



Best Practices For Nonprofit Organizations

WHY VOLUNTEER BACKGROUND SCREENING IS IMPORTANT—AND HOW TO DO IT BETTER

Volunteer workers are often the face of nonprofit and religious organizations, serving as their de facto representatives. And without volunteers, many organizations couldn't achieve their goals and desired outcomes. Yet, while volunteers are greatly appreciated and usually in high demand, nonprofits have an obligation to look closely at their volunteer workers' background histories.

CONTENTS

Introduction	03
Reasons to Screen Your Volunteers	04
Risk Assessment: Understand Who Your Volunteers Are	05
Religious Organizations and Screening	06
Communicating Your Screening Program to Volunteers	07
Benefits of Screening Volunteers	08
Implementing a Better Volunteer Screening Process	09
Treat Your Volunteers with Respect	10

INTRODUCTION

According to the **National Council of Nonprofits**, many charitable organizations run entirely on volunteer manpower. Many organizations recognize that their volunteers are some of their most loyal donors. Moreover, some dedicated volunteers have claimed seats on their favorite nonprofit's board or council. This kind of conflict of interest can impact every process within the nonprofit, especially volunteer-related programs. Some nonprofits worry that implementing a screening program will deter new volunteer sign ups, or offend current volunteers. **Are volunteer background checks really necessary?**

This ebook is designed to help you understand:

- Why nonprofits and religious organizations need to conduct volunteer background checks
- The four different types of volunteers
- How to better communicate your screening process to volunteers
- Benefits of volunteer screening
- How the right screening partner can help you create trust from the start



Reasons To Screen Your Volunteers

Working With Vulnerable Populations

The Privacy Rights Clearinghouse clearly outlines that the only laws requiring volunteer background checks involve situations where the volunteer interacts with vulnerable populations.¹ Plain and simple, if volunteers expect to work with defenseless communities, such as children or the elderly, they must be screened first.

Laws And Legalities

Some nonprofit organizations rely on funding that requires background checks on volunteer staff. In a July 2011 report, the Federal Trade Commission, the governing body that enforces the Fair Credit Reporting Act, issued an opinion that the FCRA covers volunteer background checks. It says, “nonprofit organizations staffed in whole or in part by volunteers” should treat volunteers as employees.² As such, to avoid potential liability lawsuits and alleviate any fears of negligent hiring, many organizations put a recruitment, onboarding, and screening process in place.

Nonprofit Liability

While the Volunteer Protection Act works to protect volunteers from any liability while they do their service work, there is no law or guideline in place that serves to protect an organization from volunteer liabilities, such as violence, negligence, discrimination, or harassment.³ In the absence of volunteer accountability, organizations can use background checks to help mitigate risk and provide a safe environment.

Trust And Safety Considerations

While some nonprofits aren’t required by law to screen volunteers, they still consider it prudent to conduct background checks because, like any other business, they need to keep their patrons’ interests and safety in mind. Organizations should evaluate the responsibilities and risks associated with volunteers’ duties, then identify the most accurate and cost-effective background check for each position. For example, will they be driving an organization-owned vehicle? Will they be handling cash or have access to financial records?



Risk Assessment: Understand Who Your Volunteers Are

Almost a quarter of Americans volunteer at least once a year, according to a 2016 U.S. Department of Labor Report.⁴ To better understand why screening is important, let's take a closer look at why people volunteer, and the types of people who are dedicating their time toward service. Volunteers can generally be looped into one of these four categories:

The “Kind-Hearted” Volunteer

People who volunteer to work with children, people with disabilities, the elderly, or people who take restricted medications, must be screened because the populations they're working with are considered susceptible to abuse or being taken advantage of. As mentioned in the “Reasons to Screen Your Volunteers” section, nonprofit organizations must conduct background checks because they could potentially put vulnerable people at risk by not screening volunteers.

The “Always There” Volunteer

Another type of volunteer is a familiar face. Volunteers who show up regularly become an extension of the nonprofit or religious organization because of their reliability and consistency. Thanks to their dependability, they inadvertently become representatives of the organization. Because their role is vital to the organization's daily operations, it's important to run background checks on “always there” volunteers.

The “Court Ordered” Volunteer

These volunteers have been mandated by a court order to perform community service hours as an alternative sentence to time in prison. A criminal record is certain, but a background check must be performed to better understand their offense and what type of volunteer work they are allowed to perform. For example, certain types of felonies can prohibit a person from working at or near a school.

The “Volunteer Day” Volunteer

These service workers usually volunteer one day a year—perhaps it's the day their workplace holds a service project, or they sign up to help with a one-day puppy adopt-a-thon. In these instances, it's up to the organization to understand who is volunteering at their facilities and events. While these volunteers may not require a full background check, they do need to provide basic information, such as name, address, contact information, and a record of their attendance.





Religious Organizations And Screening

Religious organizations can sometimes carry a heavier burden when it comes to screening volunteers. Often, their volunteers come directly from the congregation itself. Those who are donating to the church might also be dedicating volunteer time to the ministry's causes. Not to mention, these volunteers share a common faith with the greater religious organization. These conflicts of interests present a tricky situation for church leaders and coordinators: Should volunteers at religious organizations be screened, or is our shared faith enough? Hear what Monika, a former manager of volunteer coordinators at a large religious organization, has to say:

EARN TRUST FROM THE BEGINNING

"Volunteers can sometimes pose a challenge to the organization," says Monika. Volunteers are also members of the church, and have volunteered their time for years. So church decision-makers sometimes prefer to rely on shared faith instead of conducting background checks on their member-volunteers.

But what happens if during a volunteer's shift, someone were to be harmed or hurt, whether with intent or by accident? Authorities will need a record of who was present and if their backgrounds were checked. So if there were unscreened felons volunteering, the situation could get sticky in short order. "And if [the volunteer] has made bad choices, or [they] happen to have had a hard life, the public has a hard time separating the two," Monika said.

