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BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR SCREENING VOLUNTEERS

finding the right match



Canada 

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Paper Version

Cat. No.: PS4-57/2008

ISBN: 978-0-662-05486-3

PDF Version

Cat. No.: PS4-57/2008E-PDF

ISBN: 978-0-662-47932-1

Printed in Canada

This publication was developed in cooperation with Volunteer Canada.

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INTRODUCTION

Volunteers¹ are the foundation of many small to medium non-profit organizations. Volunteers help these organizations achieve their mission and objectives. However, a key challenge for any organization is to select volunteers who are competent and contribute to the delivery of service in a safe environment.

[The Government of Canada recognizes the importance of volunteers and the valuable contributions of non-profit organizations to Canadian society and our way of life.]

The Government of Canada recognizes the importance of volunteers and the valuable contributions of non-profit organizations to Canadian society and our way of life. The Government also recognizes its obligation to protect citizens, particularly those who are more vulnerable.

For this reason, the Government is working with non-profit organizations to help ensure that their employees and volunteers who deal with vulnerable persons have been properly screened.

This booklet outlines the essential steps for screening persons applying to work as volunteers. Organizations should consult the resources at the end of this booklet for more detailed information on how to conduct volunteer screening.

¹ “Volunteer” is defined as “an individual who provides a service or activity – someone who is not coerced or compelled to do this activity; who does this activity in service to an individual or an organization, or assists the community-at-large; who does not receive a salary or wage for this service or activity.”

WHAT IS SCREENING?

Screening is a process performed by an organization to ensure that the right match is made between the work to be done and the person who will do it. Screening serves to create and maintain a safe work environment. It is an ongoing process designed to identify any person— whether paid or unpaid, volunteer or staff – who may potentially cause harm to children, youth or other vulnerable persons.

Educating participants², staff and volunteers about potential abuse is very important. However, it is not enough! As soon as any organization opens for business – whether run by staff or volunteers – it has a responsibility to appropriately screen any person who will have access to vulnerable persons.

Screening requirements and procedures differ for each non-profit organization according to the level of risk to which participants are exposed. Clearly, the requirements to screen volunteers who would be unsupervised while working with children or other vulnerable persons are greater than for volunteers who would work with the same type of participants in a supervised setting.

Although it is recognized that organizations must manage scarce resources, the selection of the level of screening that is conducted must be exercised with caution. All non-profit organizations should develop a screening approach that is consistent with its duty of care³. Organizations will be held accountable for the harm caused to participants resulting from their failure to exercise their duty of care.

The application of good screening policies will ensure that organizations meet their obligation to take reasonable steps to protect those in their care.

THE SCREENING PROCESS

Screening generally involves 10 steps. It begins long before anyone is interviewed for a position and ends when the volunteer leaves the organization.

² “Participant” means a person who receives services from non-profit organizations.

³ “Duty of care” is defined as “the obligation to exercise a level of care towards an individual, as is reasonable in all the circumstances, to avoid injury to that individual or his/her property. Duty of care is based upon the relationship of the parties, the negligent act or omission and the reasonable foreseeability of loss to that individual. A negligent act is an unintentional but careless act, which results in loss. Only a negligent act will be regarded as having breached a duty of care.”

STEP 1 RISK MANAGEMENT

“Risk management” means asking, “What could go wrong and what do we do to avoid it?”

Risk management involves identifying the risk of loss or injury to a participant during the delivery of services. It is important to think about the vulnerability of the participant to whom the services are delivered. Accept the fact that participants can be harmed while receiving services from your organization.

Once the risk has been identified, reasonable measures must be taken to prevent, minimize or eliminate that risk.

Screening of volunteers is one such reasonable measure.

STEP 2 USING YOUR ORGANIZATION’S CHART AND POSITION DESCRIPTIONS TO IDENTIFY AND MANAGE RISK

Organizational chart

A preliminary step in the development of screening policy consists of identifying the level of risk for positions within your organization.

