Screening Volunteers

Screening volunteers is important for two reasons. First, it is important to ensure that the volunteer's needs are best matched with the agency's needs. A proper match between the volunteer and the volunteer position is the first step in ensuring a successful experience for both the volunteer and the agency. Second, screening is also part of the risk management process. Volunteers should be screened for previous behavior to ensure the safety of the agency's clientele, other volunteers, paid staff, and the agency's reputation. Volunteers who are not working with vulnerable populations, such as children or the elderly may not require a criminal history check, but such procedures should be part of the agency's risk management policy.

Screening of applicants involves multiple steps:
- Initial contact
- Volunteer application
- Interview
- Reference checks
- Criminal background checks (CBC)

Initial Contact

Your phone rings. The caller has heard something about your new program and might be interested in volunteering. There are several pieces of information you should provide potential volunteers when they first inquire about the program:
1. Go over the job description, explaining exactly what a volunteer does and the parameters of the job.
2. Explain the time commitment, making it clear to the potential volunteer that they can expect to spend so many hours/week/month.
3. Make sure you convey a clear message about the volunteer's expected relationship with the clients and staff.
4. Describe the basic requirements such as skills, educational background, criminal record check, drug tests, etc.
5. Make it clear that final acceptance as a volunteer will not be made until after the applicant successfully completes training. Offer to send the inquirer an application, a brochure, and a copy of the job description. Record the inquirer's name, address, and telephone number. Even if nothing materializes from the conversation, you know this person has an interest in your program. Their name could be added to your database for future volunteer opportunities.

Applications
Volunteer applications are similar to job applications. They are used to collect essential information that is relevant to the volunteer organization:

- Contact information (including emergency contacts)
- Demographic questions (if required for meeting non-discrimination requirements)
- Educational background, experience
- Hobbies
- Release for criminal records check, health or drug tests if required (if volunteer will be working with vulnerable audiences)
- Drivers license and insurance information (if volunteers will be driving)
- References (not related to the volunteer)
- Times when the volunteer is available to work

Other information that you might request to assist you in placing the volunteer:

- Motivation for volunteering
- The volunteer’s expectations
- Health/physical limitations
- Types of jobs in which the volunteer DOES NOT want to be placed

The application is a very important step in the volunteer screening process, and should be required of every applicant. Never waive this requirement; the information in the written application can prevent surprises or unexpected problems later on. Have the volunteer sign the application, pledging that the information is correct. Be sure to ask the applicant to list other names they may have used in the recent past. This is important for central registry and criminal record checks.

**Interviewing**

An interview with the potential volunteer should be scheduled as soon as the completed application is returned. Although volunteer applicants may not have the kind or amount of experience which would be ideal, it is important to determine if they have the ability to learn about the work, the interest to pursue the position, the commitment to complete the required training, the maturity and ability to perform the duties of the position, and an attitude consistent with the philosophy of the program. Following the interview, follow up on references and conduct record checks if warranted.

Interviews provide an opportunity for you to get to know the potential volunteer -- their interests, skills, expectations, likes/dislikes, motivation for choosing to volunteer for a given assignment, commitment, etc. This understanding can lead
to a good placement that will build a new relationship that is both positive and productive for the volunteer and your initiative.

Guiding the entire interview process must be the idea that you are looking for the best qualified person to fill the job. This requires that the interviewer plan carefully to create an interview that elicits the information needed for judging the candidate's qualifications for the job.

Interview Stages

Pre-Interview - This is the time to prepare and review your questions, review the job description, and the potential volunteer's application form. The design of the interview questions should reflect the job for which you are conducting the interview. You must think carefully as to whether this interview should be an 'oral test' or a 'friendly chat.' That decision is based on the skills needed for the job. Be sure to reserve an area that is free from interruptions for the interview.

Opening the Interview - Set the stage for the interview by welcoming the volunteer warmly and invite them to make themselves comfortable. The offer of something to drink is often a good way to get over an initial awkward moment. The interviewer should make every attempt to establish rapport with the volunteer and make them feel at ease.

The Interview - Begin the interview with a review of the job description. If you have several applicants for the same job, be sure and ask each of them the core questions you have developed. Open-ended or behavior-based questions will provide the type of information you need to assess the potential volunteer's motivation and abilities. A critical issue in interviewing is to listen to what the candidate has to say. Allow the volunteer to answer your questions free of interruptions. And remember, the volunteer is also checking out you and your agency. Invite questions, comments, and concerns so that both of you will have obtained the information you need.

Closing the Interview - This is perhaps the most difficult task of the interview process and should be concise and upbeat. Briefly review the interview to ensure that both parties understand the same information and then share with the potential volunteer what the next steps will be. It is crucial that the volunteer have a clear indication of your interest and a projected date for a final decision. This is easy if you are interested in 'hiring' the applicant. If, however, you are not interested in the person, say so. You must be honest and upfront with people who come to your organization. They deserve to know why you want (or
don't want) them. Lastly, thank the potential volunteer for their interest and effort.

**Interviewing No-No's**

"It's Easy" - Don't tell the potential volunteer that the task is easy, there's nothing to it. You should keep tasks simple and specific, but you also need to be honest about the scope and responsibilities of the job so that they can make a realistic commitment.

"Anyone Will Do" - Don't place a greater value on filling the job than on getting the right person for the task.

"Just a Volunteer" - Don't view your potential recruits as just a volunteer or they may provide you with just so-so work. Treat them with respect -- hold them to high expectations -- and you will get a first rate performance.

**Reference Checks**

Reference checks serve several purposes:

- To alleviate concerns about the applicants,
- To lend further credence to the program, and
- To reduce the program's risk of liability.

Some programs call references on the phone. Others ask the applicant to distribute a written reference questionnaire to be completed by three employment and/or personal references. Telephone calls have the advantage of two-way communication with the person providing the reference. Volunteer administrators can ask follow-up questions as well as cue in on non-verbal messages.

**Central Registry and/or Criminal Records Checks**

Central Registry is the state-run information database that contains the names of convicted abusers. It is important to see if potential volunteers have a past history of substantiated abuse/neglect, allegations, or a past criminal history. Volunteers should be made aware of the policy on these checks from the outset. Let applicants know that everyone is checked routinely; that it is not done on a selective basis.

Trust your instincts when you are screening volunteers. Don't be lulled into a false sense of security just because you run a records check. There is considerable disparity in the ways caseworkers enter information in the Central Registry.
Registry; therefore, you should carefully consider any information you obtain from that source.

To conduct a reference check, have the applicant fill out an information release form. If your program operates as a part of the court system, you may be able to access both the Central Registry and police records on an interagency basis. If your program operates outside the court, you can either obtain records checks on an informal basis or through a formal written agreement with a local volunteer center.

Your program policy should stipulate what is an acceptable -- and unacceptable -- Central Registry or criminal history record. For instance, the Central Registry may contain reports of child abuse that may never have been judged in a criminal or juvenile court. Some programs have excluded volunteers with any record of a felony conviction. Your program may want to consider screening out felons convicted of certain types of crimes, and consider how long ago the crime was committed. Before you set a policy that excludes applicants with prior felony convictions, it is advisable to check if your agency has specific affirmative action regulations prohibiting the rejection of an applicant if the felony conviction is over a certain number of years old. You must also verify current information -- employment status, family situation, etc.