

Bereavement Camp Standards of Practice

Eluna is pleased to lead the development of Bereavement Camp Standards of Practice through the generous support of the New York Life Foundation.

Please contact Eluna at info@elunanetwork.org with questions and feedback.



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About the Standards

The Bereavement Camp Standards of Practice (“Standards”) represent this committee’s recommendations that primarily consider providing a beneficial, safe, and successful experience in a variety of bereavement camp settings. The Standards are suggested guidelines compiled by peers in the field; they are not a certification or license. In addition, the Standards are not a “how to” guide. To be applicable to many types of clinicians and settings, the Standards are generalized minimum practices promoting safety and care for participants.

Definitions



Camp

Single-day, multi-day, and/or overnight bereavement support experiences.



Camp facility

The venue where the bereavement camp is held.



Host organization

The organization responsible for providing the bereavement camp.



Participants

Single-day, multi-day, and/or overnight bereavement support experiences.

Fundamentals



Organization and Service Description

The host organization will establish and provide the public and participants with information regarding the purpose, mission, and scope of services of the organization; type of camp services and their goals and outcomes; and any associated fees.



Equality/Non-Discrimination

The cultural, ethnic, country of origin, gender identity and expression, race, age, physical and mental ability, veteran status, sexual orientation, economic, spiritual and religious diversity of all campers, volunteers, and staff will be respected. The host organization will work to identify and address any barriers to inclusion.



Inclusion and Equity

The host organization will establish practices throughout the planning process and hosting of the camp program that align with the values of inclusion, accessibility, and equity for all camp participants (campers, volunteers, and staff). The host will intentionally choose a camp facility that is welcoming, non-discriminatory, and accessible for participants. The host will also consciously build a camp space that fosters these values and helps camp participants to thrive and feel a sense of belonging.



Community Outreach

The greater community will be engaged to increase awareness regarding the benefits of bereavement camp participation. Camper and volunteer recruitment practices will reach a diverse population with identified underserved populations at the forefront of these practices.



Community Resources

The host organization will maintain an up-to-date list of community resources that address the needs of bereaved individuals and families, such as social, emotional, mental health, and spiritual needs. Resources will be provided when needs are outside the scope of services of the host organization.



Confidentiality and Data Protection

The host organization will develop and clearly communicate policies to all participants regarding confidentiality, social media, photography, and media involvement. All information pertaining to campers, volunteers, and staff will remain confidential within all formats and contexts, including stories shared verbally. The host organization will thoughtfully determine what information will be shared with volunteers.

Policies and procedures will be established and implemented regarding the respectful use of camper images, stories, etc., for marketing and other purposes. Releases will be obtained from campers, parent/guardians of minors, volunteers, and staff prior to the sharing of any confidential information, including data, photographs, videos, and camper stories. To ensure privacy of camp participants, only certain designated individuals should be allowed to take pictures during the camp program.

Volunteers and staff will be trained to honor the integrity of confidentiality as it applies to their roles and responsibilities. All federal and state laws will be adhered to regarding the protection of confidential information and retention, as will any professional confidentiality requirements, including mandatory reporting laws. Campers and other participants will also be informed of confidentiality at camp and how to continue to respect fellow participants after the program concludes.



Dual Relationships and Conflicts of Interest

Policies and procedures will be established regarding dual relationships (two or more distinct relationships with the same person) and conflicts of interest (tension between self-interest, professional interest, and/or public interest) to protect participants from harm or exploitation and to ensure that participants have the best experience possible.

Specific thought will be given to dual relationships and camp attendance when a prior relationship exists between staff and volunteer, volunteer and volunteer, and staff/volunteer and camper.



Program Evaluation

The host organization will request feedback from campers, volunteers, and staff; analyze the results; and modify camp programming as appropriate in order to meet program goals and improve services. This data collection process will also help the host organization track information such as the demographics of who is being supported through their program(s). This will help to inform current community access to the program(s), what barriers to access are currently in place, and it will inform steps needed to increase equitable access within the community.

