



Mustard Seed
Communities
CARING FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE

Mission Volunteer Handbook





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Mustard Seed Communities | 29 Janes Avenue Medfield, MA 02052 | 508.242.9622

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A Message from Msgr. Gregory

Begin Your Journey By Reading A Message from Msgr. Gregory:

For reasons unbeknownst to you and me, God has chosen you to begin this journey. Thank you for answering His call and choosing to humbly serve our children and staff. It is our prayer that God will continue to reveal Himself in the time of your preparation for your trip and of course during your stay in our homes. I thank you for sharing your time, talents and discipleship with us and look forward to meeting you.



Contact Us

Msgr. Gregory Ramkissoon

Founder of Mustard Seed Communities

Contact Information

29 Janes Avene | Medfield, MA | 02052

Phone: 508-242-9622 | www.mustardseed.com

Colleen O'Hara - Associate Director of Volunteer Engagement, MSC USA

Phone: 508-544-4681 | colleen.ohara@mustardseed.com

General Inquiries: missiontrips@mustardseed.com



Frequently Asked Questions

Who are the residents of Mustard Seed Communities?

MSC cares for several hundred children and adults with special needs. A majority of them cannot speak, so you will need to learn to communicate by other means. Some residents are confined to a bed or wheelchair but some are VERY mobile and will run up to greet you with a hug. The sooner you reach out to them, the sooner your heart will begin to open to them. If anyone on the team has questions about how to hold a child, if it's okay to move them or help feed them, the caregivers will be more than happy to help. Please just don't be afraid to ask. The caregivers work with the residents on a daily basis and will be able to give advice pertinent to each specific child. They know their tendencies and give great advice.

What projects will my group work on?

First and foremost, all groups will have scheduled time to interact and play with the residents. Interaction with the residents is more important than finishing a project. Each group will also have a work project that may include light construction, painting, farming or landscaping. The Mission Program Manager will be able to give you an idea of the project(s) your group will be doing as your trip approaches. While we all like to feel as though we've accomplished something tangible on a mission trip, we ask you to always be open and flexible when it comes to your group's work projects. We will do our best to coordinate a meaningful project that you will feel great about when your week is over. If you have someone on your team with specific skills that you think may be useful to MSC, tell us and we will take that into consideration when planning your projects.

What is life like on a mission trip with MSC?

Every day brings an opportunity to rise early and spend time with the residents whether it is to feed them, play with them, or simply be in their presence. Throughout your trip, you will build community within your team and with the staff and residents of Mustard Seed Communities. Each day is filled with time to reflect, share, and pray. You will also get the opportunity to experience the culture and enjoy a “day out” in the local community. Keep your mind and heart open. That is the best way to ensure that you have a fulfilling mission experience. Be present and willing to learn from all those you meet. Click [here](#) to find a detailed sample of an MSC mission trip schedule. You will also find the schedule at the end of the handbook.

What is expected of an MSC mission volunteer?

We hope that while you’re on a mission trip, you will think of the experience as a retreat – you are getting away from the convenience of home, hot showers, electronics and your everyday life so that you can care for the MSC residents. Be present for them, the staff and your fellow mission volunteers.

How much does the trip cost and where do I start?

The minimum donation to MSC is \$1200 per person excluding airfare. We encourage you to set your fundraising goal high and raise more than the required minimum donation. Over 50% of your minimum donation goes directly to caring for the residents.

Where do I begin?

Your team leader will send you a link to join your team through our online fundraising platform, called TeamRaiser. Register to join your team online and set up your personal page ASAP. The online registration process requires a \$15 deposit which is applied to your minimum fundraising goal of \$1200.

What are some ways to successfully fund raise?

One way volunteers can be successful at fundraising for MSC is by making the appeal personal - be sure to tell your story and personalize your fundraising page with that story. You can also create a personalized URL that is easy to remember and share. Just click “URL Settings” from within your Participant Center on TeamRaiser and choose a shortcut URL.

Another way to share your story is by setting up a Facebook fundraiser. On average, volunteers who fundraise on Facebook raise \$500 more than volunteers who do not. To set up a Facebook fundraiser, click the “Connect Fundraiser to Facebook” button in your participant center. Log in to Facebook and follow the steps to set up your fundraiser. A post will automatically go on your timeline notifying your friends that you’ve created a fundraiser. Any gifts that are made to this Facebook fundraiser will automatically be added to your mission page.

We suggest that you follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#) to stay up to date on what’s happening at Mustard Seed. To meet our residents and learn more about MSC, you can go to our [YouTube Channel](#).

