

DOCENT TOOL KIT

Introduction

A docent is a trained volunteer or staff member who assists and enhances the experience of visitors to the *Americans and the Holocaust* exhibition. The following resources will help you decide whether a docent program meets your goals, how to recruit and train docents, and what factors to consider when setting up your docent program.

Why establish a docent program?

While the *Americans and the Holocaust* exhibition can be explored without the help of a guide, many libraries have found that docents can enhance the visitor experience. If you plan to run a field trip program, you may want docents to give guided tours to student groups to enhance engagement and provide focus. You may want docents to welcome visitors and orient them to the exhibition, alerting them to the layout and inviting them to participate in programs. You may just want extra pairs of hands who have engaged with the exhibition content and can assist during programs or busy periods.

What should you consider before beginning a docent program?

1) Hours and visitation

You know your library and your patrons. Do you have busy periods when the exhibition may be crowded, or are your patrons spread evenly throughout the week? Are you planning a field trip program that could benefit from trained guides? Consider whether a docent program is necessary, or if you and your staff can respond to any questions or needs that may arise as you host the exhibition.

2) Staff time

Recruiting, training, organizing, and supervising docents takes time. Weigh the opportunities that a docent program presents to you and your visitors with the time it will take you and your colleagues to run the program.

3) Community Interest

You know your patrons and you know your plans for your host term. Will your patrons benefit from a docent program or from guided tours, or do they prefer to explore information on their own? If you've hosted exhibitions in the past, would they have benefited from a docent program?

How could you utilize docents?

This will depend on your programming plans and goals. You may want docents who can help in all of these areas, or you might want to focus on one type of docent. How you plan to utilize docents will be an important consideration prior to docent recruitment, so that you will be able to provide information regarding your needs and expectations.

1) Guided Tours

You may wish to have docents available to provide guided tours to students on field trips, which can help young people focus and retain the information in the exhibition. You can also have docents available at set times for tours for the general public.

2) Introduction and Resource

You may wish to have docents available to welcome visitors to the exhibition and orient them to the layout. These docents can also “float” through the exhibition to answer questions or show visitors how to use the kiosks. If you plan to create a reflection space or solicit visitor feedback, these docents can help facilitate and monitor those reflections.

How can you identify potential docents?

Some libraries have an established volunteer program, and these volunteers often become excellent docents. They know the library and are excited about the opportunity to participate in the hosting of the exhibition. You may also have a partnership with an organization, Holocaust center, or synagogue that could provide you with committed volunteers. A docent program could be an excellent way to bring these volunteers into the library. If you are on a college campus, there may be a student group that may be interested in training as docents. And don’t forget about your colleagues, both at your library branch and any other branches within your library system! Keep the ALA’s [Equity, Divisity, and Inclusion principles and resources](#) in mind when recruiting docents.

What considerations should you keep in mind while setting up a docent schedule?

- Are you going to offer guided tours of the exhibition?
- If so, who is your target audience for tours?
- What hours do you plan to offer tours?
- What system will you use to schedule the docents?
- How will you let your visitors know about tour times or availability?
- If you do not plan to offer tours, when do you anticipate the exhibition being busy enough to utilize docents to welcome and orient visitors?
- How many hours do you anticipate each docent will volunteer each week?

Suggested Timeline for Docent Recruitment and Training

1) Recruit Docents (five–six months prior to host term)

As you begin to plan your programming and consider the factors above, you will be able to determine whether you want to organize a docent program. Decide how you would like to utilize docents and what your requirements for their availability and participation might be. Do you need more people available during the weekday to assist with school groups? Do you want to offer guided tours on the weekend? Reach out to the volunteer groups and organizations you’ve identified as potential docents and gauge interest and availability. Collect contact information regarding potential docents. You may wish to prepare a short application form in order to aggregate contact information, availability, and any other information you want to know.

2) Interview Docents (three–four months prior to host term)

As you continue to refine your planned programming and have an idea of how you’d like to utilize docents, speak with the potential docents. Are they available for training? Are they willing to practice their tours, if you plan to give tours? Are they comfortable speaking with visitors or providing tours? Are they open to learning and sharing the content of the exhibition? Are they able to share the information without editorializing or making inappropriate historical or contemporary comparisons? Select the docents who will enhance your hosting of the exhibition. If you are confident in

your programming calendar or have already chosen field trip dates, decide when you will utilize docents and the length and times of the volunteer slots. Do not schedule docent slots in the first few days of your host term, as docents will need to practice tours and become acquainted with the layout. Allow docents to sign up for slots, making sure that each docent has an equal opportunity to select slots that work within their schedule.