Below offers a range of foundational aspects of a bereavement camp that can be valuable to evaluate:

- Quality of programming
- Expressive activities, including play
- Grief support aspects of programming
- Youth voice and engagement
- Community building and connection
- Sense of belonging
- Support from camp staff/volunteers and peers
- Identified support system outside of the camp program
- Opportunities to honor and remember their person who died
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion to identify information such as equitable access to camp and who the camp program is currently supporting

Note

The American Camp Association (ACA) provides program evaluation standards. If you are a member of the ACA, we suggest reviewing these standards for your program development. A free 1-year membership is offered through the ACA.

Volunteer and Staff Involvement



Competency

The host organization will be knowledgeable and receive ongoing education regarding current literature, research, and best practices related to bereavement, bereavement interventions, and camp management. All staff and volunteers will demonstrate competencies that are applicable to their roles. The host organization will offer a variety of volunteer/staff roles that help to honor and highlight the strengths and skill sets of those interested in supporting the camp program(s).

Competency also speaks to ensuring that the selected volunteers will not impress their personal beliefs, ideologies, religions, and experiences on campers. This will help ensure an open and inviting environment that supports the campers' ability to process within their own beliefs and experiences. An exception would be if the host organization disclosed in their promotional materials that a belief, ideology, religion, etc., will be engaged explicitly in the programming.



Volunteer Selection and Screening

Volunteers will be selected following a formal application, screening, and reference verification process. The screening should at minimum include an annual criminal background check conducted on all qualified applicants and returning volunteers. The host organization will identify and operate under all federal, state, and local laws, codes, and regulations related to background checks for working with minors and vulnerable populations in the program context.

Some states have an additional Child Abuse Clearance report that can be checked. If this is available in your area, it is recommended to also have this report processed. The screening process is also a time for the host organization to acknowledge and learn more about the lived experiences of the volunteer. The organization will also speak to what is expected of the volunteer in the role they are interested in. This creates a relationship of informed consent for the potential volunteer throughout the process. Knowing these expectations allows them to opt in or out of this experience.

Note

The American Camp Association provides helpful resources, including www.acacamps.org/resource-library/public-policy/criminal-background-checks-issues-resources-camps



Volunteer Training

Camps that utilize volunteers will maintain the highest standards by providing volunteers with a code of conduct, policies and procedures, training, and an opportunity to evaluate their experience. Training will be provided to all those involved in camp programming and camper supervision. Training will include at least the following topics:

Basics and Structure of the Camp Experience

- Safety at camp - medical, social-emotional incidents, psychological, physical, and emergency procedures
- Camp leadership and reporting structure
- Staff/volunteer expectations, roles, and responsibilities
- Camp facility expectations
- Cultural, diversity, and inclusion awareness, including areas listed in the Equality/Non-Discrimination Policy and Inclusion and Equity
- Code of Conduct
- Community agreements (guidelines, expectations, and consequences for all camp participants)
- Policies and procedures
- Signs of self-harm or intentions to harm self or others
- Teamwork and conflict

Camp Programming and Social Emotional Wellbeing

- Elements of wellbeing for all camp participants
- Camp structure and programming
- Grief and grief support interventions
- Adversity in lived experience (trauma and grief)
- Working with campers
- Boundaries (physical touch/contact, dual relationships outside of camp, etc.)
- Building connection and community
- Awareness and support of staff/volunteer grief and other potentially activated responses

The following additional topics will be addressed when supporting children and adolescents:

- Developmental characteristics of children and teens
- Child abuse recognition and reporting
- Behavior management/interventions



Policies and Procedures

The host organization will have written policies and procedures that are congruent with their mission and values and support a safe and appropriate camp experience. Policies and procedures will address, but are not limited to:

- Recruitment, screening, and retention of campers and volunteers
- Camper, volunteer, and staff requirements and expectations
- Camper, volunteer, and staff behavior management/interventions
- Safety, health, medical, social-emotional incidents, and emergency procedures
- Sexual harassment, abuse, interpersonal boundaries, and appropriate touch
- Confidentiality, data protection, social media, and media involvement
- Code of Conduct/community agreements
- Personnel policies
- Tobacco, drug, and alcohol possession and/or use
- Transportation
- Communication at camp
- Electronics at camp
- Referrals
- Cost of camp
- Ratios of campers to volunteers/staff at camp
- Guests at camp
- Arrival and departure procedures
- Program evaluation
- Pre- and post-camp continued care and contact
- Addressing the needs of campers with physical disabilities
- Addressing the needs of campers with neurodiversity/neurodivergence