We understand fundraising can be challenging, but we really appreciate your efforts and your willingness to share your story and ours to help improve the lives of our residents!

Do I need a background check before traveling with Mustard Seed Communities?

Yes, Mustard Seed Communities is fully committed to ensuring the safety of the most vulnerable population to whom the organization ministers. Criminal background checks are one of the strategies used to ensure the safety of the residents in our care. Mustard Seed Communities policy is to conduct criminal background checks on all volunteers over the age of 18 at the time of registration and to repeat them annually should the volunteer travel again after a year.

When you register for the team, you will receive [this link](#) in the sign up email that will direct you to our background check site, Sterling Volunteers. The cost is \$17.50 annually, plus any applicable court fees. Due to record-keeping fees, certain states (CO, DE, FL, HI, IA, ME, MT, NE, NY, SD, UT, VT, and WI) and certain counties in the U.S. may be subject to additional fees. Please check [this list](#) to see if these fees apply to your county. If you need assistance in navigating the process of completing your background check, you may contact Sterling Volunteers at 855-326-1860 or TheAdvocates@sterlingvolunteers.com.

What should I bring?

For a detailed list of what to bring, see the [Packing List](#). We recommend that you pack lightly- plan to live simply for the entire week. You may be surprised to see what you are able to live without! If each mission volunteer packs their personal items in a carry-on bag, then checked bags can be used for donations.

Please keep in mind that the needs at Mustard Seed are constantly changing when collecting donations to bring in your luggage. Each team is assigned an Apostolate's Amazon Needs List that contains items that are most needed at that location. Your team leader should provide you with the link to this list so that you are able to purchase and bring items that are in need. If you have any questions about in kind needs, you can either check with the MSC USA Office or contact your Mission Team leader for the most updated in kind needs list. Your group will need to submit an itemized list of all donations and their values to MSC before the trip.

How will we get to our destination?

All travel arrangements will need to be coordinated by your Mission Team leader and your group. Your group will purchase the airline tickets on your own. We recommend that you research flights and purchase your airfare as soon as possible. Once you arrive in country, MSC will meet you at the airport and handle all local travel accommodations, including your day out.

Will there be any out of pocket expenses?

Before and during your trip you will want to have some money to cover small additional expenses such as souvenirs, your day out and other miscellaneous items. We caution mission volunteers from bringing large amounts of cash. For further clarification on your day out expenses, please contact missiontrips@mustardseed.com

Should our group bring gifts for the MSC Staff?

We request that no money, gifts, or addresses be given directly to any MSC staff or Residents. Some groups may plan a staff appreciation as a team, which is encouraged but not necessary. At the end of your trip, you may request that certain items that you leave be given to specific people. If you leave them at MSC, they will be distributed fairly so that more residents can benefit from your generosity. Sometimes, the residents that have the most interaction with the groups get lots of things and others are overlooked. MSC asks that we allow the caregivers the discretion to distribute items more evenly.

How will COVID-19 impact my mission trip?

Although strongly recommended, volunteers are not required to be vaccinated. Specific guidelines can be found on our official COVID-19 protocols documents:

- [Jamaica COVID-19 Protocols](#)
- [Dominican Republic COVID-19 Protocols](#)

Does MSC provide insurance for mission volunteers?

To protect our mission volunteers while traveling internationally, MSC has engaged the services of CHUBB to provide emergency travel assistance, accident and sickness insurance, medical evaluation, quarantine, evacuation and repatriation coverage. Prior to your departure, the mission leader will receive a Certificate of Insurance, ID card, and FAQs page which should address any questions you might have. This coverage is valid for the days you are traveling and is included in the cost of your trip. Insurance will pay expenses incurred for up to \$2,000 for all covered expenses if you are subject to a quarantine for any contagious disease that prevents traveling, such as COVID-19. Mustard Seed Communities has a designated quarantine location should mission volunteers need to use it.

When do you need to pay for the trip?

We need to have full payment for the trip 30 days before you leave. We are responsible first to our residents and homes therefore MSC reserves the right to cancel a trip if the final payment is not received.

What happens if we have to cancel?

All deposits and donations are non-refundable. If an individual mission volunteer has collected funds and does not go on the trip, those funds are added to the group funds.

MSC Diversity, Inclusion, & Culture

MSC's Rules and Guidelines

Thank you for choosing to spend this time with us at Mustard Seed Communities. We welcome you and pray that your experience is both meaningful and impactful. Please keep in mind you are visiting a foreign country and you are representing your country and Mustard Seed Communities. Remember that this trip is about immersion into a culture. As you travel and experience the country, please keep an open mind and heart to learning new things and stepping outside your comfort zone. We thank you in advance for your service, dedication, and cooperation.

