

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Each QR code links to a short guide for that part of the cleanup. Whether you're new to cleanups or working near encampments for the first time, these tips will help you prepare for success.

Before a Cleanup

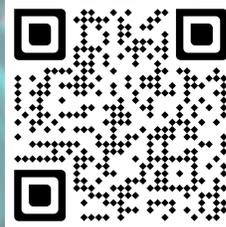
When to plan, who to include,
and how to prep for the big day.



[Get Prepped!](#)

During a Cleanup

What to do on cleanup day—
boundaries, safety, and setup tips.



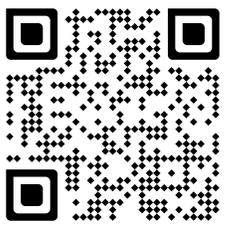
[View the Guide!](#)



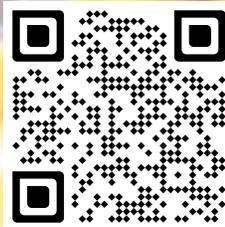
[Supplies List](#)

After a Cleanup

A checklist to report your results
to all the right partners.



[Finish Strong!](#)



[Above and Beyond!](#)

Optional Extras

Add-ons like removing
invasives or planting natives
—if time and resources allow.

Contact: Ashley@NapaRCD.org



Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

BEFORE a Cleanup – What to Do

Site Scouting

When: 1 month ahead, and again 1 week ahead

- Are there safety hazards from trash? Examples: syringes, heavy or sharp objects, toxic materials
- Are there environmental hazards? Examples: poison oak, bees, steep trails, slippery areas
- Could new hazards appear before cleanup day (e.g., rain = mud)?
- Are there active encampments near your site?
 - Introduce yourself; clarify you are not code enforcement
 - Ask about their preferred involvement (no contact, full participation, etc.)
 - Ask about materials they prefer you avoid
 - Coordinate with trusted groups to help approach encampment residents
- Can volunteers safely access trash areas (e.g., slope vs. flat ground)?
- Plan your trash hauling route — is there a clear access path?
- Is there adequate parking for staff and volunteers?

Prior Notice

Notify the following groups at least 2–4 weeks ahead of the event:

| Group | How to Notify | Notes |
|----------------------|-------------------|---|
| Encampment Residents | Flyers, in-person | Offer options for participation, trash drop-off, dumpster use |



Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------|---|
| Landowners (public/private) | Email or call | Get written permission if needed |
| Homeless Service Providers | Email or call | May help with outreach |
| Waste Management | Email or call | Coordinate trash pickup/dumpster |
| Volunteer Groups | Email | Include time, place, and safety protocols |
| Water Agencies & County | Email or call | If applicable (floodplains, county reporting) |

- Flyers can be handed out and posted at visible locations
- Ask encampment outreach groups (e.g., [SOS Richmond](#), [Keep Coyote Creek Beautiful](#)) about best timing for notices

Risk Management

- Who owns the land where the cleanup will take place?
- Who owns the tools and supplies?
- Who holds liability for volunteers?
- Who will collect and store signed waivers?



Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Trash Removal Coordination

Choose your method and coordinate early:

1. Bag it up, load it up, and haul it to the dump yourself. Sometimes, agencies and organizations have an agreement or contract with the dump for low-cost services for dumping waste collected during cleanups. Contact your local landfill or transfer station for details.
2. If you are a nonprofit, sometimes you can work with your city or county and have them coordinate pickup by their staff. In that case, you leave the trash you collect bagged up in a designated location and city or county folks will come pick it up and take it away for you.
3. The easiest, but least common, is having a contract or agreement with your waste services provider for their trucks to pick up the collected trash from your sites for you. No middle people involved. You simply let them know a week or two ahead of time where you will be doing a cleanup, and they will give you a location nearby where their trucks can do a pickup. You simply leave your bagged up trash in the designated location and their trucks will pick it up.

Event Planning

Time Considerations:

- 9am–12pm works well for volunteers
- 11am is often better for encampment residents
- Avoid early morning, extreme heat, and rainy conditions
- Plan around first flush to avoid inaccessible streambeds

Who's Invited:

- Public: volunteers, schools, local groups
- Provide environmental education content if possible
- Encampment Residents
- Outreach staff with training

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Basic Cleanup Bin Supply List

This checklist includes all the essential supplies needed to run a successful cleanup event with volunteers. It's designed to help ensure your team is fully prepared- from welcoming participants to sorting waste safely and effectively.