Note

The American Camp Association provides helpful resources, including:

Releases and related issues

www.acacamps.org/resource-library/articles/releases-related-issues-revisited

Camp staff Use of Electronic Devices and Social Media

www.acacamps.org/resource-library/articles/campstaff-use-electronic-devices-social-media-some-issues-solutions

Health and Safety



Camper, Volunteer & Staff Ratios

The host organization will develop and implement policies regarding ratios of leadership, volunteers, and campers at camp. General considerations will include age of campers, types of loss, social and emotional needs of campers, type and location of facilities; types and locations of program offerings; and the length of the camp experience. Ratios will be based on the number of clinical staff, the experience level of volunteers, and the needs of the campers being served.



Ratios when supporting minors: The American Camp Association recommends the following ratios for general programming



Ages 6 - 8

1 adult to 6 campers

Ages 9 - 14

1 adult to 8 campers

Ages 15 - 18

1 adult to 10 campers

The host organization will determine when a greater number of adults are necessary.

The Bereavement Camp Standards of Practice Committee recommends following the general ratios laid out below – especially in an overnight camp format:



Ages 6 - 8

1 adult to 3 campers

Ages 9 - 14

1 adult to 6 campers

Ages 15 - 18

1 adult to 10 campers

It is important to be mindful of the needs of neurodiverse campers, which may indicate that increased ratios are needed to support the volunteers. It is also important to consider the needs of the campers, because there are situations where these increased ratios can be too intense and interfere with the camper's experience.

- **Individual engagement:** Staff and volunteers will be trained to avoid 1:1 camper/staff or camper/camper engagement that is out of observable sight of others. A minimum of three participants, including appropriate supervision, should be together at all times. This policy is often referred to as the “rule of three”. Individual connection is valued and can be engaged safely in a public area.

- **Ensuring the “rule of three” is maintained:** The “rule of three” is a basic safety rule that ensures that there is always an appropriate number of individuals together. This should be thought of in terms of always having one adult in the grouping of three individuals. No three campers (minors) should be left alone, and no adult should be left alone with a camper. To maintain this ratio throughout the camp program, there may be times when “extra” volunteers/staff may be asked to join a group to ensure ratio is being met. These individuals may be: clinical team members, floating or logistical volunteers, or camp leadership. The rule of three is a minimum practice, and this minimum must be adhered to at all times for the safety of all camp participants.
- **Clinical staff and volunteers:** Camp leadership will include a team of volunteer/staff members clinically trained (master’s level) in a relevant field, who also have expertise and experience working with the bereaved populations served. This might include counselors, social workers, school counselors. Another layer of support volunteers could include highly trained bereavement support group volunteers, special education teachers, and clinician trainees. The host organization will assess the need for additional clinical staff to help properly support the camper population.
- **Leadership to volunteer ratio:** The host organization will provide appropriate leadership support and supervision to volunteers for a safe, high-quality experience.
- **Staff/Volunteer to camper ratio:** The host organization will identify the number of staff and volunteers needed in the program areas established. In order to properly support neurodivergent campers and campers with specific needs, it is advised to have a surplus of volunteers to help support other volunteers/staff, as the clinical team sees fit.
- **High risk situations and settings:** Most incidents at camp occur during unstructured program time. The host organization will identify high risk settings or situations and develop plans for supervision and safety accordingly.
- **Considerations for sleeping arrangements:**
 - For overnight camps serving minors: sleeping arrangements must be evaluated for the number and location of staff within the sleeping quarters. It is suggested that there are at least two adults sleeping in each cabin space with campers. This ratio should be adjusted to fully support the needs of the campers in that cabin space.
 - For overnight camps serving adults and families: sleeping assignments will be made with personal and family privacy in mind.



Safety and Emergency Procedures

Policy and procedures will be developed and implemented to ensure campers, volunteers, and staff are safe at camp. The host organization will consult with the camp facility in the development and implementation of safety plans.