Diversity & Inclusion

Mustard Seed Communities does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, gender expression, age, national origin, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or military status, in any of its activities or operations. We welcome individuals from all backgrounds and view diversity as an essential part of pursuing our mission of caring for the most vulnerable.

Culture

Cultural competency is crucial in any organization that works and serves people from different cultural backgrounds. Having volunteers from diverse cultures can improve awareness for our whole organization. We ask that you act respectfully toward the local community. The way of life may be different than what you are used to, so we hope you use this time to embrace and not dwell on these differences. We especially ask that you be sensitive to all employees of MSC. In group reflections, you may want to share about the differences you are experiencing. Just be mindful of when you are sharing and be open to asking questions to learn more about the local culture.

Points to remember while visiting...

- **Caretakers and those working with the residents are the experts in their care.**
 - However, culturally, they may find it disrespectful to give volunteers direction.
 - Some volunteers may have visited in the past and have experience interacting with the residents and staff. However, please continue to work from a perspective of humility and learning.
- **Be humble about your personal economic means.**
- **You are going to give and receive through this experience and it is important to reflect on this before and after your visit.**
 - Please consider your mindset when you come to visit and be open to your mission trip as a learning experience.
- **We feel it is critical to bring up race and culture prior to visiting our communities and residents. This is a sensitive topic that should not be ignored.**
 - Please be mindful to not approach our staff and/or residents in an “us vs. them” mentality. Never let anyone feel like an “other” in your interactions.
 - Recognize that there is a fine line between seeking to “rescue” and viewing yourself as a savior versus respectfully serving and supporting others.
- **View our residents as they view themselves – many live with great joy.**
 - Although the residents may live with a disability or chronic illness, their lives are still joyful and meaningful.
 - We ask that while you are on your mission trip, you seek to see the goodness and richness in the lives of the residents, while still recognizing that they have faced hardships in their lives.

Safety Protocols

The safety and security of our mission volunteers is MSC's first priority. All MSC locations are secured and gated and have security 24 hours a day. As with any international destination, you need to exercise common sense and use caution when outside the MSC facilities. Each mission group is accompanied by an experienced driver and a Mustard Seed Communities mission representative when traveling outside of MSC properties. The mission representatives, who are employees of MSC, supervise all volunteer activities and stay with the mission group throughout the day and evening. Mustard Seed Communities has been safely operating mission trips for over twenty years.

To ensure a safe mission trip experience:

- Do not carry excess cash or wear unnecessary jewelry or valuables.
- On arrival at MSC, give all valuables (tickets, passports, large sums of money) to your group leader who will put them in a lock box for the duration of the trip.
- Stay with your group at all times and don't leave the MSC compound unless it is absolutely necessary.

If you need to leave in an EMERGENCY:

- Inform your group leader
- Go in groups of at least three or four
- An MSC security guard or local staff member must accompany you.
- When traveling on the bus, please keep hands and arms inside the bus at all times.
- Beat the heat – wear a hat and sunscreen and drink more water than you would ever think possible – dehydration and excessive exposure to the sun and heat can lead to headaches, nausea and other undesirable conditions.
- Take care of yourself for the group's sake.

Photo and Social Media Policy

We love getting amazing photos and video from mission volunteers and encourage you to share your best photos from your trip when you get home! The following policy applies to photographing residents when at Mustard Seed Communities:

1. The residents need you to be present while you are spending time with them. Take photographs during group activities like Circle Time or during certain events. Your experience and memories are most important. Before taking a photograph, kindly secure permission from the Administrator or a senior representative of the Apostolate.
2. Be respectful of the person/people who you are photographing. Group shots are recommended. Make sure that the individuals are comfortable with their photo being taken. Before taking a photo, ask the people who you are about to photograph if they consent to getting their picture taken. Some residents at MSC may not respond verbally and, in this case, it is important to establish a connection with them before simply taking a photo. If you take a photo of an individual, shots should be long shots and angled.
3. Be conscious of who you can and cannot photograph when visiting MSC. Some residents cannot be photographed for their own safety. If you are unsure whether you are allowed to take photographs, ask your Mission Rep or a MSC staff member if there are any restrictions concerning photography.
Residents in the Dare to Care program at Martha's House and Dare to Care in Jerusalem and residents at Matthew 25:40 and Mary's Child cannot be photographed for their safety.
4. Put yourself in the place of the subject you are photographing and think about whether you would like your picture to be taken in that situation. Photograph people in a positive light rather than taking photos of those who may be uncomfortable or in a bad mood.