Supply Checklist

- Welcome Poster
- Registration List
- Liability Waiver – Spanish and English laminated copy
- Liability Waivers – 5 signature pages
- Pens – 5
- 3 Clipboards
- [Welcome Script with Safety Talk](#)
- [Encampment Safety Script](#)
- Data Card- if you are recording weights and other data
- Fish Scale- if you are recording weights and other data
- 8.5×11 Landfill Guide- you can get these from your waste services provider
- 8.5×11 Recycle Guide- you can get these from your waste services provider
- 8.5×11 Compost Guide- you can get these from your waste services provider
- Sharps Container
- Two boxes of non-latex rubber gloves- M and L are used most for adults
- First Aid Kit
- Hand sanitizer
- Bug spray
- Roll of painters tape
- Water Jug
- Compostable cups
- Paper towels

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

DAY-OF a Cleanup – What to Do

Setup

- Cleanup Bin, trash grabbers, gloves
- Table
- Coffee, water, snacks
- Extra bags for encampment residents to fill (if applicable)

Registration & Check In

- Participants must sign the waiver when they arrive.
- If a participant is under 18 and is not with their parent/guardian: You can have the participant call their parents. Verify the parent gives their verbal consent for their child to participate in the activity for the day, and then you can put your initials and “verbal confirmation, phone call” next to it.
- If you are at a site that has an encampment nearby and folks would like to participate but refuse to sign a waiver, it is okay to let them participate without signing.
- Please cover the intro, pick and choose the history and impacts that you find interesting and relevant, and then be sure to go over all of the safety guidelines.

Sample Script

Intro

Welcome to *location* in the watershed! We’re excited to have your help in the effort to keep this part of our community clean. I’m with *your organization* and we’re here today with *partner orgs*. If you have any questions about who we are or what we do, just ask, and we will answer any questions y’all have.

Add any info here specific to your cleanup day, your organization, etc.

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Why are we here

- The average person in the US produces 4.9 lbs of trash/day. That adds up to a total of 292.4 million tons of trash created in the US every year.
- When trash is not disposed of properly it ends up polluting our streets, parks, wild spaces, and eventually our waterways.
- There are multiple garbage patches, but the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is the biggest. It is a floating mass of plastics in the Pacific Ocean (between our coastline and Hawaii) that is now more than twice the size of Texas, or three times the size of France.
- It is estimated that every year, over 2 million tons of trash enter the ocean by flowing through rivers.
- Plastic is the most commonly found material in cleanups worldwide! 8 out of the top 10 items found in cleanups are single use, disposable plastic items.
- Cigarette butts have been in the list of top ten items found in CA trash cleanups since the 1980s. It moves up and down in the rankings, but it's always there.

Safety Talk

- Avoid large drums, dead or injured animals, and human waste.
- If you choose to pick up syringes, needles, and sharp objects, please do not empty your bucket on the tarp. Make sure you dump it out separately, call over one of the leaders of today's cleanup, and have them put the items in their sharps container. If you choose not to pick up these items, mark their location and tell your site captain where they are.
- Wear gloves and closed toe shoes at all times. Never touch trash with bare hands.
- Teamwork makes the dream work- Don't lift anything too heavy! If something is too heavy for a group of 2 to move, report the location to the site captain, who will report the location to appropriate city or county staff.
- Stay in teams of at least two, or in sight of others in your group.
- Avoid overexertion, sunburn, heat exhaustion, and dehydration. We suggest you take your water bottle with you. If you choose to leave it here at the check in site, make sure you are returning often to drink water.
- All children under the age of 13 need to be supervised by an adult.
- Watch out for poison oak. Leaves of 3, leave it be!
- Leave all "waste" where it is, along with any associated tissues. Talking both human and animal, unless it's in a dog waste bag

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Encampment Safety & Compassion, if applicable

The number of people experiencing homelessness in California has been on the rise for more than 15 years due to a variety of social and economic factors. Between 2017 and 2024, homelessness increased 39 percent in California, to a total of more than 187,000 people. As a result, the number of unhoused people residing in encampments has risen, which can be in areas where creek cleanups are held.