Camp leadership is encouraged to inform the local authorities (police, sheriff, fire department, and EMS), or ensure the camp facility has done so, of the dates, location, and number of campers, volunteers, and staff on-site to increase safety, minimize impact of emergencies on campers, and ease evacuation if necessary.

Areas to consider include:

- Presence of animals at camp facility. Use of therapeutic animals in programming, service, and/or emotional support animals accompanying participants.
- Skilled facilitators for specialized program activities (i.e., a certified lifeguard, challenge course facilitator, clinical staff/volunteers).
- Procedures will be established in the event a participant is missing, an unauthorized person is discovered on property, or in the case of an active threat. An active threat is defined as any incident, which by its deliberate nature creates an immediate threat or presents an imminent danger to the camp community.
- **Environmental emergencies:** Necessary actions will be identified in the event of anticipated natural disasters (tornadoes, fires, floods) and/or other environmental emergencies (loss of power, compromised water system, etc.). Staff and volunteers will be trained to know and fulfill their role in the response plan.
- **Social-Emotional Incidents:** Policies and procedures will be defined and implemented regarding acute mental health concerns that arise during the intake process, while at camp, or during post-camp follow-up. This may include, but is not limited to, neglect, abuse, harm of self or others, or other crisis situations. Programs will have at least one designated clinical staff point person responsible for overseeing acute social-emotional needs of campers, volunteers, and staff, and will engage appropriate follow up. It is recommended to have all clinical team members trained in acute social-emotional response protocol.
- **Accidents/Incidents:** Policies and procedures should be defined and implemented regarding non-social-emotional incidents, accidents, and near misses that occur while at camp. Examples of “incidents” and “accidents” include fires; natural disasters; danger from intruders or trespassers; crises arising out of camper, staff, or rental group behavior (e.g., fighting, serious emotional outbursts, threatening others); or other situations posing serious safety threats. Examples of “near misses” and “emergencies not resulting in injury” may include lost campers, near drownings, or the use of drugs or alcohol by staff or participants.
- **Guests and Service Providers at Camp:** Policies and procedures related to appropriate participation of guests and service providers will be developed and communicated. Items to consider based on the individual’s participation at camp include: sign-in upon arrival; type of identifier guest must wear; escort policy; required background check clearance; and necessary paperwork (i.e., confidentiality agreement, liability release, media release, etc.). When inviting guests, camp leadership will be mindful of the vulnerable nature of the camper group and be thoughtful of the impact of guests on the campers’ experience and safety.
- **Communication Plan:** The camp will have a communication plan that includes:
 - A single spokesperson for the camp is clearly identified.
 - Communicating with guardians should a natural disaster or emergency occur.
 - Identification of an individual to contact a guardian in the event of a camper-related accident or incident.

- Identification of individuals(s) who will contact emergency personnel in various health or emergency events and collaborate with personnel to minimize the impact of the event on campers (i.e., lights and sirens off).



Medical Procedures

- A healthcare plan will be developed and implemented that includes: The collection of a medical form as part of the camper and volunteer intake process, including a record of allergies, dietary restrictions, current prescription and over-the-counter medications, and a description of any current physical, mental, and psychological conditions requiring medication, treatment, or special considerations while at camp.
- The host organization will determine the level of healthcare provider needed during the camp experience based on the camper population, camp setting, access to additional medical support, etc. At minimum, at least one Registered Nurse, Physician Assistant, or Physician with current licensure in the state that camp is held will be on site during the duration of the camp experience. If a camp or activity is located more than 1.5 to 2 hours from access to the emergency medical system (EMS), an individual with Wilderness First Aid Certification, from a recognized training provider, is required.

All camp medical professionals will have current, age-appropriate CPR and First Aid Certification. Please note, campers should not fulfill a medical team role.

