

To Screen or Not to Screen?

Four Reasons You May Not be Screening Your Volunteers...
And Why You Need to Start

A VERIFIED VOLUNTEERS WHITE PAPER



Introduction

You work in the nonprofit world because you genuinely want to make a difference.

But nonprofit work can be challenging and even thankless. It's encouraging when volunteers are willing to spend *their free time* helping your organization work toward a greater good – so encouraging that it can be hard to imagine that some of these individuals approach you with less-than-noble intentions. Unfortunately, dishonest volunteers – like long hours and strained budgets – are not new to nonprofits. Luckily, there is a way to identify many of these individuals before they are brought on board: volunteer background screening.

Screening volunteers is sometimes viewed by service organizations as costly, time-consuming and inconvenient. For these reasons, some volunteer managers employed with nonprofit organizations choose not to screen their volunteers.

Where do you stand when it comes to screening your volunteers? Do you also believe that screening is an unnecessary step in the volunteer onboarding process? How much damage can one volunteer do, right?

More than you think. No nonprofit or volunteer program is exempt from the risks posed by untrustworthy volunteers; organizations of all shapes and sizes have been affected. That's why more and more of them are screening their volunteers. Let's take a quick look at the numbers.

How Many Organizations Screen Volunteers?

The National Center for Victims of Crime conducted a survey to find out what types of organizations screen volunteers, how they go about screening and what information comes out of this process.¹

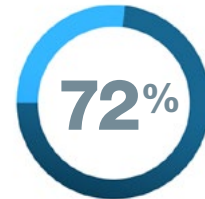
517 Human service organizations were contacted:

86%

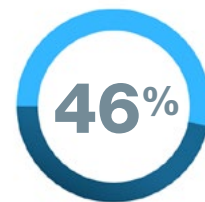
Screen volunteers in some way.

12%

ONLY 12%
of survey participants
don't screen their
volunteers at all.



Of volunteers are screened in local databases, but far fewer are checked against other county and state databases, sex offender registries, adult and child protective service databases, and fingerprint-based criminal databases. **So the question remains, can the results of these background screens be trusted?**



Of survey participants have encountered "inappropriate" candidates.

Volunteer Screening is Essential

Why is volunteer screening necessary for your organization...and for all nonprofits using volunteers? Unfortunately, people with criminal records may be more likely to view nonprofits as vulnerable, unsophisticated organizations that they can get involved with – and take advantage of. There is too much at stake to let one of these individuals begin work with your organization. Consider the safety of your co-workers and vulnerable participants. What about the protection of your assets? Have you thought about what a volunteer scandal could do to your reputation, and how it could discourage potential volunteers and donors?

Still, many nonprofit organizations have strong (and negative) opinions on volunteer screening. Let's look at the four most common objections to adopting the practice.

4 Reasons You Might Object to Volunteer Screening – And Why You Should Reconsider

1. “SCREENING IS EXPENSIVE.”

Some organizations think screening is too expensive. And there’s historical evidence to back up this feeling. In 2000, each background check run by the United Way cost \$100. Today, thanks to advancements in technology, that cost is much lower – typically under \$35, depending on the thoroughness of the check and the size of your organization’s screening program. Still, volunteer background screening can be a major line item for an organization that already has to stretch inadequate funding across many programs.

One approach taken by some organizations is to ask volunteers to optionally contribute to the cost of their background checks. You might think that asking these individuals to actually pay to work for you, for free, would send them running. But you’d be surprised how many volunteers will elect to pay for all or part of their background checks when given the option.

Verified Volunteers is witness to this emerging trend. In the first quarter of 2014, nearly 75% of organizations using the Verified Volunteers volunteer screening platform gave their volunteers the option to split the cost of their background checks with them. Almost a quarter of those volunteers obliged, paying for all or part of their check. In fact, the volunteers covered, on average, 91% of the cost of their checks.

Screening can also be looked at as a time and cost *savings*. How? Data suggests that screened volunteers are more committed to the organizations they serve, meaning they show up more often. This translates into reduced recruiting costs, both in terms of time and dollars.

Here’s another point you might consider. If you don’t conduct regular background checks before onboarding volunteers, you are opening your organization up to potential financial losses that can come as a consequence of inviting unchecked volunteers to work with you. Proper screening takes time and money, but it will ultimately save you money in the long run. In fact, savings can add up quickly and significantly.

TAKEAWAY:

- + Giving volunteers the option to pay for at least part of their check can add up to major savings. You don’t need to be forceful or demanding; just include the option during the background check order process.
- + When calculating the costs of conducting background checks, be sure to also consider ways you may recoup these expenses. For starters, have you thought about the impact this extra measure of protection may have on your insurance premiums? When talking with insurance brokers, be sure to mention how you use background checks as part of your risk management plan and ask if this will reduce your insurance rates.²

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2. “SCREENING IS FOR OTHER ORGANIZATIONS – NOT US.”

“My volunteers don’t work with vulnerable populations. I don’t need to screen.”

“I always watch my volunteers. I never leave them alone.”

These are two common misconceptions. Luckily, many organizations are changing their tune when it comes to which of their volunteers they are screening.

