

Crisis Christmas

A Guide for Samaritan Volunteers

Thank you for your interest in volunteering at Crisis Christmas in London.

This leaflet gives you a brief introduction to Crisis Christmas (CC). If you are thinking of volunteering at CC for the first time, we hope that it will give you some idea of what to expect when you arrive and start working. If you are an old hand at CC it might remind you about what you need to bring!

Crisis Christmas

The CC project is run by the charity Crisis over the Christmas period, from 23 to 30 December, when they open a number of day and residential centres across London. We aim to work during the whole period of CC. Crisis also run a number of other projects and organise other activities for homeless people throughout the year. See www.crisis.org.uk for more information about the charity and also a useful leaflet for their volunteers.

Most of the centres are opened in buildings that have been donated to Crisis for the Christmas period and they are converted to provide shelter and support services for homeless people and others (the "Guests"). The location of the centres is often not known until early December, as Crisis has to negotiate the loan of suitable buildings from the owners. In 2010, there will be 5 days centres open from 8am to 8pm and 4 residential centres to which guests are referred (rough sleepers, dependency, women's and 'quiet'). If volunteer numbers allow we will aim to work in some of the other centres so this will involve going to other sites. Crisis will provide transport for this.

The organisation of CC is a major task, much of this hidden from the view of volunteers and guests. 6,500 volunteers run the centres during the CC week, but much more time is spent before the event finding the venues; getting electricity, gas and plumbing connected; installing heating, lighting, toilets and showers;

building offices and rest areas; sourcing food for 800 or more people a day, and so on.

The Event

The Crisis Christmas centres will provide food, support and companionship for 800-1,000 guests during the day, and in the residential centres 600-700 at night.

CC provides three hot meals a day. In addition to this, guests are provided with toiletries, towels, access to showers, warmth, and companionship and in the residential centres, a mattress and blankets. Guests also have access to: -

- **Medical Services** – including a surgery, first aid and nursing cover, chiropody, dentists and hygienists, opticians, mental health support and complementary therapies such as massage, and aromatherapy.
- **Advice Services** – with specialists providing advice on welfare benefits, legal and housing issues, and a team of resettlement workers helping the guests to link in to year-round services for assistance in finding permanent accommodation and support.
- **Clothing** – new or nearly new clothing is provided to guests who need clothing and a sewing service operates throughout the week for alterations and repairs.
- **Hairdressing & manicure**
- **Entertainment** – games, TVs books, art and craft workshops, entertainers.
- **Samaritans** – more of which later.

Who are the Guests?

Guests at CC come from all over London, and from a variety of circumstances. There are a significant number of street homeless people, but there are also people who live in temporary hostel accommodation, or in low quality housing. The common theme is that of poverty and a lack of social networks and support. The age range of

the guests is very wide. In general, however, guests tend to be middle-aged.

A lot of guests have problems in addition to their homelessness, for example many have problems with alcohol, and there is a high incidence of physical and mental health problems. No alcohol is allowed into the centres with the exception of the dependency centre, and guests are searched on their way in.

The Organisation of Crisis Christmas

Crisis volunteers are organised into three 8-hour shifts a day in the 24 hour residential centres and two 8-hour shifts in the day centres. Each shift is led by a Shift Leader and a team of Assistant Shift Leaders (“Green Badges” (GBs)) in each centre. The organisation of Crisis volunteers is completely separate from Samaritan volunteers. In particular, Crisis Shift Leaders – the GBs - are not to be confused with Samaritan Shift Leaders.

Samaritan volunteers do not get involved in general tasks that are carried out by Crisis volunteers. Samaritans are **only** there to offer emotional support.

Samaritans at Crisis Christmas

The Samaritans provide a 24-hour a day service for guests and Crisis volunteers, based at one of the residential centres. We work shifts of around 4 hours, **Shifts will be sent out to the other 8 centres across London from our ‘home-base’. Crisis will provide the transport for this, but please be patient as there are a lot of transports for Crisis to plan, (Samaritans alone made 94 transport bookings last year). So transport doesn’t always go smoothly.** We initially ask you to let us know when you will be available and then we will confirm with you when we expect you to be on site. Please do not change your availability late in the day except in the direst emergencies. We put a lot of effort into ensuring we have the required resources. Please give your availability the same sort of priority you would for shifts in your own Branch. The effects of people dropping out or not appearing are very similar.

We are there to provide Samaritan support to those who require it. We do this by being present in the main area of the centres, often working from a fixed base

where we have a banner and chairs. We talk with guests in the main area of the centres – we do not take them off to another place to talk to them except in very exceptional circumstances.