Folks living in encampments are just as much a part of our community as you and I, and we hope you will treat them, their possessions, and their spaces with the respect you expect to receive.

- Stay about 20 feet away from active homeless encampments. You wouldn't want anyone walking into your home or your yard and taking your belongings; show that same respect to our residents living in encampments.
- How do I tell if an encampment/tent site is active?
 - Are there people there?
 - Are there temporary structures that are standing? Tarps, tents, etc
 - Are the items you see fresh, or have they been affected by weather over a long term? For example, covered in mud, half buried, etc.
- If you see things that are in very good condition and could be reused, we recommend hanging them over a fence, or laying things out on the ground so people can see them.
- Bottles with liquids are to be left closed and put directly into the landfill cart.
- Another reminder for y'all to NOT pick up tissues or organic waste that is not in a doggy bag. Yes, we're talking about human feces.
- Clothing, pillows, etc. must go in the landfill cart
- If you find a shopping cart, please pull it out of the water and leave it next to your trash bins.

*Set your site boundaries here. Where can people go, where should they not go.

If you are sorting and recording weights of your landfill, recycle, and compost: As your buckets fill, please return to this spot to sort through your trash. Please be patient, as we will be recording the trash found to help us keep a record of what is picked up in our area throughout the years. We currently have ____ years of cleanup information that helps guide policy change and advocacy not just locally, but in the State of California.



SJSU SAN JOSÉ STATE
UNIVERSITY



UC DAVIS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Agriculture and Natural Resources



Northeastern
University

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

While Volunteers are Out

Ideally, cleanups should have two people (Site Captains) that are in charge.

- Site Captain One:
 - Stays near the table and equipment to continually welcome new volunteers
 - Explains to passersby what is happening, who all these people are, and why we are here
 - When people fill their buckets or bags with trash and come back, this person can either help the volunteers sort through trash and put it in the correct bin (if applicable) or help make sure all bags and other collected trash is stacked up and ready for pickup in the correct spot.
 - This person is the emergency contact if something goes wrong- they are closest access to the road and can guide emergency personnel
- Site Captain Two
 - Walks around and engages with volunteers
 - Makes sure everyone is having a good time
 - Keeps everybody safe
 - Answers volunteer questions during the cleanup
 - Takes photos of volunteers in action
 - Ensures respectful distance is kept from any active encampment or tent sites, if appropriate, OR
 - Makes sure all interactions with encampment residents are compassionate, safe, and respectful

Sorting (if applicable)

Dump all buckets onto the tarp, fill separate buckets with landfill, recycling, and compost, weigh each of the buckets, record the weight, and dump the bucket into the appropriate roadside cart. Then at the end, add up all the bucket weights for each category and enter it onto your data form.

If it is windy, have people sort through their own bucket and put items directly into the bins, making decisions and learning about their local waste management streams as they go. In this case, you will need to take a photo of how full each roadside cart is at the end of the day. There is a way to estimate weight of landfill, recycling, and compost by looking at how full the bins are.

- 95gal trash cart ~70lbs full
- 95gal recycle cart ~70lbs full
- 65gal compost cart ~50lbs full



Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Reporting to Attendees

At the end of the cleanup, report out to your volunteers how many pounds of trash they picked up and saved from being swept downstream and into the ocean. The immediate statistic will help them feel a sense of accomplishment and impact, and is likely to bring them back for another event.

Trash Removal

If using individual landfill, recycling, and compost bins, it's important that the trash collected is removed as soon as possible to avoid contamination of waste streams.

If you aren't sorting, leaving the dumpsters there for a day or two often doesn't hurt, especially if there are any encampments nearby that could use the dumpsters after your event is finished.



Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

AFTER a Cleanup – What to Do

Thank Volunteers

- Send a thank-you email to all registered participants.
- Include photos from the event (if available).
- Report back on impact metrics (e.g., pounds of trash collected, number of volunteers).
- Mention upcoming cleanup opportunities.

Report Your Impact

- Calculate total pounds of trash, recycling, and compost collected.
- Tally how many participants attended (including community members and encampment residents).
- Record locations cleaned and note any areas that may need future attention.
- Take photos of sorted materials, filled dumpsters, and participant groups.
- Submit any required reports to funders, partners, or permitting agencies.