Verified Volunteers conducted a survey of 400 organizations across the United States and some interesting trends were revealed. The biggest of all was perhaps the fact that screening – for all volunteers – is on the rise. In 2011, 30% of all volunteers were being screened with a criminal background check. By 2014, this number had jumped to 40%.

The biggest driver of this increase was organizations screening not just volunteers serving vulnerable populations, but everyone – whether episodic volunteers, office workers, or those holding any other “non-threatening” role.

TAKEAWAY:

+ Winging it and hoping for the best is not enough. Require background checks for all volunteers working with your organization – not just those working with vulnerable populations. Bad things can happen regardless of who your organization serves and whether or not you vigilantly “watch” your volunteers.

1 IN 10 VOLUNTEER
background checks
come back with a
previously undisclosed
criminal history



Just because volunteers don’t interact with participants doesn’t mean they pose less risk to your organization.

Every year nonprofit fraud and embezzlement occurs on both large and small scales. The Washington Post reported that, between 2008 and 2012, more than 1,000 nonprofit organizations alerted the federal government that assets in amounts greater than \$250,000 had been taken from their accounts through theft, embezzlement or unauthorized transfers.³ On a smaller scale, in Toledo, Ohio, an unpaid volunteer stole over \$90,000 from a charter school after he was given access to its funds.⁴

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3. “SCREENING TAKES TOO LONG”

“I need to get my volunteers on board. I can’t wait weeks to screen them!” Some volunteer managers think the screening process is too lengthy. But a little time is a small price to pay when it comes to participant safety.

In the National Center for Victims of Crime survey, one in four survey participants say that the background check process takes too long. This complaint is understandable; waiting for a background check report takes time away from working toward the mission of the organization.

The way to get around a lengthy screening process is to find a professional background screening service. By working with an established screening company, the process is streamlined in a way that allows organizations to onboard volunteers faster than ever before. For instance, the Verified Volunteers platform was developed exclusively for volunteer organizations to conduct and manage screenings. With the platform, background checks take hours or days – not weeks or months.

However, always weigh quality against time savings. Do not accept a check that comes back instantly or within minutes. If it does, your report likely has missing, incomplete, and outdated information. It is not a quality, reliable report. Instead of relying on stale databases, you want the core of your screening to be focused on county courthouse searches. That’s where the most complete, recent, and trustworthy data can be found. This takes just a little bit longer, but goes a long way towards finding criminal records (and untrustworthy individuals) that nationwide databases often miss.

TAKEAWAY:

- + Do your research. The background check process does not have to take weeks. Find a company that can get you complete, accurate results quickly.

Word of caution: Remember to be wary of screening companies that promise instant or lightning fast results.

SOME SCREENING VENDORS GET YOU INFORMATION IN A JIFFY.

It can be a matter of hours versus weeks.

3-7 WEEKS

Average time for an FBI background check.

UNDER 2 DAYS

Average time for a Verified Volunteers background check.

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4. “SCREENING REPELS VOLUNTEERS.”

“No volunteer wants to undergo a background check.” This is a major concern for some volunteer managers. You might feel uncomfortable asking a volunteer to submit to a background check. After all, you don’t want to drive them away. You need all the help you can get.

While there may be pushback from a few people, many volunteers understand the importance of complying with background check policies. They are familiar with the screening process thanks to the pre-employment screens they have undergone. And background checks are becoming the norm when it comes to volunteering as well (as noted earlier, volunteer screening is on the rise all across the country). More than 62 million people volunteer annually in the United States.⁵ Tens of millions of these individuals are screened annually and those who truly want to contribute will not be scared off by this requirement.

In the end, a good screening process shows that you care about your program and the quality of individuals who help you. Volunteers with good intentions should not have any trouble agreeing to such a check. Those who do are probably the wrong fit for your organization anyway.

TAKEAWAY:

- + Understand that high-quality volunteers – those who truly want to help and will prove to be the greatest assets to your organization – will not take issue with a background check requirement. Institute the policy.

Conclusion

Background checks do require time and money. But today, volunteer background checks can be completed faster than ever before – and for a fraction of the cost. With affordable tools at your fingertips, there is no reason not to screen. Within several hours or a couple of days, you can receive background checks for potential volunteers and minimize the risk of onboarding those with harmful intentions.

If your job seems challenging now, imagine what it would be like with the added complications of lawsuits and funding crises. Don't let the four common objections to volunteer background screenings get the best of you.

About Verified Volunteers

Verified Volunteers helps nonprofit organizations gain confidence in the volunteers working with those they serve by delivering thorough, compliant background checks. By enabling volunteers to order, manage and share their background checks via a secure online platform, we create a community of vetted volunteers and help nonprofit organizations save time and money. Our extensive expertise in screening and compliance best practices help clients recruit the best volunteers in order to maintain a safe environment and positive reputation. Verified Volunteers is backed by Sterling Talent Solutions, one of the world's largest background screening companies, and partnered with Points of Light, the world's largest organization dedicated to volunteer service. Visit www.verifiedvolunteers.com.

References

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