Optional: If you'd like the docents to do a group reading of *The Unwanted: America, Auschwitz, and a Village Caught In Between*, by Michael Dobbs (Knopf, 2018), alert docents to this and ask them to read the book prior to the first docent training. Alternatively, you can ask docents to watch *The U.S. and the Holocaust*, directed by Ken Burns, Lynn Novick, and Sarah Botstein, which debuted on PBS in 2022, and was inspired by the Museum's exhibition in Washington, DC.

3) Docent Training #1 (one month prior to host term)

A docent training should consist of at least two components: historical background of the exhibition and the logistics of the docent program. Gather docents together, either virtually or in person. The training will likely take about two hours.

- Review how you plan to use docents. Share your programming plans with them.
- Discuss the expectations—including time commitment and behavior—that you have for docents.
- Have docents sign a volunteer agreement committing to uphold your requirements regarding behavior and agreeing to commit to their volunteer slots. Include on the agreement instructions about how to contact you or a point person if they will be late or not available.
- Review the [“Exhibition Background and Key Messages.”](#) in the Grant Support materials with the docents. Feel free to print or copy this material for their reference and so they can study it as they prepare. Spend some time here, even reading it aloud or sharing it on a screen and soliciting questions.
- Review the [Exhibition Panels PowerPoint](#) with the docents. They do not need to be able to read all of the text, but should have a sense of the organization and look of the exhibition.
- If you are in person, show the docents the space where the exhibition will be constructed and how you plan to display the exhibition and the kiosks. If you are virtual, share pictures of the library space.
- Distribute copies of the [guided tour script](#) to docents. Whether or not you plan to have docents give guided tours, this script provides more information about the exhibition and its content. Docents do not have to memorize the script and can carry it with them on clipboards, but they should be very familiar with the content.
- Review and provide copies of the [Best Practices for Guided Tours](#) resource in the Grant Support Materials.
- If you plan to have the docents tour school groups, inform them of your plans for how the field trips will run. Often, the groups are too large to move through the exhibition together. Will the groups be split, with one group doing another activity (such as watching and discussing the [Behind Every Name](#) animated films) while the other group takes the tour? Give docents the opportunity to review any materials related to the other activity.
- Conclude the training by reinforcing expectations, including the responsibility to become familiar with the exhibition content. Encourage docents to reach out with questions or concerns (and if you are unable to answer their questions, contact Eric Schmalz at eschmalz@ushmm.org). Consider distributing the [Historical Background and Overview of New Research](#) document from the Grant Support Materials, which provides additional information and suggestions for further reading.
- If you asked docents to read *The Unwanted* or to watch *The U.S. and the Holocaust*, hold your book/film club discussion by asking what surprised the docents about this history. Let the conversation go from there.

4) Docent Training #2 (first week of host term)

It is important for you and for the docents to become familiar with the exhibition after it has been put together. Having several people to help with the construction of the exhibition will make things faster and easier. Feel free to use willing docents to help you unpack and put up the exhibition, relying on the Grant Support Materials that will guide you in hanging the panels and setting up the kiosks. After the exhibition erected, you should hold your second docent training, which must be in person. Depending on how you wish to organize the training, you can gather all the docents together or meet with them in small groups, or even individually.

- During this training, docents should give a full practice tour. No matter how much practice they have done without the exhibition, they will need to familiarize themselves with the choreography of moving with a group through the physical space. They can give the practice tour to each other or to family members or friends, but you or another staff member should also watch the tour. Remember that they can carry the script with them—there is no need to memorize it. The staff member watching the tour may wish to create an assessment rubric, carry the script or have some other way to take notes so you can provide feedback.
- After the tour, debrief. Are the docents comfortable giving more tours, or do they need more practice? Do they need any additional information or resources to make them feel more confident in their tours? Go over their schedules and remind them of expectations. Make any necessary schedule adjustments and request any additional practice prior to the start of their docent sessions.
- If you do not plan to have docents provide guided tours to student groups or to the public, it is still a good idea to gather docents together during the first week of your host term and have them watch you (or a colleague) give a tour using the Guided Tour script so that they can familiarize themselves with the space and content.

Resources

These resources can be provided to docents either as part of their training or for their own personal research and reference.

- [Guided tour script](#)
- [Exhibition Background and Key Concepts](#)
- [Historical Background and Overview of New Research](#) (includes recommendations for further reading)
- [Americans and the Holocaust online exhibition](#) [note: this exhibition relates to the special exhibition on display in Washington, DC, from 2018–2024 and should be used to provide additional information and context]
- [Americans and the Holocaust recorded tour](#) with curator Dr. Daniel Greene [note: this tour is of the special exhibition on display in Washington, DC from 2018–2024 and should be used to provide additional information and context]
- The [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#) (provides background information on Holocaust-related topics, including many related to American responses to the Holocaust)