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BLOG: HANGING OUT AT THE STATE WELCOME CENTERS

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by GSA Marty Wagner, Comfort Inn Concord Class of 2011

When the first pieces of the interstate highway system were built in the 1950s, no one could have imagined the number of vehicles that would take to the roads nor the number of people that would travel to New Hampshire by automobile. On holiday weekends, and some summer weekends, as many as 600,000 of our closest friends cross our borders to enjoy all NH has to offer. I feel like I've met at least half of them at the State Welcome Centers. This article is intended to tell you more about being a volunteer at these Centers, and perhaps meeting some of these nice folk yourselves.

I volunteer regularly at the Hooksett North and Canterbury Welcome Centers, and have also put in shifts at the Hooksett South and Seabrook Welcome Centers. Whenever I've mentioned my volunteering history to other GSAs, there have always been questions about my experiences. Below are some FAQs which I have been asked by other GSAs in my 6 years of volunteering at these Centers.

What do GSAs do, and what does the staff do?

In each of the Welcome Centers, the staff and I seem to have worked out a rhythm of who does what. The GSA's job is generally to cover the brochure racks or general area and approach people to see if they need help. If they're looking at brochures or looking around a bit aimlessly, it's time to take the initiative and speak first. Often when I ask visitors if they need help finding something, they first say 'no' and then immediately follow that up with questions. At that point, the conversation has begun, and another fun experience as a GSA is underway.

The staff generally operates from behind the desk. At the centers where they have printers, it is the staff who researches things online based on a question they've received from a visitor or the GSA on duty. They often print out that type of information as well as driving directions when asked for those. Staff in Hooksett are also responsible for issuing various licenses, but GSAs are not involved in that task at all.

Staff at other State Welcome Centers are responsible for maintaining the facility which sometimes means that the GSA is the one covering the front counter area alone for short periods of time during the shift. However, if something comes up which requires their help, they are nearby and easily accessible.

I'd like to think that the staff and I are backup for each other since we all bring various knowledge to the centers. I've gotten to know some of the staff so we know each other's specialties and interests, which only helps the visitors overall. Many times visitors benefit from a discussion with two of us for ideas and recommendations.

By the way, how each center keeps GSA records may vary slightly from place to place; it's clicker counters in Hooksett and marking the tick sheets in Canterbury. My rule is 'When in Rome, do as the Romans.' It's their 'house'; I'm the temporary visitor so I follow their rules.

When is the best time to volunteer?

I volunteer year-round at the State Centers, although I go less frequently during the quieter winter months and more often during NH's high season from Memorial Day through the end of October, followed by the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Their shifts are generally Thursday through Saturday at northbound centers, and Sunday and Monday on southbound centers. To pick a time that will suit you, just think about when the traffic jams occur on the highways. The norms change with weather forecasts and holidays, of course, but generally, the busy times, particularly from Memorial Day through Labor Day and then during foliage season, are:

Thursday afternoons when people get a head start on the weekend. (northbound)

Fridays from noon until about 9 p.m. (northbound)



Saturdays from 9 a.m. to about 3 p.m. (northbound)

Sunday from early afternoon to 9 p.m. (southbound)

Monday mornings when people travel to avoid Sunday travel (southbound)

Is there a place for GSAs to sit?

The short answer is that yes, there are places for GSAs to sit at the State Welcome Centers. However, in order to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of their computer systems, the State prefers that only employees be behind the counter. That does not preclude GSAs from finding a nearby bench or chair to sit on between helping visitors. During busy times, I never have enough time to sit, but the option is always available to me if I need it no matter how many people are passing through the centers.

What types of questions or interactions can you expect?

I could write a book in answer to this question, as could any GSA about the places where they volunteer. The short response is expect anything and everything from..... where are the bathrooms to.... the lakes really freeze enough here in winter so people can walk on them? It was February, and when I told this particular man about bob houses, ice hockey tournaments and car racing on Winnepesaukee, he wanted directions to go there that very day. He was from Egypt and had never seen a frozen pond or lake. How cool is that? I didn't believe it two years later when I had a similar conversation with another visitor, this one from Brazil.



At all four State Welcome Centers where I've worked, there are always people who are just planning for their next vacation to NH. They're looking for ideas and brochures to back up those ideas, whenever possible. Another constant is lost people trying to find the way to their destination or the way back to where they started. One of my favorite questions related to directions was: "Can you tell me the difference between Hampton and New Hampton? I'm supposed to be at one of them, but I'm not sure which one." He laughed heartily, as we stood in Hooksett, not particularly close to either place. We asked a few questions and decided Hampton Beach was his destination. Staff printed directions for him and he was gone.

During our snowless winter of 2015-2016 when there was no skiing, many of the February vacationers still came to NH, but they were looking for recommendations to help keep themselves busy during their stays. Being in snow country with no snow is a challenge, but we came up with some ideas.

In May of this year, the Canterbury Welcome Center helped a busload of Romanian visitors. Only one or two spoke English, but we offered them maps and brochures, and they were appreciative. Then the guide himself, also from Romania, asked for ideas of where to stop in the White Mountains as they drove to Quebec. We made a couple suggestions, he seemed happy with the options, and off they went.

Beautiful Saturday afternoons in summer are likely to bring out people who have decided it's a good day for a ride, and they now want to see as much as they can. I once spoke with a woman who wanted to walk the Flume, drive across the Kanc, visit Diana's Bath, and do some shopping in North Conway. It was a great plan but it was also 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and she was headed back to Boston for the evening. I estimated the travel time for her, and when she saw the difficulty, I helped with an alternative plan.

In the Fall, questions are mostly about finding the red leaves, of course. I've developed a couple routes people might take depending on the traffic and how adventuresome they are. I loved it when one man came up to the counter one day and said, "I only want to go on back roads with my camera." He was a professional photographer, and we found him roads that were just grey lines on the map. Another visitor, while not a professional, was every bit as serious about her photography craft. "I'd like to take a foliage picture reflected in a lake." Staff and I put our heads together to give her some ideas which had an added challenge because it was about two weeks prior to the peak season. As you all know, finding red trees is not an exact science.

It was in late Fall when a woman and her husband appeared with all kinds of questions about what they might see and do in the White Mountains. We had been discussing it for a while when she added that they wanted to take the Cog that day, too. "That's great," I said as I looked at her flip-flops and her husband's shorts. "You might want warmer clothing though since it's currently 23 degrees at the top and only 12 degrees with the wind chill factor." Unfortunately, they didn't have any warm clothes with them, but there were still lots of other alternatives for them to pursue.

I, of course, have also had some questions that stump me although I always provide the best answer I can. At the top of that list was one asked on the Friday night of Columbus Day weekend: "Why is there so much traffic tonight?" Tough one.

Do the State employees want us as the State Centers?

I was reluctant to include this question, but since I've been asked this at least twice, I decided to just put it in black and white. The State employees at the Centers have always welcomed me to their Centers, and treated me kindly. We've gotten to know each other a bit and share stories like anyone you work with. It's neat, too, that almost all of them have been through GSA training now, so they really understand how our mission fits into theirs. Pictured below are part of the Hooksett crew: on the left is Meaghan, Hooksett North and South supervisor, standing with Andrew who works on the northbound side of the highway.

More Questions?

I hope this little bit of information about the State Welcome Centers gives you better insight about volunteering there. Those of us that do it, really love it. Choosing a time to volunteer is key, so keep in mind.....traffic jam time usually means plenty of action, and lots of variety. The other most important thing is to be ready to approach people in the Centers to offer your assistance.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me or any of the Centers. They're waiting to meet you, as are some of those 600,00 closest friends arriving here by car!

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