Group the positions in your organization according to the level of risk to which participants can be exposed.

- » Low risk: minimal or no contact with vulnerable persons.
- » Medium risk: supervised contact with vulnerable persons.
- » High risk: unsupervised contact with vulnerable persons.

Each position should set out specific conditions and responsibilities of staff and volunteers, including the type of participant with whom the volunteer occupying the position will be working.

Position descriptions

It is imperative to describe positions within your organization in relation to the risks inherent to vulnerable persons. Position descriptions do not have to be lengthy but they must set guidelines and behavioural standards. They clarify the roles and responsibilities of the organization's staff and volunteers.

The following pieces of information can be included in a position description:

- » Title
- » Participant group (children, seniors, etc.)
- » Goals
- » Activities and tasks
- » Outline of responsibilities
- » Time commitment expected
- » Boundaries and limitations
- » Skills, experience and qualifications required
- » Personal traits and qualities needed and/or desired
- » Orientation and training available
- » Support, supervision and evaluation provided
- » Mandatory activities (e.g. training, monthly meetings, travel)
- » Working conditions (e.g. non-smoking environment)
- » Benefits to the volunteer

Screening measures

Set the screening standard based on the risk factor. For example, with low-risk positions, you may set as a minimum screening standard that volunteers should complete an application form, that the information contained therein is verified, and that supervisors regularly meet with volunteers to provide feedback on their work.

Actively work to reduce risk in specific positions. For example, you could design positions that require volunteers to work in pairs with vulnerable persons or introduce an initial mentor phase where an experienced person works with new volunteers.

If your volunteers are active in more than one position, make sure they are screened for the position where the level of risk to vulnerable persons is the highest. If volunteers change positions, make sure the extent of the screening used for the previous position is appropriate for the new one.

STEP 3 RECRUITMENT PROCESS

Recruitment of volunteers is usually done less formally than the recruitment of employees. In fact, volunteer recruitment is often haphazard as the management of organizations will encourage friends and neighbours to help out with the organization's activities. These personal ties between volunteers and the organization's management complicate the screening process.

[...volunteer recruitment is often haphazard as the management of organizations will encourage friends and neighbours to help out with the organization's activities.]

Be careful of the recruitment process you select.

It is recommended that you resort to a more formal recruitment process in which you post notices or mail requests for volunteers accompanied by position descriptions.

Avoid recruitment notices like, "Help! We're desperate! Come and volunteer!" This sense of urgency does not always attract the type of volunteer the organization wants or needs.

Instead, the recruitment notice should communicate that your organization carefully selects its volunteers. For example, your recruitment notice could read "We're seeking mature and reliable volunteers with relevant experience to join with us in carrying out our mandate."

Be careful about how you recruit, especially for positions of trust with vulnerable participants.

Ensure that your recruiting materials clearly outline that the organization takes its responsibilities in respect of participants seriously and screens all applicants thoroughly. Do not leave people with the impression that everyone who applies will be accepted.

Be very clear that your organization is extremely careful about selecting volunteers, and do not apologize for that fact.

Make sure that your promotional materials, including your position descriptions, are kept accurate and up-to-date.

If you are recruiting through your local volunteer centre, ensure that its staff there is kept up-to-date about changes in position descriptions and of any special considerations that would affect the referral of volunteers. When someone indicates interest in a position, send information to him or her before you commit to an interview. Ensure that the documents include all of the information available about the position in question, and about the organization's screening measures.

It is only fair that there are no surprises, and that potential applicants are given an opportunity to screen themselves out at this point. It also saves time that might have been wasted interviewing someone who was not aware of the screening measures and who refuses to participate in them.

1. It is important to have a formal recruitment process.
2. The organization should be open about its process, including the screening, and make it clear that not everyone is accepted for the position for which they apply.
3. Recruitment materials should indicate that your organization thoroughly screens applicants.

The screening process should be based on the assessment of the risk to which the participants are exposed.