Much of the emotional support we offer takes place around our “base”. Callers will come to us, or we will approach guests who look as if they would like to talk. Individual volunteers may also spend some time, under the direction of the Samaritan Shift Leader, working away from the base – often in the wider space of the floor, sometimes outside of the building, sometimes in one of the other centres, with guests who may not be willing or able to come to us. We also get requests from Crisis Shift Leaders to see Guests that they have concerns about. All such requests should be passed to the Samaritan Shift Leader who will deal with it.

Being a Samaritan at CC can be very challenging. Guests may find it very difficult to talk about themselves because they have so few opportunities throughout the year. Their stories can be very upsetting. Contact with a caller may be made up of several short calls as the guest may find it difficult to talk for anything but short periods. You will probably find that volunteering at CC is different to what you are used to in a Samaritan centre.

Crisis volunteers spend a lot of time talking to and supporting guests – it is one of their duties – and many guests do not need more than this. We are at Crisis Christmas to provide emotional support as a **Samaritan** and you should avoid getting drawn into chats or running errands for guests or Crisis volunteers. Be aware, however, the Crisis volunteers may also be callers – you may need to be particularly sensitive to the feelings of Crisis volunteers. Don’t discuss the calls you’ve had outside the Samaritans space or to non-Samaritans – confidentiality applies to the guests and the Crisis volunteers are not Samaritans even if we are working to the same end.

The Organisation of Shifts

Samaritan Volunteers typically work 4 hour shifts during the day and night. We operate from two locations; we will have a base in one of the residential centres and a separate “office” for volunteers to debrief. Each Samaritan shift consists of a number

of volunteers plus a Shift Leader. The Shift Leaders are carefully selected on the basis of their experience of working at this sort of event. Some may look younger than you may expect but they do know what they are doing. Please trust them.

The **Shift Leader** is in charge of the Shift; he/she directs volunteers, handles requests from Crisis Shift Leaders for Samaritan volunteers, and supports volunteers. Your Shift Leader will brief you before the shift about any issues and to let you know what they expect from you. You may work with a number of different Shift Leaders during the event and they may differ in style. Listen carefully to what they say. They will support you during the shift and will hold a post-shift meeting to discuss what happened. Please use them. Do not “bottle up” feelings. Remember you may be doing two or three shifts a day so it is important to de-brief properly from each shift.

The Shift Leader does not offer emotional support to guests. They are there to support the volunteers only and you should always be aware of the need to rescue the Shift Leader should she or he seem to be getting caught up with a caller.

The Shift Leader is responsible for everything that happens on the shift. It is therefore vital that you keep the Shift Leader informed of your whereabouts for example, letting the Shift Leader know before you go off to the toilet or to get a cup of coffee, or to go for a walk round the floor so that she or he knows where you are and will not worry about you or send someone to find you. If in doubt about anything, talk to your Shift Leader.

Working with the Shift Leader is the **Festival Leader**. The Festival Leader is responsible for the running of the event, organising the rota, making sure that there are sufficient volunteers to cover the shifts, and volunteer and caller care. The Festival Leader is normally based in our Office at one of the residential centres. There are several different Festival Leaders during the duration of CC, working on a rota basis. Even when you are not on duty, the Festival Leader will want to know where you are in case of emergencies. We need to ensure there is someone at our base at all times for security. Please do not just disappear (even for a smoke or the loo)!

Make sure that the Shift Leader knows where you are.

Off Duty Periods

We generally expect volunteers to work at CC for 2 to 5 shifts over a period of 24 to 48 hours.

We usually have some sort of space where we can sleep. It can get crowded and intimate. You might want to bring earplugs as unfortunately some volunteers snore! Please do not bring an alarm clock. We have a wake up rota and an alarm clock tends to wake up the whole room (especially if you've got earplugs in!).

Accommodation is usually basic, and you will often have to sleep on the floor. We provide basic food as well as tea and coffee. It is a good idea to bring any can't-live-without food, drink or treats that you will need to survive a period away from home, as it may be difficult to find a shop open near to the centres.

Time off shift is your opportunity to seek and provide support to other volunteers, and we urge you to make the best use of this time that you can. It may be useful to bring a book or personal stereo with you if you want some private time.

Please do not bring a camera. Though there are undoubtedly some terrific photos to be taken, cameras are not allowed in the centres for obvious reasons.

We aim to give all volunteers feedback on what went well and what could have gone better before they leave and we welcome suggestions on how we could do things better. We hope this will be constructive and helpful.

Food, Drink, Toilets, etc

Basic food and drink (tea, coffee, bread, cheese, etc) is provided at the Samaritan's accommodation area.

Food and drink are provided by Crisis for both guests and volunteers who eat together in the main area of each centre. If there is anything you cannot survive without, you should bring it with you.

e We are unlikely to have access to a shower or bath. Again you are advised to bring anything that you cannot survive without (soap, towels, shampoo).

