school. SOS holds multi-week summer camps for ages 4-6 and rising 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade students. These camps teach participants about horses using educational tools and games with staff always ensuring a safe and fun environment.

Confidentiality Policy

All medical and personal information concerning patients and personnel is confidential and kept in a locked area. It is expected that all people affiliated with Strides of Strength Therapeutic Services will respect the confidentiality rights of participants and personnel. All volunteers will sign a confidentiality statement.

Volunteers are made aware of confidentiality issues in the following manner:

- Confidentiality issues are reviewed with volunteers during volunteer training.
- The volunteer training manual states: “Respect the rights, dignity, and privacy of all participants.”
- Volunteers do not have access to participants’ files and only pertinent information is shared with volunteers (information that is necessary for volunteers to perform their duties effectively.)
- Patients and guardians are made aware that information about their disability may be provided to volunteers.

Thank you for Joining our Team!

Name (Printed): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____



STRIDES OF STRENGTH
THERAPEUTIC SERVICES