

# Properly Screening Volunteers

By Rollie Dimos



**V**olunteers play an important role in the success of a church. Every church leader understands and appreciates the vital functions that volunteers perform in all areas of the church, from ministry leadership roles, worship and production, hospitality or working in youth and children's programs.

In some respects, volunteers are the lifeblood of the organization.

The tension that church leaders have is finding qualified volunteers for sensitive functions. While volunteers are necessary, there is inherent risk in placing people who you may only see once or twice a week in roles that involve handling cash, taking care of infants, or ministering closely with children.

As summarized by James Cobble in a recent article on recruiting workers, the risk is very real. He states:

Hundreds of churches have been sued as a result of the sexual molestation of minors by church workers on church property or during church activities. In many of these cases, the victim alleges either or both of the following two theories: (1) the church was negligent in hiring the offender without adequate screening or evaluation, or (2) the church was negligent in its supervision of the offender. <sup>1</sup>

*How does a church recruit and enlist the help of enough volunteers to ensure the success of their ministries, yet perform due diligence and care to make sure the volunteers are capable, trustworthy and qualified?*

Consider the following steps to ensure you properly screen volunteers:

**Step 1: Application.** All volunteers should complete an application form. The form should request basic information about the person, including address and phone numbers. The application should request the names of at least 3 adults (not related to the applicant) that have known the individual as least 1 year. The application should ask for previous experience working in a ministry, in education or other civic organizations. The application should ask whether

*Continued on next page...*

## Properly Screening Volunteers (cont.)

the applicant has had any arrests or convictions, and require the applicant to agree to abide by the church's statement of faith or other code of conduct. Lastly, the application should request authorization to perform a criminal records check.

The church may want to gather additional information from the applicant as part of this process that could include how long the applicant has been a Christian, if the applicant has been water-baptized, and if the applicant agrees with key tenants of Christian faith and the church.

For an example of a written application form for volunteers, [download](#) the "Church Risk Management Guide" provided by AG Financial Solutions.

Step 2: Interview. All potential volunteers should complete an interview with a church leader. As the church leader reviews the application with the applicant, they can discuss any arrests or convictions noted on the form, and get an understanding of any previous experience. The interview process can be used to make sure the applicant understands the church's code of conduct, and agrees with the church's statement of faith.

During the interview, the applicant will have a chance to discuss their background, experience, and journey in the Christian faith. Some churches use this opportunity to discuss ministry strengths, or have the applicant complete a spiritual gifts test.

Step 3: References. Due diligence and care in screening volunteers requires checking the applicant's previous work and volunteer experience and character. This requires contacting others who are familiar with the applicant. The church I attend uses the following questions to help assess the applicant's abilities:

- How long have you known the applicant?
- Do you have any reservations about the applicant working with minor children in the church?
- Would you give the applicant a high recommendation?

These 3 questions can reveal a lot about an applicant. Most people providing references will speak freely if they don't have any concerns about the applicant. However, some may not be willing to speak badly or provide any negative endorsements. A person's hesitancy to answer the questions or a lack of positive encouragement speaks volumes. At least 2 of the 3 references should recommend the applicant for service.

If the applicant has listed any institutional service, such as volunteering at other churches, with

*Continued on next page...*

## Properly Screening Volunteers (cont.)

civic organizations, with other children's organizations, or in public or private education, those references will be just as important, if not more important. It is imperative to follow up on any previous work or volunteer experience.

Step 4: Stability. Consider the applicant's longevity or stability in the church. How long has the applicant been attending? Does the applicant attend regularly? Is the applicant a member of the church? It wouldn't seem reasonable to let an applicant serve in the church if he or she just began attending. Some churches require an applicant to attend the church for 3 to 6 months before allowing them to volunteer. Other churches require the applicant to become a member before volunteering. Both of these requirements are meant to ensure that the applicant is committed to the church, and invested in the success of the organization. It also allows time for the church to get to know the applicant and assess their abilities and character first-hand.

Step 5: Criminal Records Check. Before an applicant is approved to volunteer in the church, especially before volunteering with children or money, the church should perform a background check. At a minimum, this includes: (i) a criminal records check and (ii) a search of the Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website at [www.nsopw.gov](http://www.nsopw.gov).

These two records checks will identify any convictions for fraud or embezzlement, wage garnishments, sexual abuse or child molestations. These types of red-flags will disqualify the applicant from certain positions in the church.

There are several providers who can perform a criminal records check for a small fee, while the National Sex Offender Public Website is free. In next month's newsletter, we'll discuss the various aspects of background checks and what to do if red-flags appear.

In summary, including these 5 steps in your volunteer screening program will help ensure the church is performing due diligence and care when authorizing people to perform services in the church. These best practices will help the church find qualified and capable volunteers while protecting the church, its members, and its resources.

### Additional Resources:

1. Watch a panel of experts discuss the topic of risk management, including why screening volunteers is important. Two different videos are available:
  - a. Church Administration Essentials video: Visit the AGTV website by clicking [here](#).
  - b. AG Financial Insurance Risk Management Live video: Visit their website [here](#).

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## Properly Screening Volunteers (cont.)

2. Here are two articles by James F. Cobble, Jr., that discuss this topic further:
  - a. *Before You Hire*, <http://www.churchlawandtax.com/web/2013/march/before-you-hire.html>
  - b. *Strategies for Recruiting Safe Children's Workers*, <http://www.churchlawandtax.com/web/2013/march/strategies-for-recruiting-safe-childrens-workers.html>

### About the Author:

Rollie Dimos, CIA, CISA, CFE, is the Internal Audit Director at the AG National Leadership and Resource Center. As an auditor in the government and nonprofit sectors, Rollie has been helping leaders assess the strength of their organizational controls for over 20 years. If you have a question about this article, you can contact Rollie at 417-862-2781, or by email at [rdimos@ag.org](mailto:rdimos@ag.org).

<sup>1</sup> James F. Cobble, Jr., *Strategies for Recruiting Safe Children's Workers*, accessed 5 Aug 2014.