- Family/self-pre-screening and an initial health screening at camper arrival are recommended including temperature, signs of illness, recent exposure to any contagious diseases, etc. Staff, volunteers, and campers who feel sick or have mild symptoms should be encouraged to stay home.
- The review and collection of all prescription and over-the-counter medications, in original containers, will be required at this time, with the exception of items such as inhalers, epi-pens, and insulin pumps. Any medication taken by a camper that day will be documented along with the next needed dosage.
- All staff, volunteer, and camper prescriptions and over-the-counter medications will be stored in a locked location, with the exception of items such as inhalers, epi-pens, and insulin pumps. Medications will be dispersed by designated healthcare providers only. The camp program will have a recordkeeping system documenting incidents and care provided, including:
 - Date, time, location, and name of person ill or injured
 - General description of injury or illness
 - Description of any treatment administered
 - Administration of all prescription and over-the-counter medication
 - Name and signature of persons evaluating and treating
- The camp program will establish and clearly communicate with all staff and volunteers when, how, and by whom an additional level of medical or emergency care should be contacted.
- The camp program will consider the need for standing orders from a physician for medical care provided to participants.



Transportation

When transportation is provided by the host organization or camp facility, policies will be developed that address and ensure:

- Training of drivers and driver requirements
- Verification of DMV records of drivers for past violations
- Verification of appropriate vehicle insurance
- Supervision of participants while being transported
- Safety orientation for passengers to include what to do in the event of an accident
- Mechanical evaluations and safety checks of vehicles in use
- Release form from campers or the guardians of minor campers

Camp Facility and Business



Insurance

The host organization will, in consultation with their insurance provider, the camp facility, and other vendors, evaluate the need for the types of insurance listed below.

- Liability insurance
- Professional liability insurance for those with professional licenses
- Accident insurance
- Workman's compensation for those who qualify
- Property insurance for host organization property (electronics, etc.)
- Motor vehicle insurance if any transportation is provided by the camp, volunteers, staff, or chartered
- The need to have the facility be named as a co-insurer on the camp's liability policy



Camp Facility

The host organization will have a signed agreement in place with the camp facility that includes:

- Terms of use, including dates, times, and costs
- Cancellation, minimum fees, and refund policies
- Services that will be provided by the host facility, such as food service, recreation options, program staff, and transportation
- Cost and conditions for use of any recreational equipment or program services
- Party responsible for any special program activities (ex: swimming, challenge course, horseback riding, etc.), what is included in those activities, and the qualification level of camp facility staff related to program services provided
- Party responsible to provide first aid, emergency care, and emergency transportation
- Party responsible to supervise the camp and participants' behavior
- Party responsible for safety policies and procedures (i.e. – what is the expectation for the facility vs. what is the responsibility of the organization hosting the camp program.)

- Required orientation to the host site regarding the site's safety procedures and regulations
- Any insurance required for the host organization and camp facility
- The availability of all-gender bathrooms and bathrooms that ensure privacy for participants

Pre-Camp Assessment

The host organization will develop a thorough registration and assessment process to ensure the appropriateness and readiness of each camper for a safe experience in the identified camp setting. This might include, but is not limited to, an application and additional paperwork, phone assessment, in-person interview, open house or other pre-camp event, and ongoing phone and email contact. Paperwork components will address the needs of both the host organization and the camp facility. Consultation with other providers may be necessary. Consent and release will be obtained prior to consultation with other providers. The host organization should establish policy and procedure for determining and communicating non-acceptance to the camp program.

Categories covered in the pre-camp assessment process might include:

- Contact and demographic information
- Bereavement history
- Social, emotional, and behavior experiences and needs
- Neurodivergence and tools to support camper at camp
- Family structure and communication
- Coping styles
- Belief systems
- Medical information

Forms may include:

- General application
- Consent to provide care
- Liability release
- Media consent and release
- Transportation release
- Custody release (for minors, if applicable)

Forms should be crafted taking into consideration the Equality/Non-Discrimination Policy to avoid potential bias and discrimination. For example, applications can request preferred pronouns and offer the gender identity selection as an open text box for them to fill in with their gender term (this allows individuals to report their gender in words that are true and affirm their identity).

During the pre-camp assessment process, campers and their caregivers will receive an overview of the camp experience, be informed of expectations, be able to speak to any needs they would like support with throughout the camp program, have concerns and questions addressed, and be informed of their acceptance status.

