

Background Checks for Volunteers

How important are volunteer background checks? Do they even matter?

Organizations that rely in part on volunteer labor consistently find themselves asking these questions. The assumption is usually that volunteer background checks are less important than background checks for full-time or part-time employees. According to a CareerBuilder survey from 2016, 72 percent of employers conduct background checks on all employees. A parallel statistic isn't even available for volunteer checks. They are less common – and less valued.

Volunteer Background Checks: Broad and Full of Holes

When organizations do conduct background checks of volunteers, there is evidence to suggest those checks are less in-depth than what companies are using for paid employees. Some recent reports state most volunteer organizations that do screen their volunteer candidates uncover misdemeanor or felony convictions in less than two percent of cases.

These low “hit rates” suggest most volunteer organizations are not comprehensive with their volunteer background checks. Many organizations, for instance, might be using national or multi-jurisdictional checks but not checking federal and county courthouse records or verifying education and driving records. As a result, volunteer organizations end up overlooking red flags. Volunteer organizations can correct these oversights. Any business that uses volunteers can achieve more thorough and realistic results by revamping their background check policies. In most cases, this course correction can be achieved by simply subjecting volunteers to the same background check policies that apply to employees.

Employee checks are more likely to be thorough and multi-faceted. Per CareerBuilder, companies that conduct background checks on all employees not only look at criminal records (82 percent), but also employment history (62 percent), identity verification (60 percent), education (50 percent), drug use (44 percent), professional licenses (38 percent), and credit history (29 percent).

For one reason or another, volunteer organizations often don't go the distance when vetting new volunteers. What is the explanation for these sometimes-deliberate oversights, and what risks do they pose to businesses with volunteer teams? We will answer these questions and others in the coming pages.

Now you know.

Why Volunteer Organizations Don't Always Conduct Background Checks

One way to understand why volunteer background checks are not a leading concern is to look at the organizations that rely heavily on volunteers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, some of the most common volunteer activities in the United States include fundraising, tutoring or teaching, coaching or supervising youth sports teams, and mentoring youth. Organizations that commonly rely on volunteers include churches, youth organizations (especially youth sports programs), schools, nonprofit organizations, and political campaigns. In 2015, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 33.1 percent of volunteers spent most of their volunteer hours working for “religious” organizations. 25.2 percent spent most of their volunteer time at “educational or youth service related” organizations.

These organizations have a few things in common. The first and most significant of these similarities has to do with finance. Churches, schools, youth programs, and nonprofits are all entities **that don't always have the funds to screen volunteers in the way for-profit employers screen new hires**. Lack of funds is a large part of the reason that roles like youth sports coach or church minister enlist volunteers in the first place. Organizations typically do not have the capital to turn those positions into part-time or full-time jobs.

Money is only part of the issue. **Volunteer organizations want to be as welcoming as possible to people thinking about donating their time**. The fear is that running background checks could scare away potential volunteers—especially if the volunteers are asked to pay for their own background checks. There is some evidence that this worry is well-founded. In 2015, Pennsylvania adopted new background check requirements for employees or volunteers whose roles put them in “routine contact with children.” The law was a response to the Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse scandal at Penn State University and was devised to keep kids safer. However, reports in the wake of the law’s implementation stated that volunteer organizations throughout the state were witnessing drops in their volunteer numbers. Affected organizations included churches, libraries, and youth sports programs.

Of course, there are other reasons volunteer organizations might skip the background check. The most straightforward motivation might be that **many organizations are not legally required to perform background checks**. Pennsylvania might have strict rules about background checks for volunteers who work with children, but not every state or jurisdiction follows suit. Volunteer organizations in other parts of the country can safely and legally opt not to screen their volunteers at all.

Another factor at play is **volunteers aren't always long-term**. For every person who volunteers for a longer-term commitment—e.g. coaching their child’s sports team for a season—there are others who volunteer for one-off occasions. Field trips, festivals, races, and other events often require many volunteers for one day, but the obligation doesn’t extend beyond that day. By contrast, an employer can see a distinct return on investment for screening full-time employees; ideally, those hires are going to stick around for years. The background check helps the employer avoid a bad hire and provides a liability shield for the future. When a person is only volunteering for a one- or two-day event, the cost-benefit ratio for running a background check can appear lopsided.

