



Criminal Background Checks and Non-Profit Organizations

By Pamela Mack

Non-profit organizations invest a great deal of time, energy and money into their reputation in the community. Without community trust and involvement, the organization may cease to exist. Just like any business, employees should be screened for prior criminal records in order to mitigate the risk of negligent hiring and to protect your organization. But, what would happen if trust was lost because of the actions of a volunteer? What if someone with a known criminal history re-offends, while volunteering for your organization?

No one can prevent all bad things from happening, and no one wants to live in a world of fear and risk avoidance. That being said, there are some steps to consider which can provide your organization with a better level of confidence, based on having some important information about your volunteers from the start.

Should I Screen My Volunteers?

Criminal background screening for volunteers is a process similar to screening employees, and is treated as such in the industry. Many organizations screen all of their volunteers. Even if you feel this is not necessary, there are some key volunteers that deserve a closer look.

- Does your volunteer work with children?
- Do they have access to financial reports, funds, or private information?
- Do they hold key positions in your organization where they could

potentially damage your reputation?

- Will the volunteer provide transportation or make deliveries for the organization?

Considering these and other questions can help you to make a decision about whether to screen, and what particular searches to run.

How Should I Screen Volunteers?

Unfortunately, there is no single search that will provide every bit of information about a volunteer, but there are some searches to consider to help make you aware of pertinent information.

National Criminal Database – This database is a compilation of records from many sources in most states, and is a good way to throw a net over the country and see what you catch. The information is by no means comprehensive or necessarily up-to-date and must be confirmed at the county level prior to using the information for hiring decisions. Some sex offender records are also included in the database, although not a comprehensive record of all fifty states.

County Court Search – County Courts are the best source for records and should be included in your search. Searching all the counties they have resided in for the last seven years will give you a much more accurate result. If that is not feasible, adding at least the current county of residence can be helpful.

Sex Offender Registry Search – While the National Criminal Database Search does have some sex offender records, if sex offender registry information is needed, a check of the national registry should accompany a database search.

Motor Vehicle Report – State DMV's can provide a driving record of your volunteer or employee.

For a thorough check, a combination of county court records, a national database search and a sex offender registry check or Motor Vehicle Report when warranted, is the best way to locate records. A background screening provider can help you set up a protocol that meets your needs and budget, and should be able to offer you discounted pricing for your non-profit status.

In short, perform a background screen when necessary to rule out any records that are adversely related to the duties of the volunteer. Screening will help you know more about your volunteer, mitigate risk and protect those who serve you, while keeping your organization and reputation safe.

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