Consider the following steps:

- » Look at each position individually.
- » Examine the position description and determine the nature and degree of risk to which participants are exposed through the delivery of services by volunteers in the position.

Review the screening process for the position.

The intrusiveness of the screening, which can include police records checks⁴ (PRC) are proportional to the degree of risk to which the participant is exposed during the delivery of service by a volunteer in the position. There is no magic to selecting a screening process.

To determine which process is appropriate, ask yourself these two basic questions:

1. Given all that you know about the position, including its risks and the vulnerability of the participant(s), what do you need to know about the applicants in order to decide whether to accept or reject their applications?

⁴ A "police records check" (PRC) includes a Criminal Records Check or Verification (a fingerprint based screening service provided by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police), as well as a search of the records held in the information database of a local police agency.

Do you need to know about:

- » professional qualifications?
- » attitudes towards participants?
- » ability to develop bonds with vulnerable participants?
- » criminal history?
- » motivation for volunteering?

2. Which screening process will provide this kind of information?

STEP 4 APPLICATION FORM

An application form is the first screening tool that potential volunteers and staff will encounter.

It collects basic information – name, address, experience – while giving the organization permission to do reference checks and police records checks (if necessary). The reasons for asking for references and the conditions for a police records check should be noted on this form.

As with the use of a position description, asking volunteers to complete an application form signals the seriousness of your organization’s commitment to screening and provides a paper trail that will protect both the volunteer and the organization.

Organizations should check with the Human Rights Commission or Council in their respective province or territory for a list of the types of information that may be sought as part of the selection process.

[The interview provides not only an opportunity to talk to the potential volunteer about their background, talents, skills, interests and availability...]

1. Ensure your application form only asks for information related to the requirements of the position.
2. Questions on matters such as the candidate’s race, national origin, colour, religion or sex are prohibited under federal and provincial human rights legislation.

STEP 5 INTERVIEWS

Interviews are an extremely important step in the screening process.

The interview provides not only an opportunity to talk to the potential volunteer about their background, talents, skills, interests and availability, but also to explore any doubts the organization may have about the suitability of the candidate for the position.

An interview also serves to communicate your organizational expectations. In other words, an interview will help determine if the applicant is “the right fit” for the job.

When planning an interview with a potential volunteer, you may want to consider the following:

- » have at least two people conduct the interview;
- » explain the interview process to the applicant;
- » establish a comfortable environment for the applicant;
- » describe the position specifically, using the position description;
- » describe the screening procedures of your organization;
- » document the applicant’s responses to the questions and keep them on file;
- » look for attitudes towards children, vulnerable adults or general values that do not fit with those of your organization; and
- » ask all applicants the same basic questions for consistency.

Past behaviour is the best indicator of future performance.

The selection of appropriate questions is very important in volunteer screening. Also, remember that information sought during interviews is subject to the same provincial and federal human rights legislation mentioned in Step 4 – Application Form.

Interview questions should encourage responses that allow you to judge:

- » relevant work-related experiences;
- » relevant formal and informal education;
- » eagerness to work;
- » ability to work with others;
- » integrity;
- » supervision preferences;
- » initiative and judgement; and
- » reliability.

Location of interview.

If a volunteer and participant will spend time in a volunteer's home, an in-home interview is entirely appropriate, particularly where it is necessary to determine if the home is a safe and appropriate place for the participant to be taken.

Warning signs during the interview.

Be wary of monosyllabic or many yes/no responses instead of complete answers to the questions.

Note any inconsistent answers to differently formulated questions on the same issue. Evasion, general and roundabout answers rather than specific responses should raise flags.

1. To select the best candidate, the selection process must be completely objective and based on the requirements of the position.
2. Interviews are an important element of the selection process.

STEP 6 REFERENCE CHECKS

A reference check may be the most effective screening step during the selection process.