Dress Code

It is advisable to wear older clothes that you do not mind getting dirty and worn. The centres can get rather smelly at times and you may end up sitting on grubby floors. It is also important not to “dress up” – guests may be sensitive to their own appearance, so please dress casually. Although the centres should be warm, our own living area may not be so please bring warm clothing, particularly for night shifts. Multiple layers are good so you can be dressed appropriately whatever the conditions. Don't bring anything expensive that might get damaged, stolen or ruined.

You may also be working outside for periods in the rain or cold. Please make sure that you have plenty of warm and waterproof outdoor clothing with you.

Reminders

- Remember to bring with you the kind of items you would take camping – sleeping bag (and hot water bottle!), warm clothes, essential food and drink, washing gear, earplugs and a torch.
- Do let the Festival Leader know if you are going to arrive later than you originally stated, as rotas are often planned to take account of when you said you will arrive. Contact telephone numbers will be included with the letter you get confirming the arrangements for this year's CC.
- When you arrive at CC for the first time we will do our best to extend to you a warm welcome. There are times, however, when volunteers, the Shift Leader and the Festival Leader are extremely busy, and if this is the case please help yourself to a cup of coffee and wait for the chaos to pass!
- Remember that you might be working again within 4 hours of going off shift so make sure you get enough rest or sleep.
- Seek support should you need it and remember that other volunteers may want support. Your Shift Leader is there for you, as is the Festival Leader.
- The Shift Leader has overall responsibility for the shift and the volunteers on it, regardless of the seniority or experience of the volunteers. You must consult the Shift

Leader **before** you do something that might affect the number of volunteers available at the base. The Shift Leader may also give you directions (such as who to approach, or ask you to stay in one place). If you disagree please discuss this **after** the shift. Remember that the Shift Leader is in charge.

- CC is hard work and physically and emotionally draining. Bear this in mind when arranging what you are going to do when you leave!
- Chocolate is always welcome!

And Finally...

We very much hope that you enjoy Crisis Christmas and that you will become an CC regular.

If you have any concerns during or after the event then **please** talk to a Shift Leader, the Festival Leader, or another volunteer. It is difficult to come away from Crisis Christmas unchanged by the experience, and you may want to talk about how you feel about it when you get home. Contact telephone numbers will be available at the event.

Bullet Points on “How we work”

- The main focus of our work is on exploring feelings with the Guests, including feelings around suicide. You will be wearing a badge with an orange rim. This means you are a ‘Specialist Service’ volunteer. All of the Crisis volunteers are encouraged to ‘talk’ to the guests. Samaritans are a ‘*specialist service*’ because we will actively listen to potentially distressing emotional content. The Crisis volunteers can ‘chat’ to the guests but we are there to provide a Samaritan service to **every** caller we speak to.
- The Shift Leader (equivalent to the *Leader in a local branch*) will be working in the main area with the shift and is responsible for your health and safety and the quality of service. They do not engage with callers when working as a Leader. We expect volunteers to do as asked by the Shift Leader when on shift. Any queries about directions given during the shift can be discussed in a post shift meeting but we would ask that you take direction from the Shift Leader without question when on shift.
- The Shift Leader will want to know your whereabouts when on shift **at all times**. Any requests from Crisis personnel to attend to a Guest, or if you need to leave the main area for any other reason, such as a comfort break or to log calls, must all be referred to and agreed by the Shift Leader.
- The Shift Leader will want to know about the depth of exploration of feelings you are engaged in with each caller. This is so they have an overview of the shift and can re-allocate volunteers if a request to attend a Guest elsewhere on the floor is made.
- In order for the Shift Leader to know about the depth of your call, you may need to break away from callers to explain that you are engaged in a ‘serious’ call and do not wish to be interrupted. Each Shift Leader will advise you on their style and how and when they will expect you to update them.
- You are working as part of a team of volunteers so monitor your colleagues when in the main area of the centre. Protect them from any interruptions if they are with a caller and try to engage ‘groups’ if a volunteer has more than one caller around them. Further guidance on working within the team will be given during the event.
- If you are engaged with a caller at the end of a shift, *you will* need to ‘handover’ callers to a volunteer on the next shift. Guidance on how to do this will be given at the event. This has to be done in order to ensure that you get a break. Likewise as you go on shift, you may be asked to go to a caller who has been with another volunteer on the previous shift.
- We are there to provide a service for the Guests, but we are also one of the few services open for Crisis Volunteers. Therefore we encourage you not to be in the main area of the centre during your off-duty time in case you are approached by either Guests or Crisis Volunteers.
- Be aware that you may get very tired and will be hearing some potentially distressing histories and emotions from some of the guests. Look after yourself and seek support from the other Samaritan volunteers, the Shift Leaders or the Festival Leaders.
- **Don’t Panic** – the Shift Leader is there to offer advice, guidance and support. If you feel out of your depth, stuck in the middle of a call or need a break – talk to your Shift Leader. They have experience of working in this style and are there to help you.