



Information Sheet

Screening Volunteers

Why Use this Resource?

Screening volunteers for positions or roles within your organisation, is necessary to ensure both volunteers and service recipients are protected. This information sheet discusses some risk management strategies for screening volunteers.

[Links to National Standards for Involving Volunteers - No. 3 Recruitment, Selection & Orientation]



Why Screen Volunteers?

Volunteer screening aims to:

- **create and maintain a safe environment**
- **ensure an appropriate match between volunteers and their roles**

Using a structured screening procedure replaces haphazard, and potentially arbitrary, decisions with a fair and defensible method. Using multiple screens increases your chance of placing volunteers successfully and safely.

Screening is a series of steps. For each role the organisation selects and implements appropriate steps in screening.

- Determine the risk associated with specific volunteer roles within the organisation
- Write clear position descriptions which identifies the screening requirements of each role and which send the message that the organisation is serious about screening.
- Utilise a formal recruitment process which all within the organisation understand and adhere to. Specific waiting periods may be identified for applicants who are grieving a death or recovering from a personal illness
- Use an application form to identify contact information and to seek permission for other screening processes.
- Conduct interviews as an opportunity to find out information about the applicant and to explore any doubts about the applicant's suitability for a particular role.
- Follow up on references - identify the level of trust required in the position sought and ask specific questions about the applicant's suitability. Identify with applicants that those providing references should not be family members.
- Request specific background checks eg: police records, working with children, driver history. These checks are not fail safe or a certain guarantee but indicate the organisation's commitment to the safety of its participants
- Orientation and training sessions offer an opportunity to observe the volunteer in a variety of settings and ensure the volunteer is informed of and understands specific organisational policies, procedures and ways of working. Specific training may be developed according to the identified risk associated with particular roles. Probation periods give the organisation and the volunteer the opportunity to learn more about each other.
- Supervise and evaluate volunteers according to the level of risk identified with a role. Research has found that convicted child abusers were amazed at how readily they were placed. They were even more amazed that they were unsupervised as they carried out their volunteer work.
- Seek follow-up from program participants including through scheduled visits and spot checks for volunteers.



Volunteering Qld

Volunteering has never been so easy

Risk Management Strategies for Volunteer Screening

- Always base screening processes on the potential risk posed by a position. Begin your screening process by considering the potential dangers inherent in the position. For example, a position that will have one-on-one contact with vulnerable service recipients or the general public poses greater risk to these populations than a clerical position with light typing duties and no public contact.
- When a position involves unsupervised contact with vulnerable service recipients, use a more rigorous screening process. The determination of whether a screening process will be considered reasonable will take into account the level of risk to service participants.
- Before screening for a particular position, identify the characteristics that will act as automatic disqualifiers for the position. For example, determine that one or more moving violations during the past five years will disqualify an applicant for the position of van driver.
- Whenever a basic screening process raises red flags about an applicant, you should investigate the issue to determine whether it disqualifies the applicant.
- Do not disqualify applicants based on their beliefs. Conduct, not ideas, is an appropriate basis for exclusion.
- If appropriate, when a disqualifying characteristic is detected in an applicant for a volunteer position, consider the applicant for another position.
- Establish written screening guidelines and use written tools to substantiate your efforts, such as position descriptions, interview guides, hiring checklists, reference check worksheets, and other items as appropriate.
- Don't collect information you can't evaluate. Ask yourself what you will do with the information. Make sure the information you gather is really necessary and appropriate to the duties. Do you need to fingerprint someone who referees a fundraising basketball game?
- Be consistent. If background checks are important enough for some volunteers, they are equally important for all volunteers performing the same tasks. Failing to screen board members, prominent citizens, or others assumed to be suitable invites disaster.
- Determine whether a license is required for each position, and confirm that every applicant has the required license before proceeding with additional steps in the screening process.
- Evaluate the sufficiency of your screening processes using the reasonableness standard. Is the process used to screen applicants for volunteer positions reasonable under the circumstances?

Excerpted from the Energize, Inc. website library <http://www.energizeinc.com/art.html>

Screening as a Deterrent to Volunteers

Some people are afraid that extensive screening will scare away potential volunteers. Fortunately, many successful programs have demonstrated that thorough screening can be done. Most candidates will understand the reason for a thorough process when you explain your organisation's concern that clients be served and protected. Once again, open communication is key.