References will confirm the background and skills of the applicant and will provide an outside opinion on the suitability of the person for the position. Always ask for references. Do not assume that applicants will only give the names of people who will speak well of them. People often expect that references will not be contacted.

Getting the most out of a reference check:

- » Describe the position clearly to the person giving the reference. Ask about the applicant's suitability to the tasks and responsibilities of the position.
- » Define the vulnerability of the participants with whom the volunteer occupying the position will work, (e.g. "Joe will be working closely with children and will be alone with them...would you be comfortable with Joe having this kind of working relationship with children?"). Do not ask leading questions (e.g. "We really think Joe will make a great mentor, don't you?").
- » Leave space in the call for open comment (e.g. "Could you comment on Joe and how you think he would fit in this job?").
- » Do more than one reference check. If the candidate has given names of people who might not be objective (e.g. family members), ask if it is okay to contact previous or current employers.
- » Moreover, ask for references in relation to a particular position that the applicant has occupied in the past (e.g. references for his or her work for a number of organizations as a caregiver working with seniors).
- » Whenever possible, get the name of someone who is familiar with the applicant's work with specific participant groups.

1. A reference check is one of the most important elements of the screening and selection processes.
2. To get the most out of your reference check, prepare a list of questions or a sample script beforehand.
3. Be aware of the dos and don'ts of reference checks.

STEP 7

POLICE RECORDS CHECKS (PRC)

Police records checks are probably the most misunderstood element of screening.

Too many people believe that having a PRC conducted means that the person has been screened. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is not only important to know if someone has been convicted of a crime, but the nature of that crime is equally important. A conviction for sexual assault can be more relevant for a position involving work with children than a conviction for fraud.

What information do the police see when they enter a volunteer's name in their database?

Contrary to popular opinion, not all police forces conduct their criminal record checks in the same manner. Some police rely on their own records. Other forces rely on their records, but also request a criminal record search through the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC), while others only request the latter.

Prior to requesting a PRC, your organization should decide what type of information is required from the police.

It is important that the request contains sufficient information about the position description in your organization for which the PRC is conducted. This allows police to tailor the check to better meet the needs of your organization.

For example, if the volunteer will be responsible for driving participants to medical or dental appointments, police may choose to verify their own records for convictions under the provincial highway traffic legislation, as these convictions are not recorded in CPIC but constitute information relevant to the position.

Limitations to PRCs.

Unfortunately, many abusers and sex offenders have never been convicted of a crime. Furthermore, despite CPIC and internal police records, there are often gaps.

For example, a recent conviction may not yet be registered. A name-based search, as opposed to a finger-print based search, will not likely yield any record of convictions where the applicant uses an alias.

Although a person may have received a pardon, the *Criminal Records Act* authorizes the federal Minister of Public Safety to unseal the record for the purposes of screening persons seeking to work with vulnerable persons.

The record of conviction may not be available because the individual was convicted as a youth under the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*.

Despite the built-in limitations of PRCs, they do serve a purpose, particularly in those cases where the organization is committed to a full and complete screening process (e.g. high-risk positions). The PRC will also signal that the organization is concerned about the safety of its participants.

1. PRCs are only one element of the multi-step screening process.
2. Be aware of the limitations of PRCs.
3. PRCs are an important screening tool, particularly for high-risk positions.
4. Organizations should consult with their local police force when developing their screening policy.

STEP 8 ORIENTATION AND TRAINING

Screening continues throughout the volunteer’s entire involvement with the organization.

On-going vigilance on the part of the organization is a must – the responsibility does not end once the volunteer is in place.

A volunteer should be considered “on probation” at least until his or her training period is complete.

A three to six month probationary period allows the organization and the volunteer to ensure they have made the right choices and offers each the chance to change their minds.

During the orientation and training period, an organization should:

- » gain knowledge of the volunteer's approach, values and work style – role playing may be used to explore some of these issues;
- » ensure that the volunteer understands organizational policies as they relate to his or her role within the organization (i.e., policies governing road trips with vulnerable persons);
- » work on the development of interpersonal skills, as required, in the areas where the volunteer will be working; and
- » make the final decision as to whether the volunteer should be offered the position on a permanent basis.