How to share your photos with MSC:

Please add your photos to your Mission Team Folder. Your Mission Leader should share the Photos folder with you to upload your photos all in one place!

When you share your photos with Mustard Seed, you agree to allow us to share it on Mustard Seed social media channels or for other marketing uses at our discretion.

Social Media

When sharing on your social account, always tag Mustard Seed Communities on the platform. If the photo does not follow the policy outlined here, we may ask you to take it down.

Mustard Seed Social Accounts

Facebook: @MustardSeedCommunities

Twitter: [@MustardSeedComm](https://twitter.com/MustardSeedComm)

Instagram: [@mustardseedcommunities](https://www.instagram.com/mustardseedcommunities)

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/mustard-seed-communities>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/mustardseedcommunities>

Social Media Dos and Don'ts:

Dos:

- Present the residents in the best light, the same way you would post a picture of yourself.
- Refer to residents with person-first language: "individuals with disabilities who have been abandoned."
- Talk about your experiences with a lens of thankfulness and reciprocal service.

Don'ts:

- Post an image of a resident that does not portray their best self.
- Refer to residents as "orphans," "poor," "starving," language which might reduce their image to something less than a person with dignity.
- Talk about your experiences as if you "helped" or "saved" people.

Volunteer Norms and Expectations

- 1. Participate, don't anticipate** – Be flexible and patient. Sometimes the plan for the day may change and we hope you keep an open mind going into each day and stay present to the moment.
- 2. Personal accountability** – Be respectful of one another and MSC properties. Mustard Seed Communities is a home and a family to all our residents and staff. As volunteers, we hope you too feel at home with us and treat our facilities with the same care as you would your own home. Also please be aware and sensitive to cultural differences that may arise and use this opportunity to respectfully learn about a new culture.
- 3. Toilet paper and water are in limited supply** – Please use sparingly as we have little supply. Check to make sure the water is not left running.
- 4. Showers** – When showering, be considerate of the quantity of water you are using. In most of the cities MSC is located in, the city tends to shut off the water for most of the day. Therefore, a tank with water will be filled for showering and drinking. Please take military showers. In other words, get wet, turn the water off, shampoo and lather up, then turn the water back on to rinse off. This will ensure that everyone has enough water to shower!
- 5. Sleeping Quarters** – Each apostolate has male and female dorms. Please maintain respect for everyone's personal space and boundaries in the dorms.
- 6. Waste** – Please do not waste food. Only take what you know you will be able to eat. When serving yourself, please be considerate of others who have not yet eaten. If you are concerned about having ample food, kindly bring some snacks to share. If you are concerned about dietary restrictions or personal choices, plan to bring snacks or food to supplement what is provided.
- 7. Dishes** – All groups are responsible for cleaning the dining area and kitchen after each meal. The group leader will assign a person or team to take turns washing the dishes each day. Trash can be brought to the designated trash area outside of the mission house to discourage pests.

- 8. Quiet Hours** – We ask that by 11:00 p.m. the lights are out in the designated sleeping area and quiet hours are observed to respect each other and the apostolate community. We also ask that all volunteers be inside the mission house by 10:00 p.m.
- 9. Respectful Dress** - When packing, please consider bringing appropriate clothing to wear. Although we understand it may be hot, please dress modestly, refraining from tank tops, spaghetti straps, short shorts, two-piece bathing suits, and similar. For Mass, we ask that you bring long pants, such as khakis, collared shirts or a nice top, a skirt or a dress to wear.
- 10. Mass** - Please ensure that your group takes the time to properly prepare for the celebration of Mass. If coming from a work site, please take the time to clean up and when possible change for Mass.
- 11. Prohibited Items** - We ask that for the purposes of safety that you do not light candles on the property. Smoking, alcohol and drugs are also not allowed on property. We are home for children, and as such, we fall under the government's policy for protecting children. If use of alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, or open flames is discovered on MSC property, the local government could close the facility.

We know that you are wonderful and respectful individuals who will meet and exceed our community expectations. However, if you are struggling to comply with our volunteer expectations, we will need to meet with you to discuss whether you can remain at the community property. Thank you for honoring our community standards and for your efforts to be culturally sensitive to your host country.

We are so excited to have you as a volunteer with Mustard Seed Communities! If you have any questions, please contact missiontrips@mustardseed.com.