Evaluate & Debrief

- Debrief with cleanup staff and partners.
- What worked well? What can be improved next time?
- Did any safety or site access issues arise?
- Document lessons learned for future events.

Follow Up with Stakeholders

- Share outcomes with landowners, homeless outreach groups, waste management, and city staff.
- Let them know about any items requiring follow-up (e.g., hazardous waste, large debris).

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Leave No Trace (of the Cleanup Itself)

- Remove tables, signage, and supplies from the site.
- Ensure dumpsters or carts are picked up promptly (unless left intentionally for encampment use).
- Double-check for forgotten supplies or materials left behind.

Share the Impact

Share a social media post or a newsletter article to highlight your team and volunteers. Share the story of your cleanup, teamwork, and the impact made!



Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Low Impact Restoration Tools for Your Cleanup Event

*** Important note – make sure you notify the California Department of Fish and Wildlife of any alterations you plan to make to a habitat. [Here is a link](#) with info on how to navigate their systems

Intro

Habitat restoration is an important step in any landscape's healing. While conducting a cleanup, utilizing low impact land alterations can have huge impacts on habitat health while providing engaging and educational activities for participants.

To engage deeper, reach out to Adam Gelfand at Contra Costa RCD (agelfand@ccrcd.org) and/or check out [CUSP's website](#) for more resources

Invasive Removal

Invasive species are organisms that negatively impact biodiversity. They are commonly found in disturbed landscapes. Below are some of the most common invasive species found in the San Francisco Bay Area that can be removed by hand.

Materials

- Shovel(s)
- Garden loppers
- Gloves

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Common Invasives

Mustard/radish



Milk thistle



SJSU SAN JOSÉ STATE
UNIVERSITY



UC DAVIS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Agriculture and Natural Resources



N Northeastern
University

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Lactuca



Johnson's grass



Poison Hemlock

- These should be removed while using gloves, as it is known to cause rashes.



SJSU SAN JOSÉ STATE
UNIVERSITY



UC DAVIS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Agriculture and Natural Resources



N Northeastern
University

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Native Planting

Materials

- Native plants
- Flags
- Watering apparatus (bucket and creek, or piped irrigation systems)
- Shovel(s)

For a list of riparian native plants, [see this spreadsheet](#). Note: this is a palette for creeks in Pinole, CA, located in Contra Costa County. For area-specific plants, you will want to do your own research and/or call your local native plant nursery.

Standard Operating Procedure

1. Decide where to plant your plants. Lay them out and place colored flags near them to grab people's attention.
 - Consider the plants' needs (sunlight, water, soil type, etc).
2. Dig a hole slightly larger and deeper than the plant container.
3. Loosen the soil and roots in the container, and gently remove the plant.
4. Gently break up the root ball so the roots are slightly spread out.
5. Place the plant into the hole and fill in with the removed soil.
6. Water the plant thoroughly to eliminate air bubbles and ensure root contact with soil.
 - This step is crucial to the plants' survival. If any of the roots are exposed to air under ground, the plant will die. Watering the plants immediately after planting prevents this

Cleanups with Compassion

A Best Practice Guide
for planning
volunteer cleanups
near and with
unhoused neighbors

Willow Staking

More to come on this, see [this presentation](#) for background info.

Willow staking refers to the practice of hammering sticks gathered from willow trees into stream banks in order to stabilize them. When done correctly, willow staking is a simple yet powerful tool for preventing erosion, routing streams, and promoting biodiversity.

Special Considerations

This practice only works in the winter, when willows are sending all their energy to the roots. It may work in the dry season with supplemental watering.

Materials Needed

- 2–3 ft long rebar
- Mallets
- Willow branches
- Loppers
- Flags (optional)

Standard Operating Procedures

1. Cut a bough from a willow tree (~5 ft long, ~1 in thick at base).
2. Trim it into 1-ft+ stakes with leaves removed.
3. Cut root end at an angle (to spike), top flat (for hammering).
4. Identify creek-side location; aim for access to water table.
5. Use rebar and mallet to create guide hole, insert willow stake.
6. Saturate surrounding soil and place a flag for marking.

