

Volunteer Screening

From No Surprises: Harmonizing Risk and Reward in Volunteer Management

Unless you accept everyone who walks in off the street, you are already screening. Using a structured procedure replaces haphazard, and potentially arbitrary, decisions with a fair and defensible method. Methodical screening doesn't eliminate reliance on your gut feeling; you may subconsciously pick up clues about a candidate's suitability. You can leave room for intuition in your selection process, but use it as a basis for further inquiry.

As the sensitivity of the volunteer assignment increases, the need for multiple and more thorough screening procedures rises. At the low risk end of the spectrum is a volunteer who assists each week in copying and filing newspaper clippings or someone who helps organize groceries for the food bank. At the high risk end is a guardian for an elderly person with Alzheimer's disease or a mentor for a child in a program involving unsupervised overnight visits at the mentor's home.

Using multiple screens increases your chance of finding the best volunteers and rejecting the worst. Layered screening procedures may expose people who aren't telling the truth by revealing inconsistent responses. In addition, the thoroughness of the process may discourage applicants with something to hide.

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 organization's concern that clients be served and protected. Once again, open communication is key.

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

Screening Guidelines

- Use the position description to evaluate the responsibilities of and supervision for the position. This analysis provides the basis for developing appropriate screening procedures.
- Gather all of your data before making a judgment. If something seems fishy to you, ask the applicant for an explanation. Be sensitive to cultural differences and your own assumptions. Remember, the goal is to recruit the best people, even if they aren't just like you.
- Ask the same question in different ways and get information from multiple sources. For example, you can trace an applicant's employment record during an

- interview and then call former employers. Verifiable information, like a driving record, can give you insights that an interview won't provide. Later on you can line up all the answers and see if the dates and locations match.
- Include others in the process. One person may pick up signals that the other misses. Consider peer interviews or group sessions. Caveat: Limit the number of eyes that have access to sensitive or private information. Only those staffers with a legitimate need to know should review criminal and financial records, for example.
 - Be realistic. Be flexible. Weigh the thoroughness of the screening technique against the responsibility of the position. For example, a youth-serving organization may want to sponsor a mentoring program that includes overnight visits. If the group doesn't have the resources to screen each volunteer thoroughly, it may revise the program to prohibit unsupervised contact.
 - Don't collect information you can't evaluate. Ask yourself what you will do with the information. Some organizations set up elaborate interviewing processes or use personal-style tests such as Myers-Briggs and don't know an E-N-F-P (extroverted, intuition, feeling, perceiving) from a J-E-R-K.
 - 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.

Every screening technique has pluses and minuses. For example, criminal records checks are an important element of the screening procedure because they can eliminate known offenders and scare away people who have been convicted of target crimes. Nonetheless, criminal records checks identify relatively few abusers. If a position is sensitive enough to need a criminal records check, use that check in addition to other information you gather.

Don't make the mistake of believing that a program is too valuable to let thorough screening get in the way. Although screening procedures may seem daunting, keep your focus on protecting the people you serve and fulfilling your mission.