When a volunteer engagement is an ongoing or indefinite one, one of the biggest hurdles to implementing a new background check policy is figuring out how to handle existing volunteers. In many cases, long-time volunteers object to new screening policies. They think they have proven themselves to be trustworthy over months or years of good service and bristle at the idea of submitting to background checks. As a result, employers have one of two

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options: risk losing quality volunteers over a policy volunteers don't agree with or create a system in which existing volunteers are "grandfathered in" and don't have to go through background checks. Neither option is ideal.

The Privacy Concerns of Background Checks

Another concern with volunteer background checks—or any background check—is privacy. Volunteers often consider a background check to be an invasion of their privacy. Paid employees might have a similar view but generally don't raise the same objections because they will be receiving some form of compensation. Since volunteers aren't getting paid, the opinion that a background check is a "slap in the face" or a "sign of distrust" is more pronounced.

There are also very valid concerns about data security on both sides. Conducting a background check usually means obtaining and storing sensitive personal information about a person—potentially including their name, address, Social Security Number, and criminal history. If the volunteer organization is going to conduct background checks, it needs to take up the responsibility of securing this private data. If the organization doesn't have the infrastructure in place to guarantee data security, there can be well-founded liability concerns.

While a background check is being conducted, a volunteer might raise a valid concern about not knowing how their data will be handled. If not properly monitored and secured, there is a chance the volunteer's personal information could fall into the wrong hands. If the volunteer organization cannot provide proper assurances that the data is safe, then any volunteer is within their rights to decline the background check or withdraw their offer to volunteer.

This push-and-pull on privacy and data security might help explain why many volunteer organizations don't bother with volunteer background checks

Volunteer Background Checks and the Law

Background checks are not always required for volunteers. There is no one law on the books that demands all organizations conduct background screenings on their volunteer candidates. There is also no one law that requires employers to run background checks on all their new hires. Background check laws are always more of a checkerboard. In the case of volunteer positions, there are local, state, and federal laws that require background checks for different volunteers in certain locations.

There are two types of relevant legislation organizations should be aware of if they are hiring volunteers.

The first type is laws that require organizations to screen their volunteers. Alabama, California, Florida, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Pennsylvania all have laws that require background checks for youth sports. Many of these laws go beyond athletics, demanding background checks for any volunteers who spend considerable time with children. If your organization relies on volunteers, you should review the legislative requirements in your state and local area to make sure you are complying with all relevant measures.

The second type of relevant legislation is laws that organizations must follow if they decide to screen their volunteers. For instance, the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) applies to all background check situations, employee or volunteer. The FCRA dictates how employers obtain consent to perform background checks and which protocols they must follow when denying a candidate a job or volunteer opportunity based on background check information. Again, it's important to do your homework here to understand exactly what your obligations are and what you need to do to ensure compliance.

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Why Employers Should Screen Their Volunteers Regardless of Legal Requirements

While staying on top of relevant legislation is a must for any organization that wishes to conduct background checks on its volunteers, legal compliance should not be the only focus. Just because your organization is not required by law to screen volunteers doesn't mean you shouldn't. On the contrary, there is a strong argument to be made that all volunteers should be thoroughly vetted—regardless of legal requirements, volunteer role, and other factors.

An important point to recognize is volunteers are a face of your organization just like employees. And just like employees, volunteers can have an impact on the way people see your brand. They are interacting with your customers or clientele. They are working closely with children. They have access to your premises, computer systems, products, finances, and more. In short, volunteers have employee-like responsibilities they can abuse.

What are the risks of not screening your volunteers? A volunteer can steal from you, whether by pocketing office supplies or embezzling funds. A volunteer can commit abuse on the job, whether by physically assaulting a customer or sexually assaulting a child. A volunteer driving a company vehicle can get in a car accident for which your company is held liable. Essentially, everything an employee can do to leave your business vulnerable to lawsuits and public backlash, a volunteer can do as well.

The common argument is that volunteers don't have as many opportunities to hurt your organization. After all, they aren't around as much, aren't working full-time hours, are only taking on a temporary role, and will be supervised for most of their volunteer time, especially when they are with kids. While these factors might reduce the risk an unvetted volunteer poses to your organization, none of them can effectively neutralize that risk. And if there is a risk, you should be running background checks—both to reduce the threat level and to shield your business from accusations of negligence.