Volunteering Qld

Information Sheet

Screening Volunteers



When dealing with vulnerable populations screening volunteers before placement is not enough! Build ongoing supervision, training, and evaluation into your program. Help employees, other volunteers, clients, and their guardians to recognise and report suspected abuse.

Excerpted from No Surprises: Harmonizing Risk and Reward in Volunteer Management, 2nd ed, by Charles Tremper and Gwynne Kostin, © 2001

Cautions and Recommendations

- Keep the process respectful – information given to prospective volunteers should help them understand the purpose of screening. Forms should be clear so applicants are clear as to what they are agreeing to.
- Make sure information received relates to the correct individual.
- Understand the legal requirements related to the collection and use of criminal records and information by seeking legal counsel.
- Give applicants an opportunity to challenge the accuracy of criminal and background record checks.
- Use an appropriate release form before conducting record checks.
- Use information obtained in a fair and non-discriminatory way.

Adapted from Guidelines for Screening of Prospective CASA and GAL Volunteers and Employees National CASA Association www.casenet.org/program-management/volunteer-manage/guide-screening-volunteer

Volunteer Selection and Anti-Discrimination

Potential volunteers should not be asked questions at interview about their health or fitness. Questions should be directed only towards their ability to carry out the work required.

If a medical condition or impairment is disclosed during the selection process, the selection committee should take the information into account only if a positive answer can be given to one or more of the following questions:

- Is the person unable to carry out the essential requirements of the job as specified in the selection criteria?
- Is it unreasonable to make special arrangements to accommodate the person's special needs (e.g. seating, restroom facilities, car parking, and work schedules)?
- Would employment of the person as a volunteer increase the risk of injury to that person or to other people?

Selection committees should not draw inferences about an applicant's personal characteristics (e.g. energy levels, ability to withstand stress) on the basis of age or physical features.

No questions should be asked on religious or political conviction or industrial activity.

Volunteer Reference Checks

Do's

- Verify the nature of the relationship between the applicant and the referee.
- Check the length of time they have known each other.
- Let the referee know the types of responsibilities the applicant will have if selected for the position and have them comment specifically on suitability for the role.



Volunteering Qld

Volunteering has never been so easy

Information Sheet

Screening Volunteers



Don'ts

The most common reference-checking mistake is to miss an opportunity to get critical information from the applicant. Try to avoid the mistakes below.

- Asking leading questions. When you are checking references, let the referee provide the information. Instead of "Tom Jones told us that you and he have been friends for 10 years. Is that right?" you might want to ask, "How long have you and Tom Jones known each other?"
- Asking questions that can be answered by a simple yes or no. You need to phrase the questions so that references are required to think about their responses and to answer in their own words.
- Asking questions which are too general. Some information you need is very specific relative to the nature of the position and the risks you have identified.

For examples of specific questions you may ask refer to Staff Screening Tool Kit By John Patterson with Charles Tremper and Pam Rypkema, © 1994, Nonprofit Risk Management Center
<http://www.energizeinc.com/art.html>

Working with Children Check

The work of the Commission for Children and Young People in Queensland is regulated by the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000.

The Act requires people who work with children under 18 in particular categories of businesses, paid or voluntary to be screened - the Working with Children Check.

The Working with Children Check is a detailed national check of a person's criminal history, including any charges, convictions or investigations into allegations of serious child-related sexual offences even if no charges were laid. Disciplinary information held by certain professions is also considered.

A person whose application is approved is issued a positive notice and a blue card. When a person's application is refused they are prohibited from working in the categories of employment or carrying on businesses as defined by the Act.

The Working with Children Check is free for volunteers. Once granted a blue card is valid for 2 years.

Useful Resources

- Information Sheet – The Blue Card
- The Working with Children Kit developed by The Commission for Children and Young People, \$35

Useful Contacts

Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

Ph 07 3245 5145

Freecall 1800 113 611

Email bluecard@ccypcg.qld.gov.au

Website www.bluecard.qld.gov.au

(Photos by Ray Lockett)



Volunteering Qld

Volunteering has never been so easy