**BEST PRACTICES FOR VOLUNTEER SCREENING**

The following best practices piece is designed to help agencies better understand volunteer background screening issues and processes. This document is intended for guidance only. Ultimately, each organization must decide how to manage risk, liability, and compliance.

WHY DO ORGANIZATIONS SCREEN?

According to a 2018 survey conducted by Sterling (formerly Verified) Volunteers, organizations screen volunteers for many reasons. The top reasons (in descending order) are to:

* Protect constituents and vulnerable populations
* Provide a safe and secure environment
* Protect the organization’s reputation
* Improve compliance/required by law
* Improve volunteer quality
* Increase volunteer retention

HOW DO ORGANIZATIONS SCREEN?

According to the Sterling survey, most organizations use an external third-party service to conduct background checks while fewer go directly to a government source and even less perform the checks in-house. The following are the most popular background checks with insights into the information they can provide to a volunteer management team:

* Criminal Checks: Criminal background checks are the anchor to most background screening programs. A Social Security Number Trace is the foundation for background check screening. From this search, you can see county, state and nationwide court records and criminal databases.
* Sex Offender Registry: The Dru Sjodin Department of Justice National Sex Offender Public Website Registry (NSPOW) includes real-time listings of registered sex offenders in 50 states and the Washington DC at <https://www.nsopw.gov/>. The Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services offers a searchable Maryland sex offenders registry at <http://www.socem.info/>.
* ID Verification: ID verification gives organizations an added layer of security, protecting against the possibility that a volunteer candidate has submitted a false social security number or government-issued identification for their background check. Today, advanced photo technologies can help verify that an ID used in a screening process is a legitimate government-issued ID.
* Motor Vehicle Checks: Motor Vehicle Record checks are a key part of any background check for volunteers who will drive an organization’s vehicle, operate machinery, or drive his/her own car to transport clients. These records highlight driving history over the past three to seven years and are available in all 50 U.S. states, as well as Washington D.C. (An organization may also want to check a volunteer’s car insurance status.)
* Employment and Education Verification: Employment verification services contact the past employer’s human resources and payroll departments to make sure that the candidate’s information is correct. Education verifications confirm a volunteer’s educational history including diplomas/degrees earned, dates attended, and area of study. These checks are conducted to see if volunteers are embellishing their education, job titles, responsibility, payroll and start and end dates on their application or resume.
* Drug Tests: Volunteer substance abuse can have productivity and financial impact on an organization. Volunteer managers rely on drug screening to eliminate illicit drug users from the group of potential volunteer candidates as well as deter current volunteers from using drugs on the job.
* Social Media Checks: Social media screening can be very valuable to volunteer managers during the onboarding process, as it humanizes the candidate. On the other hand, social media profiles can reveal both positive and negative information in what is a very public domain. Social media searches should be carried out as late in the recruitment process as reasonably practical to avoid any biases.
* Credit/Financial Checks: Credit or financial checks will show a comprehensive credit history and provide public record information, plus other items that are not typically included on volunteer applications. Credit checks can provide organizations with insight into a volunteer’s sense of financial responsibility and stability. Credit checks are a useful tool for limiting the potential liability of fraud, theft and various white-collar crimes.

While certain organizations conduct comprehensive screenings and others pick and choose checks, some often-smaller nonprofits ask for references or are comfortable in engaging volunteer resources referred by other volunteers.

WHICH VOLUNTEERS DO ORGANIZATIONS SCREEN?

The answer often depends on the position and/or volunteer frequency. Volunteers who work with vulnerable populations (the elderly, children, disabled individuals, hospital/clinic patients, the homeless, those who are economically disadvantaged, etc.) should be screened. Most organizations do not screen short-term, one-time and infrequent volunteers.

**Sample Scenarios:**

* Volunteers are engaged to transport people for any purpose: Background checks, proof of adequate vehicle insurance, and often a signed volunteer agreement that has been reviewed and approved by lawyers are considered necessary.
* Volunteers are engaged for food delivery only: Background checks are usually not deemed necessary. Some organizations ask for references or accept referrals while others check the volunteer’s driving record and car insurance status. Prospective volunteers may be asked to complete a volunteer agreement.
* Volunteers are engaged for food delivery AND handle any form of payment including cash, credit card, debit card, or SNAP ID: Agencies that task volunteers with handling payment universally require background checks.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD ORGANIZATIONS RESCREEN VOLUNTEERS?

Volunteers in leadership roles and volunteers working with vulnerable populations should be rescreened annually. The checks organizations use when they rescreen volunteers vary. Some run the full background check search again, while others only run criminal record or sex offender checks. It is important to tell the volunteer if he or she is being rescreened.

WHAT EXTERNAL THIRD-PARTY SERVICES DO ORGANIZATIONS USE FOR SCREENING?

Many services are available online for organizations to use in screening applicants, but the two background screening companies cited below are used by several Montgomery County organizations that have successfully relied on these companies’ services over time. Both companies offer competitive pricing.

* Coeus Global Services, an online resource that does not require fingerprinting: <https://www.coeusglobal.com/background_screening_services>
* Sterling (formerly Verified) Volunteers. Its website offers a detailed menu of different background checks that can be performed at either a cost of $19 each screening (such as Social Security Number trace and MVA Motor Vehicle Report) or $39 each screening (such as National Criminal History Search and Terrorist Watch List). Sterling Volunteers partners with many national organizations, such as CASA, Lions International, and Catholic Charities. <https://www.sterlingvolunteers.com/packages-and-pricing/>

WHO PAYS FOR SCREENING?

This decision is up to the organization:

* Organizations can decide to cover the entire cost of the screening.
* Organizations can ask the volunteer to pay the full cost.
* Organizations can split the cost with the volunteer.
* Or organizations can simply give the volunteer the option to contribute to the cost of his/her screening.

WHAT OTHER RISK MANAGEMENT AND COMPLIANCE ISSUES SHOULD ORGANIZATIONS CONSIDER?

For in-depth looks at the many factors such as policies, privacy, insurance, and safely related to risk and liability when using volunteers, consult articles on the Nonprofit Risk Management Center (NMRC) website at <https://nonprofitrisk.org/resources/articles/> (Select “Volunteer Risk Management” and “Volunteers” filters).

To learn more about what organizations need to know about screening volunteers including applicable laws, the importance of developing and sharing screening polices, and privacy considerations, read Privacy Rights Clearing House information on volunteer back ground checks at <https://privacyrights.org/consumer-guides/volunteer-background-checks-giving-back-without-giving-privacy>