Terminating a volunteer during or after a probationary period.

Trust your observations and make decisions accordingly:

- » Inform all staff of the length of the volunteer's probationary period.
- » Conduct a personal interview with the volunteer at the end of the probationary period.
- » Unless you have clear and irrefutable proof that the volunteer intends to harm a participant, you should avoid mentioning this possibility for reasons of liability.
- » The basis for terminating a volunteer should be his or her performance in relation to the position (e.g. "This position is not best suited for your skills").
- » Whenever possible, provide the volunteer with the reasons for termination (point out the gaps in performance).
- » Emphasize the organization's duty to properly fill positions involving the security of vulnerable persons.
- » Finally, always thank them for having taken the time to try it out and perhaps suggest a different position (if wanted or needed).

Although volunteer orientation and training requires resources, your organization will benefit in the long-run through better informed volunteers, better job performance, increased job satisfaction, and a safer work environment.

Orientation and training sessions provide opportunities to observe and assess volunteers.

Make orientation and training events mandatory.

In addition to providing an opportunity to hand out written information such as manuals and handbooks, and answer questions, orientation and training events give the organization a chance to track a volunteer during their probationary placement. Refusal to attend, or constant excuses for not attending may signal that something could be wrong.

The organization should make it understood to the volunteer at the outset that the orientation and training activities are an integral part of the probationary placement. The organization should not be concerned about making them mandatory.

Involve other volunteers and staff in the orientation and training.

Urge other volunteers and staff to attend orientation and training events and to interact with the volunteers on a probationary placement.

1. Responsibility to monitor a volunteer during a probationary period does not end once he or she is in place.
2. A probationary period allows both the organization and the volunteer to learn more about each other.
3. Provide orientation and training sessions to provide new and experienced volunteers with information on the organization's policies and procedures.
4. Orientation and training sessions give the organization the opportunity to observe volunteers in a social setting.

STEP 9 SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION

Evaluation of a volunteer's job performance should occur at least once a year and two or three times in the first year. This should be made clear to the applicant at the outset.

Providing feedback on a volunteer's job performance is essential to improving his or her performance, increasing job satisfaction and contributing to a safer work environment.

If evaluation is new to your volunteers, they may resist.

Overcome resistance by clarifying that the purpose of evaluation is:

- » to ensure a certain standard of service is maintained;
- » to improve the job performance of volunteers and staff;
- » to obtain the volunteer's input on what the organization could do better to support them in their role within the organization; and
- » to protect all participants.

All evaluations should use the position description as a reference point.

During the evaluation interview:

- » go through the position description point by point with the volunteer;
- » ask the volunteer to comment on how they think they are doing in the position and how they enjoy their work with the organization;
- » give feedback on their performance;
- » keep comments positive but clearly state any concerns;
- » document the evaluation;
- » have the document signed by both the volunteer and evaluator; and
- » file the document in the organization's records.

The right degree of supervision and evaluation is important.

The degree of supervision and evaluation of the volunteer will depend on the level of risk to the vulnerable persons receiving the service by the volunteer in the position – but all volunteers need to be periodically observed and given feedback.

1. Ensure the provision of frequent feedback to the volunteer during the first year.
2. Assign someone in your organization the task of supervision and evaluation of your new volunteers.
3. Base evaluation of the volunteer on the position description.
4. The greater the risk to the vulnerable person receiving the service by the volunteer in the position, the higher the degree of supervision and evaluation should be.

STEP 10 PARTICIPANT FOLLOW-UP

It is important to make volunteers aware of the follow-up activities.

Ensure that the volunteer is aware of any follow-up that is conducted with participants receiving their service.