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Conducting Background Checks on Volunteers

A big question volunteer organizations ask at this point is, where should we start? They recognize the value of screening their volunteers but aren't sure which checks they should be running. At the same time, they may be operating with limited budgets and trying to figure out how they should prioritize their checks. Below, we have provided a quick and easy rundown of what your check should include.

Must Haves

At a minimum, every volunteer background check should look at criminal history. Criminal checks come in a few varieties: county, state, federal, and multi-jurisdictional. The best background check processes combine a few of these searches to cover as many bases as possible. You may use a county check to search for criminal convictions in the area where your organization is based but widen the scope using state and multi-jurisdictional checks. Alternatively, you might use an address history check to find out where your candidate has lived in the past and then order county criminal checks in each of those areas.

Make sure your background check policy includes searches of child abuse and sex offender registries. At backgroundchecks.com, these checks are included as part of our [US OneSEARCH multi-jurisdictional checks](#). They are a must, especially if the volunteer position involves working with or near children.

Consider Adding

While criminal checks are the most important part of a volunteer screening process, they shouldn't be all you perform. If you have the funds, consider adding verification checks for references, employment history, education, or professional licenses. These checks are a cornerstone of employment screening processes. They aren't always as relevant for volunteer positions, which don't require the same level of expertise or qualification. Still, verifying this information—and especially consulting references—can tell you if a potential volunteer has been honest about their abilities and history.

You might need to add role-specific checks that pertain to the type of volunteer position you are trying to fill. For instance, if the volunteer will be driving a vehicle, a motor vehicle record check is an excellent form of due diligence. Similarly, if the volunteer position involves the handling of money, accounts, or other matters of finance, a credit history check can be a good way to learn how responsible a candidate is.

Finally, consider a [drug screening](#). Drug-free workplaces are statistically safer and more productive. Just as you wouldn't want employees using drugs on the job, you want to make sure volunteers are fully present and of sound body and mind while representing your brand.

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Preparing Your Organization: How to Implement Volunteer Background Checks

As you can see, conducting volunteer background checks is in the best interest of any volunteer organization. Below, we have outlined a step-by-step process to help you implement these checks in your organization right away.

1. **Devise a volunteer screening policy (and post it on your website)**

The first step is to put together a policy. This policy will outline your organization's stance on background checks and reflect any relevant legislation you will follow. It can serve as both a guide for your business as you move through the other steps and a document that tells prospective volunteers what to expect from the screening process.

Before you publish a volunteer screening policy on your website, go through this checklist to make sure it hits all the necessary points:

- State your organization has a policy for vetting volunteers
- Identify which volunteer roles will require screening
- Specify the types of background checks you will be running
- Identify offenses that would disqualify a candidate
- State any fees the volunteer will be expected to cover
- State whether the background check requirement is a one-off or will be repeated for long-term volunteers
- Create a policy for privacy and data security

Before you run a single background check, you need to have a policy in place for how you will handle and secure volunteer data. This policy should specify uses for volunteer data, explain the security safeguards you are putting in place to protect that data, and provide contact information for the person in your organization volunteers or candidates can contact if they have any questions.

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2. Choose a background check company

Your volunteer background checks will only be as strong as the company you choose to conduct them. Look for a business that offers the background check products you need, provides quick turnaround times on background checks, and is clearly well-versed in relevant laws and regulations. Checking these three boxes now will greatly increase the chances of smooth policy implementation.

If you need a background check company to power your volunteer vetting policy, consider backgroundchecks.com. Our SelectCHECK program is geared toward non-profit, volunteer, and educational organizations. We can help you set up a vetting program—including training on how to use our system—at no charge. From there, you can use our background check services without the confusion, growing pains, or learning curves that typically come with a brand-new policy.

To make the process of screening volunteers easier and faster, our system allows you to send invitations to volunteers, delegating some of the background screening process to them. To learn more, visit

<https://www.backgroundchecks.com/learningcenter/invitingcandidates>

Conclusion

Volunteers may or may not be as central to your organization as employees. Still, volunteers can cause the same problems and pose the same risks to your organization if something goes wrong. Running thorough, intelligent background checks on every volunteer can reduce these risks. Start using background checks for volunteers today by teaming up with backgroundchecks.com through our SelectCHECK program. Find out more about the program online at www.backgroundchecks.com/solutions/selectcheck.

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