

### **Best Practices: Background Checks for Nonprofit Board, Staff and Volunteers**

Childhood victimization and other abuses of our most vulnerable citizens unfortunately remain a much too prevalent and tragic issue of our times. Particularly offensive is the possibility of physical or emotional abuse of those susceptible because of age, disability or circumstance while receiving services of a nonprofit. Safety efforts to protect the very people being served by a nonprofit, regardless of size, must be constantly monitored.

Even the smallest nonprofit should adopt safety-related policies based on nationally recommended guidelines developed by experts. Such policies and guidelines help protect both the recipients of the nonprofit's services and the integrity of the nonprofit's programs. Every nonprofit that serves children and youth has the obligation to exercise "reasonable due diligence" with regards to screening as part of its hiring and vetting programs for members of the nonprofit's Board, staff and volunteers. Without such screening or gate-keeping vigilance, the very people the nonprofit is trying to serve are more likely to be unprotected and the reputation of the nonprofit (not to mention its fiscal health) are at unnecessary risk.

Often smaller nonprofits do not see the need to perform screening of any kind for potential Board members, especially if it seems unlikely that they will come into contact with the service recipients. But, by performing background checks on Board members as well as staff and volunteers, the nonprofit is sending a clear message that it is putting up a safeguard at the "doorway" that will, in most cases, scare off sexual and other predators. Imagine how heartbreaking it would be if Board membership itself gave a predator any credibility in the community. Objections to the process are a red flag of a possible problem.

Unfortunately, there is no single all-encompassing background check database available in the United States. The Federal Bureau of Investigation maintains the most complete criminal database in the United States containing over 200 million arrest and conviction records concerning over 45 million individuals. All records are fingerprint-based and are made up of all federal crimes plus approximately 70-90% of each state's criminal databases. Under current law, whether a nonprofit wants a state or FBI records check, it must apply through their state-authorized agency. The state agency performs the state check and requests that the FBI perform the national check.

At the very minimum, the background check should cover **Social Security Number Verification**, an **FBI National Criminal Search** and a state specific **Sex Offender Registries Search**. Most nonprofits, like for profit businesses, use an outside service to generate the appropriate forms, register an applicant for fingerprinting services and co-ordinate the process for a fixed fee. In Pennsylvania, a Consent/Release form has to be signed by the applicant

authorizing the Department of Public Welfare, ChildLine to release the applicant's PA Child Abuse History Clearance information directly to the nonprofit

The best screening model, however, requires the following *additional steps* before enrolling a new Board or staff member or organization volunteer:

- Completion of a formal written application
- Work History verification
- Reference Checks
- Driving history checks
- An in-person interview by appropriate professional(s)
- Completion of orientation and training requirements

In addition, every two years after the initial screening, certain updates should be provided. Only a sound background check policy will provide assurance that your nonprofit is part of the solution toward reducing victimization and not unwittingly part of the problem.

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