One of the most valuable sources of information about the quality of the service provided by volunteers to participants is the participants themselves. Through education programs on abuse and harassment and healthy relationships, participants have the opportunity to talk about their experiences in receiving services from volunteers and express their feelings about the way they are treated. Listening to what participants have to say is key.

Regular contact with participants and families.

It is vital that the organization let all volunteers know that regular contact with participants and families is part of the organization's risk management procedures. Regular contact can be an effective safeguard against potential harm and inappropriate behaviour towards vulnerable persons.

Random spot checks.

If a volunteer and a participant are usually alone together, it may be appropriate to conduct random spot checks.

It should be made clear when the volunteer joins the organization that random spot checks are a possibility because he or she occupies a position where the delivery of service involves a potentially high risk to the participant. It should also be made clear to the participant that this is a risk management measure that the organization intends to take for everyone's protection.

Spot check schedules can be part of a volunteer manager's planning. If you do plan to conduct spot checks, you may consider establishing a schedule for volunteers on an annual basis. If your spot checks are scheduled ahead of time, you can defend your reasons for choosing a particular time and place for spot checks for volunteers.

1. Make volunteers aware of follow-up activities that may be conducted with participants.
2. Listen to what participants have to say about the service provided by the volunteer.
3. Maintain contact with participants and their families.
4. Consider conducting spot checks on volunteers in positions where the delivery of service involves a potentially high risk to the participant.

Many organizations have difficulty screening volunteers already involved in their programs.

One issue that confronts many organizations who have developed a screening policy is whether to apply it to volunteers already working in the organization. While it is difficult to ask these volunteers to submit to screening measures, it is incumbent on the organization to ensure the safety and protection of participants, staff and the community.

The organization should ensure that all staff know that screening is part of doing business.

- » Identify your screening policy and the procedures in your documents, orientation and training.
- » Help staff and volunteers understand why screening is necessary and, as a rule, most will understand.
- » Be aware that individuals often try to enter the organization by occupying a position that requires little screening, with the intention of moving into a position of trust without further screening. Your screening policy should be designed to deal with this possibility.
- » As your organization develops a screening policy make sure to continually remind yourselves that your goal is to protect children and other vulnerable people from harm. Keeping this goal in mind will guide your actions.

CONCLUSION

Although costly and time-consuming, organizations that employ volunteers, especially those who work with vulnerable persons, should have policies and procedures in place on screening for the protection of participants, other volunteers, staff and the general community.

[Each organization is unique. Differences among organizations are due to many factors...]

Each organization is unique. Differences among organizations are due to many factors: the province or territory; the type of community (urban, rural, large, small, northern, or southern); the nature of the programs offered; the age of the participants involved; the management culture; and the socio-economic level of participants. The context will affect the kind of screening policy adopted.

There are many practical strategies to meet the various challenges of screening. Volunteer Canada and many volunteer centres across Canada are able to provide local organizations with training and consultation and develop screening policies tailored to meet the needs of each organization.

For more information contact **Volunteer Canada** or find your local volunteer centre office at www.volunteer.ca or by calling 1-800-670-0401.

Additional Resources*

The following publications and resources are available at www.volunteer.ca

Street, Lorraine, *The Screening Handbook: Protecting Clients, Staff and the Community*. Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Association of Volunteer Bureaux and Centres. 1996

What is Screening? Why Screen? Canadian Association of Volunteer Bureaux and Centres. 1997

Developing Effective Policy on Screening. Canadian Association of Volunteer Bureaux and Centres. 1997

Web resources:

What is Screening? (includes links to screening policy tools, safe-steps 10 steps to screening page, and more!)

Developing Volunteer Screening Policies

Ontario Screening Initiative (links to OSI and tools and resources, including Screening in Sports, and a rural supplement)

Safe Steps: A Volunteer Screening Process

Safe Enough? Reviewing Your Screening Practices

Understanding Police Records Checks

* These resources originate with organizations not subject to the Official Languages Act and in some cases may only be available in the language in which they were written.