

Report from the National Dialogue on Volunteer Screening

November 28, 2011



On Monday, November 28, 2011, more than 30 professionals from voluntary organizations, government offices, insurance agencies, the RCMP, and local police services gathered in Ottawa to discuss issues related to volunteer screening. The event, hosted by Volunteer Canada in partnership with Public Safety Canada and AON Canada, was meant to foster dialogue on best practices and to identify the challenges and barriers to effective screening.

The main audience for the National Dialogue on Screening was representatives from national voluntary organizations whose local branches serve vulnerable people in the community, including youth, the elderly, people with disabilities, and individuals who are institutionalized. Proper screening of volunteers and staff is especially critical for organizations working with vulnerable populations, as their clients are particularly at risk when entrusted with individuals in positions of authority.

The agenda included presentations on topics related to volunteer screening delivered by experts from a wide range of backgrounds, including volunteer managers, federal policy makers, and law enforcement officers. These presentations were meant to urge critical, constructive discussion on current policies and procedures and to establish potential solutions to common challenges with screening. Ultimately, the dialogue aimed to identify new strategies for improving current practices and raise awareness of the importance of screening volunteers. The session covered the entire spectrum of volunteer screening, beyond police record checks. Attendees were able to share their own experiences and discuss the successes and struggles they encounter when using the current screening model.

The day began with an examination of the evolution of screening in Canada, to set the context for discussions. Screening in Canada became widespread in the mid-1990s, when Volunteer Canada and the federal government introduced the National Education Campaign on Screening. The program provided training and resources for proper screening practices, particularly with at-risk populations. A [10-step process for voluntary sector screening](#) was established with the aim of standardizing the practice within Canada. The NECS program was intended not just to educate organizations engaging volunteers, but also the public and the media, whose interest in screening was piqued by an increasing number of high-profile cases in which volunteers placed in positions of trust with vulnerable persons criminally abused their power.

It is important to clarify that volunteer screening is not focused on screening the wrong people out, but is more importantly about matching people with the best volunteer position to meet their interests, skills, and experiences. Screening is more than a safety precaution; it is an overarching practice of safely and effectively integrating volunteers into an organization. It is also an ongoing process of managing volunteers once they assume a volunteer position. The 10 Safe Steps of Screening include such steps as writing a clear volunteer position description, following a formal recruitment strategy with application forms and volunteer interviews, following up on references, providing orientation and volunteer training, and ensuring ongoing supervision and evaluation. It is best to first determine the risk associated with a volunteer position. If that person will have no contact with vulnerable clients, but will instead, for instance, write the organization's newsletter, all 10 steps may not be necessary to follow. The need for a police records check, in particular, should be evaluated based on the level of risk associated with the volunteer position. The record check process can be timely and costly, and so should only be a requirement if there is a real risk to vulnerable clients or the organization.

While screening practices have been widely used by Canadian voluntary organizations for more than a decade, common themes emerged during discussions in terms of what adaptations are needed to suit

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the current volunteer landscape. Barriers and challenges flagged included the cost of police record checks, a lack of consistency in legislation across Canada, public perception of screening (it can be viewed as treating the potential volunteer as a criminal), expediency of the process, ensuring the level of screening is suited to the level of risk involved, and the difficulty of identifying language related to screening that is common to all. The importance of understanding the broad context of screening was also repeated in the discussions. Screening must be about more than just police information checks; it is an ongoing, integrated approach for the safe and effective inclusion of volunteers within an organization.

The current system of volunteer screening in Canada can be time consuming and costly; as a result, it sometimes serves as a deterrent for potential volunteers. Voluntary organizations already experience challenges attracting and retaining a robust volunteer base, and on occasion, the added complications of the screening process can serve as a further barrier to volunteer involvement. It is therefore important that organizations take the time to explain the importance of screening to their potential volunteers. Potential volunteers should understand why screening is a necessary measure in organizations serving the vulnerable sector, and they should also be made aware that screening is not done solely for the benefit of the organization; it also helps ensure a volunteer is placed in the best position for their interests and talents. It was mentioned in discussions that volunteers should also be told up front of the costs and wait times associated with the police record checks that are part of the screening process.

Police checks are an important part of volunteer screening, though they are only one step in an ongoing volunteer management system. Police services across Canada have experienced an increase in the number of police check requests they receive, due to recent changes to laws and regulations. Because of the high volume of requests filed, the wait times for these checks can be long - the average wait time in Canada is six weeks. The cost of the checks is also increasing, as local police services must offset the cost of the expensive scanners used for the checks. Most often, this cost is either incurred by the volunteer, or is reimbursed by the voluntary organization. Attendees representing organizations working in rural areas noted they face an additional challenge because of their location. Smaller police forces don't have the funding to purchase the live scanning devices used for record checks, and so organizations in remote areas often need to have potential volunteers travel out of the community to have a police check performed.

Many participants in the dialogue noted the confusion that exists around the different types of police checks, and which to use for volunteers engaging with vulnerable persons. There are three levels of police checks: police criminal record check, police information check, and police vulnerable sector check. Criminal record checks only report on indictable and summary convictions. Police information checks go further to include any outstanding charges, charges with dispositions, and police contact (depending on involvement). Vulnerable sector checks are the most thorough, and include pardoned offences and non-criminal violent behaviour that put the individual or others at risk. The type of check needed depends on the position held by the volunteer, and the amount of contact between vulnerable persons and the volunteer.

The volunteer screening process poses challenges for organizations, as it has significant impact on volunteer recruitment and the limited resources of most non-profits. One problem flagged by participants in the dialogue was the difficulty of keeping volunteers engaged while they waited for the screening process to be completed. At times, potential volunteers lose their enthusiasm to be involved if

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they have to wait weeks to receive the proper police record check. Another issue flagged was that the screening process can seem particularly offensive to potential volunteers from different cultural backgrounds. When police records and fingerprinting are necessary, there may be a perceived association between screening and criminality. The process of police checks can be a deterrent for new Canadians, who may not be aware of the broader context of volunteer screening, and may view the process negatively. Again, it is crucial that volunteer managers take the time to explain the importance of screening to potential volunteers, and outline all the steps involved so they know what to expect.

Another issue flagged by many attendees of the National Dialogue was the lack of consistency across jurisdictions, particularly in regard to police record checks. The information required and the procedures necessary for police checks vary from province to province, as the legislation is determined provincially. Participants said a common system in place across Canada would lessen confusion and allow for a consistent process to be followed by all Canadian voluntary organizations.

Though there were many issues with the current system of screening mentioned during the National Screening Dialogue, the consensus among participants was that screening is a vital process for the safe and effective integration of volunteers within organizations, particularly those serving vulnerable populations. The day ended with constructive conversations about how screening can adapt and evolve to meet the needs of the current volunteer reality. Many participants spoke of the importance of reviving a national education campaign to provide resources and training for organizations, volunteers, the media and the public. In order to overcome the challenges associated with screening, attendees stressed the need for collaboration between organizations, to ensure innovations and best practices are shared, and to allow for cooperation and support between organizations of varying sizes, resources, and levels of experience. Ongoing dialogue and a spirit of collaboration can ensure screening continues to evolve with the needs of the time, and that it remains an important topic of discussion for organizations, volunteers, police services, and governments alike.