

Volunteer Tips and Strategies

Topic 3: Screening and Selecting Volunteers



Screening and Selecting Volunteers

As nonprofit organizations feel the pinch of tighter budgets and growing client populations, volunteers in many organizations are taking on more responsibility, effectively functioning as if they were paid staff. They often have access to clients and client information and increasingly shape the public face of the organization. Using volunteers in this manner, however, imposes additional responsibilities on organizations, must pay more attention to volunteer screening, selection, and management than ever before.

The National Center for Victims of Crime conducted a nonprofit survey to identify: characteristics of organizations that regularly screen volunteers, the methods used, and how information is used in decision making.

Most organizations say they conduct some screening, but few conduct thorough screening using all available methods of gathering information, including reference and background checks. The vast majority of organizations that participated in the survey indicated that they conduct some form of screening on incoming volunteers,

but not all organizations that screen do so thoroughly.

12 percent of organizations reported not screening volunteers at all. Organizations that do not screen volunteers reported a variety of reasons for not doing so, including not thinking screening is useful, thinking it costs too much, and not wishing to offend potential volunteers.

The majority of organizations in their survey at minimum conduct an interview of volunteers while fewer organizations check references and fewer still engage in full background checks. One in four organizations do not call references for potential volunteers, and 27 percent do not conduct any type of background check. Less than one-third use fingerprints, the most reliable form of criminal background check.

How much potential danger do organizations face by not performing background screening on volunteers?

They could face huge costs alone if a volunteer sues, steals, or harms another person while on the premises of the organization. The average negligent hiring lawsuit results in costs upwards of 3.5 million dollars. Aside from the catastrophically damaging finances, the

safety and reputation for nonprofits and their staff members then becomes severely compromised.

Tips:

1. Develop a policy for screening (click here or a sample), including:
 - Who will be responsible for screening.
 - What/how much training is required for screening.
 - How information obtained in the screening process will be maintained and used.
 - How the privacy of volunteers will be maintained.
2. Create a description for each available volunteer position that identifies preferred qualifications and responsibilities and screening requirements.
3. Determine the amount of screening required for each position by considering:
 - Will the volunteer interact with vulnerable persons (i.e., children, elderly persons, handicapped persons)? If yes, is more screening required?
 - Will the volunteer have supervision and/or be working with a large group? Is more screening required if he/she is working under little supervision or by him/herself?
 - Are there any situations that the volunteer may encounter that may increase risks of loss or negligence (e.g., transporting children)? If yes, is more screening required?



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- Are there any situations that the volunteer may encounter that may increase risks of loss or negligence (e.g., transporting children)? If yes, is more screening required?
- Will the volunteer be in a position of trust due to a relationship of trust, dependency, authority or reliance? If so, is more screening required?

5. Require applicants to complete standardized forms outlining their skills and experience, and contact information for at least three references.

6. Interview qualified volunteers prior to making selections. Interview questions should be designed to gain a greater understanding of experience, skills and attitudes.

- Does this candidate have skills, values and a personality that align with the position and the organization?
- Is this person aware of the risks involved with the position? Will this person commit to taking reasonable precautions to control risks?
- Describe the position and organization, as well as orientation, training, supervision and evaluation requirements.

(Adapted from "Volunteer Selection, Screening and Training", IBC and Whose Lending a Hand? A National Survey of Nonprofit Screening Practices From: the National Center for Victims of Crime.)

Types of Background Checks

Criminal History: To determine whether a prospective volunteer or employee has a criminal record, the candidate's name and/or fingerprints are submitted to local, state, or national law enforcement, or to a state or national repository of criminal history record information (either government entities at the state level or private companies that collect and store information nationally).

Sex Offender Registry: All states currently have lists of registered sex offenders, many of which are available online. Organizations can search online sex offender registries or contact state or local law enforcement agencies to learn whether a candidate is a registered sex offender in a given state.

Child Protective Services, Adult Protective Services:

All states have designated entities responsible for the protection of children and vulnerable adults, and these entities (whose official names vary by state) keep records of reports of abuse, investigations, and the outcomes of investigations (i.e., whether the allegation was substantiated by evidence).

Credit History: With verification of a legitimate purpose, organizations can set up an account either directly with a credit bureau or with an intermediary entity (such as ChoicePoint) to submit candidates' names and Social Security numbers for a report of their credit history. This type of check requires the candidate's consent and is typically conducted only when a volunteer will be handling significant sums of money.

Resources

Whose Lending a Hand? A National Survey of Nonprofit Screening Practices

From: the National Center for Victims of Crime

<http://tinyurl.com/69g5bhy>

The National Center for Victims of Crime conducted a telephone survey of 517 nonprofit human service organizations to identify: characteristics of organizations that regularly screen volunteers, the screening methods used, and how information revealed by screening is used in decision making.

Best Practices/Notes