Camp Experience

A sense of cohesion and community will be intentionally developed during the camp program, helping campers gain a sense of belonging, respect, and trust, and to learn they are not alone. The host organization will determine any identifying items to aid in the development of cohesion, such as camp T-shirt, name badges, etc.

Camp will be structured to allow campers the opportunity to share their story, express their feelings, and receive support in a physically and emotionally safe, non-judgmental, and empowering setting. Campers will be allowed to determine their participation level in sharing, bereavement, and recreational activities. Integrating approaches such as Trauma-Informed Care and other clinical models aid in promoting resiliency, hope, courage, and self-esteem as campers engage their grief experience.

Volunteers will have clear methods and opportunities for breaks at camp to encourage self-care and respite from responsibilities.



Considerations for Building the Camp Schedule

When building the camp schedule, it is important to consider topics such as:

- Is our camp programming inclusive for a variety of populations that will be in attendance?
- When is it best to utilize the following group options for the desired outcome?
 - Group options could include campers divided by:
 - Cabin groups/activity groups
 - Age groups (all cabins from that age group present)
 - Sharing groups by bereavement history (cause of death, relationship of loss, etc.)
 - Having all-camp together
 - Desired outcomes such as giving campers time to share and process, building community and decreasing isolation, etc. can help to dictate the preferred group structure.
- Consider the needs of the campers, as well as the number of volunteers available and ensure they feel supported throughout the camp experience.



Camp Schedule

Participants will be informed of the camp schedule. Attention will be given to a balance of activities and modalities that consider the developmental needs, learning, and expression styles of campers.

Types of activities might include:

- A variety of approaches (i.e., art, movement, music, animal assisted therapies, etc.)
- Grief education and support
- Validation and normalization
- Coping skills and identifying support systems
- Remembering, honoring, and memorializing
- Ceremonies and rituals (i.e., opening and closing)
- Challenge, character, and trust building activities
- Community and connection building activities
- Recreational activities
- Times for reflection and rest



Arrival and Departure

Policy and procedure will be developed for the arrival and departure of campers. Facilitating a welcoming and smooth process can relieve anxiety and establishes camp as a safe and reliable environment.

At minimum, check-in/out procedures will address healthcare policies, including a health screening at the start of camp and returning of medications at the conclusion. Considerations at check-in and -out when supporting minors include:

- Clear communication of drop-off and pick-up time and location
- Only designated individuals identified on the camp paperwork will be allowed to drop off and pick up campers
- Identification verification of the approved adult
- Sign-in and sign-out sheet
- If transportation is provided, ensure that all check-in needs are met prior to transitioning camper under host organization responsibility
- Provide emergency contact information for the caregiver to reach camp leadership
- Confirm emergency contact information for camp leadership to reach the caregiver
- Help campers and their caregivers say goodbye to one another
- Provide information sessions for caregivers at the start and conclusion of camp
- Return of medications at check-out



Mealtimes

Mealtimes are an important part of overall programming and a key opportunity for building community. The host organization should attend to these times as more than just having a meal. Special meal requests, dietary restrictions, mealtimes, process, and menus should be coordinated with the camp facility or food service provider. Ensure that balanced meals, snacks, and hydrating beverages are provided to participants.



Camp Rules

Facility, camp, and cabin rules will be established. All rules, enforcement policies, and consequences will be clearly communicated to the campers, caregivers, volunteers, and staff members. Campers can be given opportunities to shape rules as appropriate, during the camp program.

Post-Camp Experience



Post-Camp Continued Care

The host organization is encouraged to consider the following aspects of participant continued care:

- Timely contact regarding immediate needs with the camper or caregiver of a minor camper
- General follow-up related to the camp experience and bereavement needs
- A camp reunion event
- Information about ongoing bereavement programming within the host organization or other community resources

- Encouragement of campers to develop connections with other campers for ongoing support following the camp weekend, as is comfortable with the camper or guardian of a minor camper
- Volunteer and staff support, debrief, camp experience evaluation, and recognition events



Post-Camp Communication

The camp program will develop and communicate policies regarding ongoing relationships, communication, and social media connection following camp between volunteer/staff to campers and camper to camper.