THE PUBLIC WILL ONLY TRUST AN ORGANIZATION UNTIL THEY START TO BECOME A RISK. IT'S DIFFICULT TO **WIN THAT TRUST BACK**. IN ORDER TO CREATE A SHARED SENSE OF SECURITY AND TRUST IN YOUR VOLUNTEERS, RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION, AND COMMUNITY, IT'S CRITICAL TO IMPLEMENT **A VOLUNTEER SCREENING PROGRAM.**



Communicating Your Screening Program To Volunteers

For a screening process to be effective, organizations must be clear about volunteer expectations and requirements. As a nonprofit or religious organization, your emphasis should be to communicate the “volunteer experience” from start to finish.

This kind of transparency into the volunteer process and its screening requirements creates trust between the volunteers and coordinator, and can even engage and encourage new volunteers.

Following are several suggested tactics to clearly communicate the volunteer experience to both prospective and veteran volunteers:

Flyers: Informational sheets should outline the basics of your volunteer program; including what volunteers will be doing, for how long, where they will be doing their work, and what to expect during the screening process.

Emails: Many nonprofit and religious organizations have a reliable email database built up. Take advantage of this data by creating an informative email campaign targeting your members and volunteers.

Website content: Now that the older generations who do volunteer work are beginning to take a more active digital role, it's become easier to offer information about the volunteer onboarding process and background checks on your website.

Blogs and news articles: Nonprofits can cast a wider net for their volunteer base by posting a short blog or submitting a news article to the local paper. Be sure to include relevant information about your screening requirements and what volunteers can expect once they're approved for work.

Clearly communicating your volunteer onboarding process, along with the expectations of the background check, should be part of your first conversation with would-be volunteers. For example, Michigan State University's volunteer webpage points out that their “volunteer screening and training processes are designed to keep clients safe and ensure accepted volunteers are placed in positions that best fit their skills and expectations.”⁵

The [Volunteers of America website](#) is a wonderful example of how to properly explain the volunteer program. This website clearly outlines its policies and procedures about what volunteers want and need to know about the volunteer experience, front and center.

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Implementing A Screening Process Where None Previously Existed

Jody, a volunteer coordinator with the Indiana State Parks and Recreation Department, shares her experience. Several years ago, her office implemented a new volunteer onboarding process. The new process included email communications for the first time, and required volunteers to have an email address to participate. At first, acceptance of the new process was a challenge.

While email is now the main form of communication, it was initially very difficult to request veteran volunteers, who often were in their 70s and 80s, to create an email account for the sole purpose of volunteering. Many didn't own a computer, according to Jody, "these are older folks, they'll go to a local library to use a computer."

Following the new onboarding process at the Parks Department, a few veteran volunteers retired from service work because they didn't want to comply with the requirements. However, now the Parks Department processes about 200-300 background checks a year for new volunteers, and Jody can rest easy that her volunteers know what to expect from the screening process and are screened properly.





Benefits Of Screening Volunteers

Like an employer, nonprofit companies benefit from accurate volunteer background checks, including reduced risk of asset losses, negative publicity, and risk management, and they are compliant with insurance and legal requirements. Plus, nonprofit organizations can offer added trust and transparency into their processes.

THE BENEFITS OF SCREENING ARE

- ✓ People's skills and experience are better matched to the needs and opportunities of organizations.
- ✓ The quality and safety of volunteer programs in communities are improved.
- ✓ The risks and liability for people and organizations are reduced.

EFFECTIVE VOLUNTEER SCREENING HELPS ORGANIZATIONS IMPROVE THE SAFETY AND QUALITY OF PROGRAMS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES, WHILE REDUCING RISKS AND LIABILITY

Implementing A Better Volunteer Screening Process

Once you've assessed who your volunteers are and the risks they pose, and determined how to communicate your volunteer program process to them, you're ready to implement a background screening program or improve your current one.

Partner with a background check provider that offers the following capabilities:

Fast Turnaround Times

Your volunteers are ready to get to work. The faster you can get your screens completed, the faster they can get started doing service work for your organization.

Available Support

Find the resources and support framework you need to answer volunteer questions and put volunteers at ease.

Expert Advice And Flexible Packages

Avoid overscreening, long processing wait times, and overpaying with the right level of background check for your nonprofit.

Bulk Ordering

Request screens for groups of volunteers to quickly kick off the screening process.

Optimized For Mobile

Going mobile means that volunteers can use any device to enter their personal information, digitally sign consent forms, and view results.

Option For Candidates To Pay

If needed, pass the cost of a background check to your volunteers.

Instant Notifications

Let volunteers know if more information is needed and when their results are ready.

Enable Seamless Volunteer Communications

Email copy is customizable so you can personalize communications and explain why a background check is necessary. Even better, volunteers automatically receive their own results through a secure, online account.

Ability To Add Context

Enable volunteers who have criminal records to add context around past infractions or criminal records, giving you a clearer picture of what happened and what steps have been taken since the offense, and enabling you to make an informed, fair decision about their volunteer status.

Online Disputes

If volunteers spot inaccuracies, they can easily file a dispute online.

TREAT YOUR VOLUNTEERS WITH RESPECT

Nonprofit and religious organizations welcome, encourage, and often depend on the help and dedication of their volunteers. Moreover, volunteer programs are a great opportunity for organizations to build relationships with their community.

No matter which type of volunteer signs up to work with your nonprofit, treat them with respect and create trust from the start by clearly explaining your program's goals and screening requirements. Using a background check provider that helps you deliver a transparent process through open communication and an easy-to-use workflow will allow you and your volunteers to begin a successful and productive relationship.

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