11 Serious Tips for Volunteer Screening and Background Checks



Steve McCurley
Consultant

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Effective screening is arguably the most important risk prevention function in volunteer program management. Getting the right people in the right role can produce volunteer magic. Placing an insufficiently skilled applicant, or worse, an applicant whose intent is to cause harm, in a responsible volunteer role is a recipe for disaster, especially when the volunteer role involves a significant degree of trust or provides access to the personal information of beneficiaries. Here are some reminders and tips to make your screening process more effective:

1. Placing people in positions of trust necessitates close scrutiny of their background and trustworthiness. That means asking probing questions during interviews and reference checks, along with a criminal records check. Looking into the background of applicants can feel intrusive to the prospective volunteer, so having a good explanation of the need for this intrusion is vital. You might say, "As a volunteer you will have access to personal information of our beneficiaries. Safeguarding this information is a priority for us and we carefully screen all those who will have this access. All volunteers go through this same screening process, as do any of our paid staff who have similar access."
2. The explanation of why this screening will be conducted should be followed by disclosure of what and how the screening will be done. This should include:
    - Who do will the checking
    - What records will be accessed
    - What will be looked for during the examination
    - Who will have access to the results of the checking
    - How any results will be safeguarded
3. Permission must be obtained to launch all screening inquiries, and applicants have the right to refuse such permission. Where a prospective volunteer refuses permission to screen, the program has the right to immediately terminate the application process. The signed consent should include a brief general description of what records will be examined and what you will be looking for in them.

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4. Since a possible outcome of the screening will be declining the offered service of the applicant, you can make things easier on both you and the prospective volunteer by setting up this possibility in advance. You might say, "We are very cautious about involving volunteers. We only proceed if we are absolutely sure that both of us will benefit; if we, or you, have any doubts, we would rather not risk wasting your time." While "rejecting" another person who wants to help is never a pleasant feeling, remember that your primary obligation is to the safety and well-being of your beneficiaries. "When in doubt, decline" is a very good rule to follow.
5. Understanding the results of background checks can be quite difficult as they often utilize uncommon abbreviations or include language that is arcane and inconsistent. Guides to each state are usually obtainable from your local police force or from the vendor from whom you purchase background check services. In addition, a quick internet search will often produce a guide for your state.
6. Criminal background checks are likely to produce results that are incomplete or simply incorrect. In fact, the more common the name of the applicant the more likely it is that you will get a search result that is faulty. Each program should have a protocol that allows applicants to review their results and provide any clarification that is necessary.
7. Each volunteer program must also have a protocol that establishes which criminal offenses merit disqualification. Remember that automatic disqualifiers may include things other than criminal history. For example, an inability to effectively communicate would be a disqualifier from the SMP group presentation's role. Conflicts of interest are a common disqualification for many SHIP roles. Strong reservations expressed by references about the trustworthiness or hidden agenda of a candidate would certainly be a serious red flag if not an outright disqualifier.
8. Good screening involves paying attention both to what you see and to what you don't see. Scrutiny of a candidate's application form and in-depth interviews can surface inconsistencies and other red flags, such as missing time periods in the applicant's work history, a reluctance to answer specific questions, and so on.
9. A record of the results of background checks should be kept in a secure and confidential location. Initially this will allow you to more easily explain the decision to reject the applicant if they question that determination. Over time this record will help you determine what additional screening needs to be done if the volunteer changes roles.

10. The most common, and fatal, error committed by programs doing background checks of volunteers is for some staff person to bypass the entire screening procedure because they think they "know the applicant." Every volunteer program needs to appoint a "gatekeeper" – the person who must review the results of the screening process, verify that all paperwork has been collected, and approve the final acceptance of the volunteer.
11. Screening is part of the system of risk management, not the entire system. Remember that criminal records checks are only the first stage in screening volunteers for positions of trust and safeguarding your program against wrongful activity. After a volunteer is placed, the organization continues to have a responsibility to ensure that the right people are in the right roles, demanding ongoing support and supervision for volunteers and intervention when performance does not meet role standards.

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